

The Dark Side of Bliss

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Setting: It's my universe ...the one of *I Still Miss the Sun*. Set after the fourth season...no Riley and no Dawn (as for Tara...well...read and see). The story won't probably make a lot of sense if you haven't read the first two, since they're *heavily* linked, and I mean it. There are references, lots of them, to things happened in the first two stories. The series so far: *I Still Miss The Sun*

Bury Me Deep Inside Your Heart

Summary: Buffy is pregnant and her bond with Giles, her happiness, her very life is in danger because of the Council. In the meantime, Willow and Spike have to face the consequences of the choices they have made, will their relationship suffer because of them? There are old and new faces in town and someone trying to make amends and atone.

Spoilers: The movie, Welcome to the Hellmouth, Prophecy Girl, When she was bad, Innocence, Passion, Becoming, Dead Man's party, Revelations, Helpless, The Prom, Graduation Day, Who are you, Restless, Five by Five, Sanctuary

Rating: NC17 (for violence, sex and my potty mouth), A, *AU* (I can't stress it enough!)

Pairings: Buffy/Giles, Willow/Spike, Xander/Anya, Spike/Buffy (it's not what you think...I promise!) a hint of Wesley/Faith

Distribution: Just ask and ye shall receive.

Feedback: Please...please, please...but no flames...they're not healthy. Constructive criticism on the other hand is welcomed and needed, especially since this fan-fiction hasn't been betaed.:-)

Note: It took me a long time to finish writing this story, more than three years. I suffered from a severe case of writer's block. When I had started writing this fan-fiction, Buffy hadn't died, Giles was still Giles, Spike was still a character I respected (I still love him, but respect? That went away when Destiny aired...but that's another story!). I want to tell a few things, though: when I've started writing this fan-fiction, Spike was still *sans* soul...actually, the very idea of a redemption for our bleached wonder was laughable. I had thought about the whole fan-fiction and written most of the scenes in the lighthouse *before* Buffy's sixth and seventh season, or Angel's third, fourth and fifth season (I hadn't seen the White Room). So any similarity to things you have seen on both shows is totally unintentional on my part.

Begun on: 04/07/01~ Finished on: 12/11/04

<Thoughts> / <<written notes>> / *emphasis* / ~ recollections ~ / #dreams #

To Maria.... without you I wouldn't be writing. Without you I wouldn't have ever finished this story. Thank you...for everything! Have I told you lately how much I luv ya?

~~*

*From a Summer of the end of the millennium
an Oath will be borne from the darkness, to
fight the very mother of her power, under the
shadow of the city of the angels where the
black sun of the earth burns.*

~~*~*

PROLOGUE

Just the moonlight flickered through the half-closed blinds of Buffy and Giles' bedroom. The former watcher was lying on the bed, his head tilted on a side, his gaze locked on the blonde woman who was sleeping next to him.

He was watching how the soft, almost silvery moonlight, played with the woman's skin, highlighting its golden beauty. Her hair was spread on the pillow, some long blonde curls, as soft as silk, framed her face.

Giles couldn't help the soft smile that crept on his lips while he lightly stretched a hand to graze her cheeks. Buffy didn't know he often spent hours just watching her sleeping. She didn't know he often studied her features, each time surprised by her beauty, each time surprised by how fast his heart beat just looking at her. She didn't know how much he cherished those moments, when he had the chance to thank God for she was with him.

He thanked God because they had found their way back to each other. He thanked God because they both had had the chance to love again...and because they had eventually chosen to take it.

On his lips he could still feel her taste, his skin still kept her scent, it enveloped him, filling his heart with sensations he had never experienced, not so deeply at least: he felt whole, he felt ...home.

Giles' smile widened while Buffy's lips lightly parted open in her sleep. How many times had he watched her sleeping since they had known each other? He couldn't say.

He recalled when watching her dozing off, after their long nights of patrols or research, used to bring a somewhat sad smile on his lips while his heart wrenched in his chest, and he was almost afraid to linger in those looks, almost fearing she could sense his feelings, the love that he had silently felt for her; almost fearing she would be horrified by his feelings.

He had always loved her...even before falling in love with her. Even before failing in love with her he had clearly felt a bond between them, a bond stronger than anything he had ever known or experienced.

Theirs was a bond written in their bloods, in their calling.

Even before their relationship changed, evolved, even before he realized he had fallen in love with his slayer, and long before she came to the same conclusion, they had been tightly bound to each other.

They were Watcher and Slayer, bound to meet, chosen to fight side by side.

Yet...they had been much more than that; they had been much more than warriors chosen to fight

against the forces of darkness. They had been mentor and pupil, friends...and only later had they become lovers.

Never in his life had he cared so much for someone as for his Slayer. Not that it surprised him, he had soon found out that Buffy Summers had that effect on people.

Buffy's hand went over her abdomen in a protective gesture, and Giles' smile widened. A life was growing inside of Buffy... a life they had conceived together. The fruit of their love, their child. The initial surprise, when that doctor had told them about Buffy's pregnancy, had been soon replaced by joy. ...an absolute, pure joy that had filled him whole.

Their relationship had been still new under many aspects, and it still was, but the love between them, their bond had reached a point where they had both known it was unbreakable. It was fitting somehow, that they had created a life so soon: it had added something to their relationship. It had made them even more aware of each other. It had strengthened what they had.

None of them voiced it out loud but they both knew that there was a possibility, a concrete possibility that the time they had together could be short, very short.

He stretched toward her and leaned down to softly kiss her forehead. He placed his hand above hers, on her stomach. It was still flat; there weren't signs that she was carrying their child.

No signs...except for her increased powers. He closed his eyes, burying his face in her hair, inhaling its sweet scent.

Buffy was getting stronger. He had noticed that, even before knowing she was pregnant... how wrong he had been thinking that her increased strength had been a mere outcome of what she had experienced in Sunnydale's tunnels when Willow and he had been kidnapped.

It had been their baby, conceived so soon after his rescue.

It had been the Slayer's response to the changes in her body.

It had been the gift and the curse given by The Powers That Be to the pregnant Slayers.

She was changing. No one probably would even notice the changes in her, as they had been subtle so far but Giles, who had devoted his life to the young blonde who was sleeping next to him, had. After all observing her had been his job, his reason of living.

The Watcher's diaries, hadn't given him answers. At least none he had been ready to accept: there had indeed been Slayers in the past, who had gotten pregnant. What he had found out during his researches hadn't been very comforting, though.

Few of the Slayers, who had got pregnant, had survived the early stages of the pregnancy. They had been killed or had just disappeared, without any seemingly known reason.

Yet, he was sure, lack of strength couldn't be the cause for those Slayer's deaths. Never had been Buffy that strong. Never had she been that determined.

He kissed her forehead pulling her closer to him, while the words Spike and Eric had told him about pregnant Slayers echoed in his mind.

He had talked to them, shortly after they had found out Buffy was pregnant; they had been the only ones he had found the courage to voice his doubts, his worries to. After all, the Eletti's job was aiding the Slayer.

He sometimes had troubles reminding to himself that both vampires were after all watchers, just like him.

He had been surprised when he had found out they had already known Buffy was pregnant.

~ *"She is pregnant, isn't she?" Eric's voice greeted him, when Giles entered Spike's crypt.*

Giles started, before stepping at the center of the crypt. Spike was sitting in front of him. Both the vampires were sitting on the floor, meditating, their eyes closed.

On Spike's skin there weren't traces of what he had just gone through. His human blood had been an effective antidote against the poison he had been injected with.

"How did you know?" Giles asked getting close to them.

It had been two days since Electra had wounded Buffy. No one, except for Joyce, knew about Buffy's pregnancy yet, they had decided to wait for a few more days before telling the news to their friends.

The dark-haired vampire shrugged his shoulders. He opened his eyes and said, "She isn't the first pregnant Slayer I've met..."

"Did you know about it?" Giles asked looking at Spike.

The blonde vampire slowly opened his eyes before saying, «No, I didn't. The only thing I noticed was how strong she's been getting. Vampires can't sense whether Slayers are pregnant, not that early in the pregnancy»

"I know, it's part of their powers" Giles said noticing the way Spike briefly looked at Eric. ~

Buffy moved in her sleep, moaning something he couldn't understand. Giles pulled her tighter at him.

~ *"Her increased strength is just the first step," Eric said in a low voice.*

"First step toward what?" Giles asked, trying hard to ignore the painful knots that were forming in his stomach.

He didn't like the looks the two vampires were exchanging. He didn't like how Eric had seemed to carefully choose his words.

Spike and Eric exchanged a long glance, then Spike slowly said, "Pregnant Slayers can become... dangerous..."

"Dangerous?" Giles asked, interrupting Spike. "How?"

Spike looked at him for a moment before saying, "The first sign is usually an increased strength... then their dark side slowly comes out..." ~

Giles shook his head, trying to shake away those words, but it was useless, they mercilessly kept echoing in his mind, twisting his heart in a painful vice.

~ *“Dark side? Are you talking about the Obscuritas? It’s just a tale” Giles exclaimed, feeling suddenly breathless.*

He took a step back, almost as if he wanted to distance himself from Spike’s words and its terrible meaning. The Obscuritas.

He had heard tales about it. All the Watchers had. They had told him all the Slayers who got pregnant risked it.

The Obscuritas...the darkness within the Slayer; a darkness lying just beneath the surface which supposedly became stronger...lethal in pregnant Slayers.

*The Obscuritas...a tale, a legend.
Or so he had always been told.*

“It isn’t” Eric tersely said. Giles frowned when Spike swallowed and clenched his jaws.

“What can we do to avoid it?” Giles eventually managed to ask ~

Buffy nuzzled her face against his chest, and mumbled against his naked skin, “love you, Rupert...”

Giles felt his eyes stinging with sudden, unshed tears at her words, he couldn’t help it. Buffy made a point of telling him she loved him as much as she could, and each time her words had the same effect on him: his heart seemed to want to burst out of his chest for the sheer bliss he experienced with her.

He brushed the soft skin of her back with his fingers and whispered, “I love you too, Buffy”

Giles felt Buffy’s lips stretching in a smile, against his naked skin, she kissed the side of his neck and suddenly awake, teased, “Then why don’t you show me how much you love me, Watcher-mine?”

Giles looked down at her just when Buffy tilted her head up to look at him. She seemed oblivious of what was happening. On her face he could just read peace, wholeness. In her eyes he could just see happiness; he could only see love.

<I did this...I made her happy...I make her happy>

Giles thought and couldn’t help the surge of male pride that seemed to fill him whole.

<As happy as she’s making me...>

He tilted his head down, and covered her mouth with his, surprised and delighted, as always, by the way she responded to his kisses, by the way their bodies responded to each other. As if they had been made to fit together.

~ Neither Eric nor Spike answered him, there was a short silence, then Eric said, "We'll have to protect her for the next months..." ~

He pulled away from her and long looked at her.

~ "We'll have to protect her, mainly from herself..." Spike added.

Eric nodded at him before adding, "She's the only one who can avoid it..." ~

She smiled at him. Giles softly brushed a few locks away from her face. She was beautiful...happy, so full of life and, for the first time in longer he cared to remember, hope.

"Are you okay?" Buffy asked.

~ "How?" Giles asked, looking at the two vampires.

Spike and Eric looked at each other, as always, it looked like a silent communication was going on between them, eventually it was Spike who talked, saying, "What do you really know about the Obscuritas?" ~

"Yes I am" He replied. Suddenly he wasn't sure he could trust his voice.

"You sure?" Buffy asked.

He could feel her tiny form shifting and her legs circling his waist.

"I was just...lost in thought..." He whispered.

She kissed him and whispered back against his lips, "Do you want to talk about it? Were they happy thoughts?"

~He didn't reply at first, Spike stood up and took a few steps toward him.

"You know jack about it, don't you?" ~

"I was...thinking about the baby and you..."

Buffy's smile widened and despite the lump in his throat, Giles couldn't help smiling as well. It hurt smiling. It hurt looking at her...and wondering, fearing.

~ "Help me, then..." He said. He took a step toward the blonde vampire and said, "Help us both..." ~

"Are you happy?" Buffy asked.

He nodded. He couldn't speak, he felt that if he started speaking he wouldn't be able to hide his fears, his worries.

He couldn't, though.

He had to protect her.

"Cool!" Buffy said.

He let out a shaky chuckle and said, “Weren’t you hinting at me to show you how much I love you?”

She nodded, “I thought you had forgotten about that.”

He kissed her, interrupting her words.

Love, their love, had to be strong.

Stronger than the Obscuritas.
Stronger than the darkness within Buffy.

He was going to do whatever he had to, to protect her, to protect their baby, to keep her sane.

~~*~*~*~*~*

They had arrived to Sunnydale a week before. Arrangements had been made, the place had been chosen.

The word of the Slayer’s pregnancy had reached the Council, setting the procedure in motion.

Charles Dutton, entered the room. He was tall, with dark hair and hazel eyes. He had been a watcher for almost eight years. He hadn’t been happy with the assignment he had got, and wasn’t happy now as he secured his hold on the crate he was carrying: it was filled with weapons and jars.

He lowered it to the floor taking a look at the room: it was circular, there wasn’t any furniture in it, the other men were painting everything from the ceiling to the floor in a bright white.

“Is she really pregnant?” He asked, answering with a nod of his head to his peers’ greetings.

The man in front of him, who had started checking on one of the crates, tilted his head up and said, “The hospital’s records don’t lie, Charles. She is three months pregnant”

The man ran a hand through his dark hair and closed his eyes. Part of him had really hoped it was a mistake. “Has she shown the symptoms?”

The other man, a young blonde, pursed his lips before saying, “No, she hasn’t. We have observed her, so far she has just shown an increased strength.”

“Which is to be expected in someone who has been a Slayer for six years...” Charles said.

“I know that.” The blonde man closed the crate and observed it for a second before saying, “But I think we both know that we can’t take such a risk. You heard the orders. Mr. Laughton will be here shortly, he’s been specifically sent here to conduct the procedure.”

“I did. I heard the orders...and honestly? I don’t really like them. We are supposed to protect the Slayers. On the other hand I don’t fancy another rogue Slayer ...” Charles said.

The blonde man sat on one of the crates that were sprawled on the floor of the room and said, “I don’t like them either, but Charles... we have sworn to protect the world from evil...” He patted a pocket of his coat and continued, “we’ll have to act very carefully...you’ve been informed about

how strong they can get...we have to stop this madness before it's too late"

Charles shook his head, and went helping the other men painting the walls. He didn't talk; no one did as those words still echoed in the room.

A look at the other men confirmed that they had been all thinking the same thing.

What if it was already too late?

~~*~*~*~*~*

The orders had been clear.

It didn't happen very often that one of the Gheraiouses screwed things up; usually they were well aware of the risks, of the consequences.

Yet for the past months three Eletti had blown their covers, of them one had gone rogue.

The Slayer was pregnant with her watcher's child, yet, the gheraious hadn't told all the truth. The gheraious had started making his own rules.

That's why he had been called.

The vampire watched, outside the gheraious' house.
He had arrived to Sunnydale a few days before, unnoticed.

The Eletti were taught how to be invisible, how to walk in the shadows, how to become shadows among the shadows, or as they loved to say, the little spot of light within the darkness, and he had always been one of the best among them...although not for a conscious choice on his part. The Eletti called him only when things got messy, they usually left him alone, to carry on his original assignment.

He had been contacted, shortly after the Slayer's pregnancy had been discovered. Only later had he found out what had been really happening on Sunnydale's hellmouth.

His orders were clear, although he still hoped not to set things in motion. He still hoped that the Eletti were being too anal about their rules, as they always were.

Part of him couldn't blame the two vampires for following their hearts, that was until he recalled what the Eletti were supposed to be, how far did they usually go to protect their secrecy, their rules.

He couldn't shake away the loathing for their choices.

~ Raise your left hand Xavier ~

The vampire heard footsteps approaching. The Gheraious was coming home from checking on the Slayer and the Watcher, as he always did.

He slipped in the shadows, his tall figure disappearing completely, a hood covering his blonde hair. The gheraious tensed for a second in front of the door of his house, he turned and Xavier wondered whether the other vampire had sensed his presence, fully knowing it hadn't happened.

The older vampire looked around, but after a few more seconds, he entered his house, without turning the lights on.

<Do we all spy on each other, now? >

He wondered slipping further into the shadows and as always the shadows seemed to envelope him, cradle him.

He could almost see the gheraious, wandering the street with his eyes, hidden behind the blinds of one of the windows of his house.

Looking for him.
Looking for a shadow.

He sighed, and left.

No one had said becoming an Eletti would be a walk in the park.

~ To stand against the darkness~

Yet things could get more ugly than they already were. He was surprised the two resident Eletti hadn't felt it.

Did they really think that what had just happened would be something less than a prologue?

~ To be the light within the darkness~

Xavier lightly shook his head: Eletti who followed their hearts definitely were not a good equation. Eletti who started making their own rules were only bound to create chaos.

He hated that part of his calling. He hated being the spy among spies. The shadow among shadows.

-1-

Willow could hear the gentle tickling of the rain through the window of her classroom,. Thick clouds were making the sky leaden; the only light in the room was coming from the lightning that seemed to tear the sky up.

Willow sighed, trying to focus her attention on what her teacher was mercilessly droning about. She rested her head against her open palm, trying her best to keep her eyes open.

She stifled a yawn, and lightly shook her head, Buffy who was sitting next to her, arched an eyebrow at her.

Willow was almost tempted to roll her eyes at her hyper friend. Buffy Summers was probably the first pregnant woman she had met, who literally burst with energy.

She couldn't help the little smile that crept on her lips at the idea of her best friend being pregnant.

<You're getting way too sappy, Will...>

She thought, the ringing of the bell though, broke her thoughts.

"Thanks God for little miracles" She mumbled under her breath, grateful for the end of the lessons. She just wanted to rest. She felt so tired.

"Did I hear, what I think I've heard? Who are you? Where's my best friend?" Buffy teased her.

Willow snorted and turned toward Buffy, she had already collected her books and bag. A large smile was plastered on her face.

"Who are **you**? Since when you're a morning person?" Willow teased her back, slowly getting up and collecting her books.

Buffy had never been a morning person; Willow had always thought it had been partly due to her nightly extra-curricular activities. The redhead though, had had the chance to find out for the last months that it hadn't been that the reason.

Buffy was spending almost all her nights slaying; yet, she was always in an awful good mood in the mornings. Willow suspected it had to do more to do with the fact she was happier than she had ever been.

They headed toward the hallway and Willow couldn't help noticing how her friend's smile softened as she said, "Do you want the official version or the real one?"

"The real one...although I'm almost afraid to know...." Willow mumbled.

Buffy stopped walking and said, "Since I have a reason to looking forward to opening my eyes..."

Willow couldn't help cocking her eyebrows at her, in a gesture which she was sure, it reminded Buffy of a certain bleached blonde vampire Willow was in love with.

The Slayer shrugged and said, "C'mon...you can say it...I'm mushy, sappy, I've got it bad..."

Willow laughed before saying, "I'm just happy for you, Buff..." She tilted her head on a side and looked at her for some seconds before adding, "Oh, and yes, all of the above is true, pregnancy is making you very sappy"

They resumed walking and Willow noticed for the first time, the way her friend was looking at her, a frown was marring her brow. She sighed and said, "What?"

"Are you feeling alright, Will? You're quite pale...and you look dead tired..." Buffy stopped then mumbled, "There's a pun somewhere in this statement but..."

"I **am** dead tired..." Willow stated, interrupting her friend. It looked like the more she slept, the more she tried to rest, the more tired she felt.

They were walking down the hallway, Buffy looked around before returning to look at her best friend and said in a low voice, "Well...Eric told that some of the effects of the spells could last for a while..."

“A while? Buffy I've been feeling like crap for weeks!” Willow almost snapped, she shook her head and marveled, “I mean,” She shook her head and then in a low voice added, “I don't know what I mean...”

“You're just tired, and hey! We've had a lot to do lately, between study, hellmouthy stuff and with the uber ho in town,” Buffy smiled and added in a teasing voice, “besides, I kinda think you've been busy in a major smooch fest with Spike”

Willow blushed at Buffy's words, her fingers unconsciously went to the gold ring she always wore on her left ring finger. She hadn't put it off, since Eric had given it to her. Spike hadn't commented on the ring, he hadn't said a word about it, but Willow at times felt he didn't like the fact that she had kept it.

“Hmm...well, yes...we...” She started. She then opened her mouth, tempted to talk to her friend about her nightmares, about how her nights had been filled with them. When she wasn't dreaming of Spike turning into dust, she relived his death by Drusilla's hands...and hers, when she was too slow and Angelus caught her.

Buffy interrupted her, though, saying, «Say no more...I'm gonna be a mother soon...I don't wanna hear juicy details about you and the bleached wonder...as much as...” She stopped talking and looked around for some instants then suddenly murmured, «he's here!»

“Uh?” Willow asked blankly. “Spike's here? Where?”

She turned her head; following Buffy's gaze and was surprised when she didn't see anyone, “Buff? I can't see him...”

Buffy was still looking around, wide-eyed. She took some steps and said, “I can feel him...”

“What?” Willow asked.

Buffy though wasn't listening to her. She had put a hand over her still flat belly in a protective gesture and was clutching her books against her chest with her left arm, almost as if she wanted to shield herself with them.

Willow blinked when Buffy tilted her head up, closed her eyes and flared her nostrils. She shook her head...what the hell was going on?

“Buff? It's daylight, remember? Vampires usually tend to avoid it...it isn't very healthy for them...” She said looking around.

Some of the people in the hallway were looking at them puzzled. She ignored them and tentatively touched her friend's left shoulder, she gave a little squeeze to it adding, “And besides, Spike was going to spend the morning training with Eric...”

Buffy shook her head no, she opened her eyes and tilted her head on a side, without looking at her and hissed, “He's here, Will...I can feel him...I can sense his demon, I can smell its stench...”

“Uh?” Willow kept looking around; she rolled her eyes and said, “Nice way to talk about my boyfriend, Buff...”

Hoping to distract her, she squeezed her shoulder harder. Buffy blinked and looked around, then turned toward Willow and smiled at her saying, “Where were we? Oh, yes! No juicy details about

your nightly activities as much as I'm curious about it"

Buffy looked at her, taking in the fact that Willow was still squeezing her shoulder and said, "What's the matter?"

"Uh? Matter? What...I...no matters here, we're matters free...honest!" Willow said pulling her hand back.

She smiled at her friend, who seemed totally oblivious of what had just happened.

<What the hell is going on? >

She clutched her books against her chest and looked at Buffy; she looked calm, peaceful...and very happy. There weren't signs of the predator look her eyes had held, just a few minutes before.

She had totally zoned out. Willow let out a sigh and asked, "Are you alright?"

"Never been better...I'm morning-sickness free...can you believe it?" Buffy happily said.

"I guess it's one of the benefits of being a Slayer" Willow commented, managing a smile.

"Yep...and I feel *so* strong...poor Rupert, he's almost afraid to train with me..." Willow noticed how Buffy lowered her voice when she added, "He lets our two resident Eletti being pummeled by me, though..."

"Don't I know" She mumbled. Spike hadn't commented on it, he hadn't made a big deal out of it, but a couple of times, she had really hurt him. She shook her head, and grinned at her best friend saying, "Well I can't speak for Eric...but I think Spike is starting to think about switching sides..."

Buffy looked at her, and for a moment, she was sure she had seen a look of pure fear...pure hatred in her eyes. She almost snorted before saying, "Buff? I'm kidding!"

Buffy rolled her eyes and smiled at her, but didn't talk for a second, they had almost exited the building when she said, "Ok, I've been enjoying the training a little too much lately, but Will... think of the bright side..."

"Which would be?" Willow asked. She had heard about mood swings in pregnant woman...but that was the first time, she was experiencing it...first hand.

Buffy wiggled her eyebrows at her and said, "You can kiss all of Spike's bruises better..." She circled her shoulders with an arm, saying, "Hey, what about we stop at the cafeteria before going home? I'm dying for cheese cake!"

"Say no more...as your best friend it's my duty to indulge in your cravings..." Willow said smiling. She made a mental note to herself, to talk to Giles about what had just happened, that afternoon during Buffy's training.

"Ya know what, Will? I love being pregnant..." Buffy commented smiling.

The two friends, headed toward the cafeteria, none of them saw Eric and Spike coming out from behind a pillar.

“You were right; she has been able to sense me...” Spike commented.

Eric nodded looking at him, he took a step forward saying, “We can’t leave her alone”

“Do you think it has already started?” Spike asked.

“I don’t know...” Eric admitted. He shrugged and said, “She is very different from all the Slayers I've ever seen. She is not alone...”

“Will it be enough?” Spike asked.

“It has to, William...” Eric said in a low voice. He narrowed his eyes, and repeated: “It has to...”

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The closed fist almost connected with Xander’s jaw. The young man though quickly tilted his head on a side, dodging the punch.

Another punch hit him, on his chin this time. Xander shook his head, and punched his opponent back.

“Cover your face, Xander...I shouldn’t be able to hit you” Giles said.

Blow after blow, Xander Harris kept training with Eric or Giles. His training had begun shortly after Buffy and Giles had announced them Buffy was pregnant.

He had asked to train with Buffy. Years fighting on the Hellmouth had taught him a few tricks, but he knew he wouldn’t be of much help whether something happened.

His best friend was pregnant...and he knew in his heart he would do anything to protect her.

Much on his surprise both Giles and Eric had agreed on letting him train. Although there were moments, like that, when his body hurt so much that he wondered at his actions.

The only answer he had been able to give was that helping Buffy, being one of the people who night after night helped the Slayer in keeping the world safe, made him feel whole. It had given him a purpose.

Being a card-carrying member of the Scooby Gang had helped him finding himself.

Gone was the insecure boy who had greeted Buffy four years before, saying, “Can I have you?”.

Gone was the Zeppo, replaced by a young man, who had proven himself to be of invaluable help on many occasions.

He had friends, real friends...whom he trusted implicitly. He had a woman he loved wholly...and made him happy.

“Xander you’re letting your guard down” Giles’ voice called distracting Xander from his thoughts.

They were training in Eric's house. One of the largest rooms had been purposely left empty; it had soon become the official training room for all of them...especially since Buffy had moved in with Giles.

Eric didn't seem to mind, though. Xander had noticed that very few things really seemed to matter to him, including the place where he lived in.

"Sorry G-Man" He mumbled, dodging a punch and twisting Giles' arm behind his shoulder.

"Very Good, Xander..." The former Watcher said pulling away from him and Xander was surprised by his strength.

<Why should I be? He's the guy who has made a living out of being pummeled by the Slayer...>

Xander shrugged and looked around before asking, "Where are our two resident vampire spies? Shouldn't they be here?"

Giles threw a club at him, and Xander couldn't help noticing Giles' surprised look when he easily caught it; the older man arched his eyebrows and said, "They were training on their own...in Spike's crypt, I think."

"Special training, uh? And what are we, chopped demon's entrails?" Xander began attacking Giles, but was soon disarmed.

"Don't rush at anything, Xander...you don't have to tire soon. Remember, we don't have superhuman strength"

"Got it..." Xander mumbled.

He wiped away some sweat from his forehead, with the back of his hand.

"I guess their training is quite different than ours." Giles said. They began sparring again.

"How different can their training be?" Xander suddenly asked.

He had watched the two vampires training for the last two months; he hadn't noticed anything different from his training, except that they didn't hold back with each other.

Watching the two vampires training together was a fascinating sight, albeit a slightly disturbing one. Each blow was given with the precise intent to hurt the other.

When Xander watched Spike and Eric training together he had troubles believing they were friends and not mortal enemies.

He had troubles believing Eric was one of the few people Spike blindly trusted.

"I don't think it's for us to know, Xander." Giles commented. He hit him in the stomach with the club, and Xander almost doubled over in pain.

"Hey, what the hell was that for?" Xander managed to ask.

"You were distracted..." Giles said.

“And knocking me unconscious was going to help me, how?” Xander panted.

“It wasn’t supposed to...that’s the point! In a real fight, you would be dead, now.”

Spike’s chuckle interrupted him. Both Xander and Giles turned; Spike was leaning against a wall, his hands in the pockets of his duster.

“Care to share the funny?” Xander asked through clenched teeth.

Spike took some steps toward them and said, “Was just thinking that none of you heard me entering the room...if that was a real fight you would be both dead, right now....”

“But Spike, I thought you liked us now” Xander deadpanned, playfully batting his eyelashes at him.

Spike snorted at his words, “Don’t push it, mate...” He said. Yet, it was clear he was still amused.

Xander didn’t want to admit that he was beginning to really like Spike. He had a good sense of humor; he was a surprisingly patient trainer, and what mattered most...he was making Willow really happy.

Yet there was a part of him who couldn’t help fearing him.

Truth was he didn’t want to trust Spike.

He couldn’t trust Spike.

No matter how many times he kept telling to himself that he had proved himself to them for the past months, he couldn’t shake an ancestral fear of his demon away.

He had lied to all of them for years, hiding his real identity...and he had been pretty damn convincing.

It looked like he was the only one who kept remembering what had happened to Electra. She had been an Eletti, just like Spike...and she was now the current master vampire in Sunnydale...

She looked like she had vanished. They hadn’t seen her since that night at the mansion. Yet, there had been an increased number of turned people. They were having a hard time, trying to prevent her actions.

It looked like he was the only one who kept wondering what would happen whether Spike or Eric lost their souls too.

It looked like he was the only one scared shitless at the idea.

Buffy trusted Spike. She had learned to trust him with her life. Among the Scoobies, he was the only one who had had a glimpse at what had happened during the attempted heta7tanatos, when Eric had used him to help Giles and Willow breaking the spell. He had seen them fighting together...and how much they had relied on each other.

None of them had ever told a soul about what had happened, but he suspected the forced time they had spent together in the galleries had forged a very strong bond between them.

Buffy trusted Eric just because Spike did.

Willow was in love with Spike. She had fallen in love with him, even before knowing about his real identity, although he suspected that she would have ever voiced her feelings if she hadn't been taken.

She loved Spike so much that she had risked her life to save his.

Willow loved him enough to time travel to save him.

From what Xander had seen, she didn't trust Eric that much. Xander didn't exactly know what she had seen or experienced when she had gone back in time...but he suspected it was one of the reasons she didn't like Eric.

Giles had learned to trust both the vampires, especially since they had discovered about Buffy's pregnancy. He knew though, that Giles didn't want to repeat the same mistake he had made trusting Angel.

As for Anya, she had grown quite fond of Spike when he had been poisoned. She had been the one tending his wounds when he had been poisoned, she had spent countless hours trying to ease the pain he had been enduring.

She probably trusted Eric; maybe it was because he was the older person she had known since she had lost her powers.

Xander sighed, and tilted his head up, trying to ease the soreness in his shoulders. Giles was a very good trainer; no wonder Buffy was such a strong Slayer.

He noticed how Giles was looking at the blonde vampire. He frowned: they were probably onto something. It wasn't the first time he had caught them sharing knowing glances for the last weeks.

He cleared his throat before saying, "Why do I suddenly feel like a third wheel?"

"Careful, Harris or you could shock us with your insight ..." Spike commented.

"Oh, you're so funny Mr. 00 positive" Xander retorted, harsher than he had intended.

"Xander?" Giles said, interrupting him.

Xander shrugged. He grimaced in pain and said, "Ok, got it...uh...Spike, do you know whether Eric hides some Tylenol somewhere?"

"You can ask him, he's in his study" Spike informed him.

Xander nodded before muttering, "Don't even remind me ...we had to bring, like, a hundred crates ...didn't all of you guys live in crypts?"

Both Spike and Giles arched their eyebrows at him, Xander raised his hands in surrender and said, "Ok, I'm gone...witness me going!"

He quickly headed toward the door. He tried to ignore, the sudden knots that were forming in his

stomach.

Spike's apparent amusement had faded the moment he had looked at Giles, and behind the usual cockiness, he had glimpsed something akin to worry in the vampire's words and demeanor.

As for Giles, after four years, he had become quite good at reading him...and he looked like he was worried too.

They were hiding something from them...and he was going to find out what. Although he feared he might not like it.

~~*~*~*~*~*

"Did you follow her?" Giles asked, as soon as Xander had exited the room.

Spike nodded and looked around before saying, "She sensed my demon..."

Giles closed his eyes and swore under his breath.

"This doesn't mean a thing, though. All the Slayers should be able to do that...and they were in the past..." Spike said.

Giles opened his eyes and nodded, "That much is true, unfortunately, we are talking about a pregnant Slayer."

Spike shrugged, "We can't leave her alone. This time Red was with her..." He trailed and shook his head.

"I know, it could happen again...and she could be alone," Giles added. He took a deep breath. Spike's news about Buffy's heightened senses wasn't comforting.

~ There's so much you don't know about them, about your own powers. ~

Giles couldn't help a sharp intake of breath, when something he had told Buffy a long time ago, came up in his mind.

It looked like a lifetime had passed since that night at the Bronze; they had known each other for less than twenty-four hours. How she had refused her calling back then. How scared she had been of her powers, of her destiny.

~ A Slayer should be able to see them anyway. Without looking, without thinking. Can you tell me if there's a vampire in this building? ~

Although she had already been a Slayer for almost a year when they had met, and she had killed Lothos, her powers had yet to fully blossom.

~ You should know. Even through this mass and this. . . din, you should be able to sense them. Reach out with your mind. You have to hone your senses, focus until the energy washes over you, until you, you feel every particle of. . . ~

How far she had gone. Her powers had blossomed, even before she had gotten pregnant. She truly

was a powerful Slayer...and Giles for the first time since they had met was beginning to fear her powers.

He was beginning to fear the effects they could have on the young, wonderful woman he was in love with.

“Perhaps she should quit patrolling for a while, at least” Giles continued.

He frowned when Spike shook his head, “Don’t think it would be of any help. She has to channel her powers somehow... pummeling all of us into unconsciousness wouldn’t help her. ”

“What do you suggest?” Giles asked, surprised by his own words.

Was he really talking about Buffy’s pregnancy and safety with **Spike**?

<Not Spike...you are talking to the Eletti who has been doing his job long before you were even born>

He had to remind to himself. Yet, although he intellectually knew he could trust Spike, it was still hard for him to do so.

He chose to ignore the voice in the back of his mind, which kept telling him, that part of his distrust toward the vampire was caused by jealousy.

Although he usually refused to even acknowledge it, there was a tiny glimmer of jealousy in him, whenever he looked at Buffy and Spike, since the truth about the vampire’s real identity had been uncovered.

His jealousy wasn’t of romantic nature. He had no doubts about Buffy’s feelings for him...and only a blind man wouldn’t see how deeply Spike loved Willow.

He hated to admit that he was jealous of the bond, which had formed between Spike and Buffy for the past months. At times he almost felt like the blonde vampire had become Buffy’s *de facto* watcher.

It was Spike who usually went out patrolling with Buffy. Each night she trusted him with her life and the life of their baby. They made an excellent slaying team.

He couldn’t help recalling that Buffy had been the first one to volunteer to go back in time when Electra had poisoned Spike.

He felt like Spike had taken away something from them, since his real identity had been uncovered. He knew it was petty of him...Buffy kept training with him, every day, she was now, more than ever, his Slayer...and Spike was just doing his job, what he had been chosen for, yet, he couldn’t shake that feeling away.

He sighed and Spike seemed to sense his inner turmoil because he said, “You are a watcher, her watcher...what would you do if you weren’t in love with her?”

Giles blinked but said in a low voice, “I’d suggest she kept patrolling, at least until we had proofs ...”

Spike just nodded. He turned his back at him and took off his duster, then placed it on a bench, which was on a side of the room. He stopped though, when Giles asked, in a quiet voice, “Have you ever met a Slayer who had reached the Obscuritas?”

Giles could see the blonde vampire nodding his head, yet he didn’t turn, he just said in a low voice, “Once... ”

“What happened?” Giles asked.

“The term Obscuritas says it all: she had reached it and there wasn’t anything human in her any more...” Spike slowly said. He turned toward him, his face a cold mask. He shrugged and said, “She was the second Slayer I bagged... the one who put the demons and warlocks together to end the world.”

-3-

It was strange for Buffy to be in her old house. She kept looking around in the big kitchen, while her mother, was tending to their lunch.

She was glad she was spending some quality time with her mother. After her initial reaction to the news of her pregnancy, her mother had seemed to come around, accepting her relationship with Giles, and mostly had started being an enthusiastic grandma-to-be.

It looked like her main concern now, was when Giles was going to make an honest woman out of her.... that’s what she had been talking about.

“White dress, mom? Wouldn’t it be a bit redundant?” Buffy asked, while laying the table.

Joyce turned toward her and shot her an exasperated look.

Buffy grinned at her but said, “I’m serious...we don’t care about these things...”

Joyce sighed and leant against the fridge, she crossed her arms over her chest before saying, “That’s no true, honey...don’t you recall all your plans when you were ...”

“A child?” Buffy finished for her. Joyce nodded; she took a big tray from the fridge and placed it on the table.

Buffy shrugged and said, “That’s the point. I’m not a child anymore...and besides...what I really dreamt about was marrying Christian Slater...but then Merrick found me, and I haven’t been a child, since then...” She smiled at her mother and said, “Mom...I’m happy, really! I’m blissfully happy...you know what I’m dreaming about now? A small wedding, with just you and the guys...”

“Who are you? What have you done to my daughter?” Joyce teased her.

Buffy laughed and taking some chips from the tray said, “I’m a new improved version of her...”

Joyce smiled at her words. They sat together and ate their lunch, making small talk; Buffy kept shooting glances at her mother. It looked like she was hiding something from her. She took a deep breath and asked, “Ok, mom...spill...”

“Spill what, honey?” Joyce asked. She took a sip of wine from her glass and said, “Ok...there’s something I need to tell you”

Buffy arched her eyebrows at her; she rested her elbows on the table and asked, “Is everything alright?”

“Oh...yes, honey, of course it is!” She smiled at her, and stretched a hand on the table, taking her hand in hers.

“What’s the what, then?”

“I received a job offer...a very good job offer...” Joyce slowly said.

“That’s wonderful, mom!” Buffy exclaimed, she squeezed tighter Joyce’s hand in hers and asked, “But why do I feel I’m not going to like what you’re about to say?”

Joyce let go of Buffy’s hand and said, “Because you know me too well. I should move to St. Francisco if I accepted the offer...”

“St. Francisco?” Buffy asked. She rested her back against the chair, and blinked, she cleared her throat before saying, “What...what are you going to do?”

Joyce let out a sigh, she shrugged and said, “I don’t know, honey...I’d lie if I told you I’m not tempted to accept, because I am...”

Buffy nodded, she sniffled and murmured, “It would be terribly selfish of me to ask you to stay now, wouldn’t it?”

Joyce shook her head, she smiled and said, “No, but it’s terribly selfish of me being tempted to accept...especially now...but then I look at you...you have a man who adores you, and a whole army among vampires, witches and former demons to protect you, better than I ever could...”

Buffy blinked back tears, “Mom, it’s not the same thing...and you know that ...some of the things I’ve done...hell, most of the things I do...would scare a normal person blind...but you dealt with them...you are part of my world! I’m sorry if I made you feel cut out from my life, lately”

“No, honey, you have nothing to be sorry about!” She sighed and said in a low voice, “God knows whether I want to be here with you, now...but truth is I feel like I haven’t been really part of your world for a long time...you are your own woman, Buffy... I wouldn’t even consider the offer if you were alone...but you aren’t...and besides St. Francisco is not that far away from here...”

“Do you want my blessing?” Buffy asked.

“I want to make sure you understand, honey...”

Buffy took a deep breath. To say she didn’t want her mother to leave meant using an euphemism. Yet there were other things to consider, such as the fact that she was going to be safer away from the Hellmouth and its threats.

She shrugged and said, “I understand mom...this doesn’t mean I’m not going to miss you, though.”

“We’ll see each other often, honey...and hey! I’m going to be a grandmother soon...and I fully

intend to spoil my grand-child rotten!”

Buffy laughed, and then shaking her head said, “Can you believe it? I’m going to be a mother!”

Joyce cocked her eyebrows at her, a smile playing on her lips.

Buffy snorted before saying, “Ok, ok...I know...dense, much?”

Joyce smiled at her daughter, and then said; “I was thinking that Rupert and you could move here... you will need more space after the baby is borne”

Buffy blinked surprised. She hadn’t ever considered the option of moving out from Giles’ apartment.

She looked around, that house held so many memories to her; a dreamy smile crept on her lips when realization dawned on her. That wasn’t home any more for her.

Giles’ small apartment, with its nice smell of old books and herbal tea was her home, now. Her real home.

“Honey?” Her mother’s distraught voice distracted her from her thoughts.

“What?” She asked, blinking.

“Your hand...” Joyce said in a low voice, pointing down with her eyes.

Buffy followed her mother’s gaze, only to find out she had shattered the empty glass she had been holding in her hand.

Blood was plenty gushing out from three big wounds on her open palm. Tiny glass’s fragments glittered in her hand, the blood had stained them, and they almost looked like tiny rubies.

Buffy swallowed. She hadn’t even heard the glass shattering; she hadn’t even felt it cutting her hand.

<Why doesn’t it hurt? >

She silently wondered. While Joyce helped her tending her wound, Buffy couldn’t help noticing the low grumble in her stomach.

Color drained from her face when she realized all that blood hadn’t nauseated her.

It had aroused her.

She had craved to taste it.

She had craved for more...and not necessarily for her own.

~~*~*~*~*~*

“She usually makes two rounds of patrolling” Daniel Laughton, a short brunette, middle-aged man said, looking at two men in front of him.

He had arrived to Sunnydale a few hours before. He would have come sooner to the little town, but the situation in London, at the Council had required his presence. The news of the Slayer's pregnancy had been source of turmoil. A long time had passed since a Slayer had gotten pregnant, and the current situation, with a Slayer who refused to hear from the Council and another one, in prison convicted for murder made it all more complicated.

Part of the problems within the Council had been caused by younger watchers, who had been vehemently against any possible action taken against the Slayer...in the end, however, they had been forced to concur with them...the older Watchers. A pregnant Slayer needed to be dealt with.

When he had arrived to Sunnydale, the old lighthouse had been already prepared for what was going to happen. Magical shields had been created to protect it. All the rooms were ready for what was about to happen.

"She isn't going to be alone, you know that...one of them is always with her during her patrols." A young blonde man, said. He was the one who was going to perform the spells needed for the procedure, Maximillian Hawthorne, that was his name, looked for a moment at the silent man who was sitting next to him before adding, "We've been spying on her...unfortunately, we haven't been able to determine yet who is the father of her child, their houses are all shielded and there is magic surrounding them all the time...the signals are quite confused. Last night she appeared to be in three places at the same time."

"I'm aware of that but you know what the orders are, we have to take the Slayer and start the procedure..." Daniel said nodding. The Slayer and her friends had been taking precautions, yet they hadn't thought about hiding the hospital's records.

He looked at the two men in front of him, he could see that both the young men were having doubts about their actions...and he didn't like it.

"I already told Charles yesterday...I don't really fancy another rogue Slayer. But, sir...this procedure...I haven't ever heard of it...I barely knew about the Obscuritas itself..."

"I do realize that the procedure may seem unorthodox, but it has proven of invaluable help in the past. You have to remember, Mr. Hawthorne that we are not talking about an average Slayer."

"Is there something average, about a Slayer, sir?" Charles Dutton, the man who had been silent until that moment, asked.

Daniel looked at the man; Charles Dutton was in his late thirties, he hadn't been thrilled when he had seen the younger man upon his arrival to Sunnydale. He knew the younger watcher had quite romantic ideas about the Slayer's role in their war.

Charles Dutton was against the very idea of taking measures to deal with a pregnant Slayer. His presence there was the result of weeks of discussions within the Council. The younger watchers had demanded the presence of one of them, a representative, during the Procedure, to make sure it was absolutely necessary.

Foolish. Stupid.

They had no idea...no idea whatsoever of what they were dealing with.

"No..." Daniel admitted, "that's what usually makes a pregnant Slayer something to fear, to

loathe...but this Slayer...can you imagine what would happen if she ever reached Obscuritas? She would be far worse than any enemy she has ever fought..."

"How can we be so sure she has indeed approached Obscuritas?" Charles asked, "What if she's just pregnant?"

Daniel smirked at his words. He had heard the same complaints back home. "Do you really care to find out, Mr. Dutton?" He asked, "Let me tell you a story then: a century ago, a Chinese Slayer got pregnant. Her watcher in his diary kept writing about how strong she was getting, how heightened her senses were, how proud he was of her fighting skills...he hadn't believed in the Obscuritas, he hadn't informed the Council of what was going on ...he had thought it was just an old tale...told to scare watchers, to prevent them from letting their Slayers having sexual experiences"

"What happened?" The blonde man asked.

Daniel took a moment before answering. Maximillian Hawthorne was pivotal for the procedure. He was young, he wasn't even thirty, his powers, though, made him a precious element of the crew. He was young, and had doubts about the procedure, but his heart...was in the right place. He had an absolute faith in the Council. It was time, though, to thread any seed of doubt in the young man's heart.

He shrugged his shoulder and said, "His blood made it difficult for us to read the last pages of his diary. She had reached Obscuritas, and well...we could say she switched sides..."

"Was she dealt with?" Charles asked in a low voice.

"Don't they all one way or another?" Daniel replied, "None of us have to like it, we pledge to assist and guide the Slayer, that's what Watchers are for...but believe me, if a Slayer as powerful as Buffy Summers ever reached Obscuritas, no one would be able to stop her..."

-4-

The rain was pouring down. She kept running, without looking back.

She didn't need to.

He was at her heels. His evilness permeated the air; even the rain reeked of him. Willow was sure her heart was going to explode any minute, now.

He was close, too close, closer than the light. Her blue gown was soaking wet with rain, blocking her legs. She squeezed the little silver bottle, which was hanging on her chest, in her fingers.

She had to come back to him. She had to come back to Spike.

She was his only hope, just like he was hers.

She was the only one who could help him.

The golden light was so close to her, now.

Within the light there was her safety.

Within the light there was their hope.

“I have something which belongs to you, little girl.” Angelus’ voice almost made her stop.

<It’s a trap...he doesn’t have anything, keep running, enter the light>

She said to herself, over and over, like a mantra.

“I’m holding it in my hands right now...don’t you want to see it?” He continued. How was it that evilness vibrated even through his calm voice?

Willow didn’t want to stop, didn’t want to see, yet she couldn’t help turning to look at him, his voice similar to a siren’s song.

Angelus wasn’t moving. Rain was beading his face; a cruel leer was playing on his lips. He slowly raised his right hand; it was closed in a fist.

“You keep forgetting things, little girl...did you really think you could bring back life with you?”

Willow slowly stepped back. She could feel the cold golden light burning behind her back.

Angelus was getting close to her. He was shaking his head, an arrogant smirk on his lips while he slowly asked, “Will he love you when he knows the way you failed him?”

Willow froze, ice seeping through her veins while Angelus opened his closed fist and blood poured from it.

“Will he love you, little girl?” He repeated.

Willow shook her head, while her eyes stung with tears that were making her sight blurred.

*“I am *his* life, little girl.” He said.*

*“*I* am...I have his blood!” Willow screamed, as her tears trailed a burning path down her cheeks.*

Angelus tilted his head on a side and almost hissed, “You just took what you wanted, little girl.”

Willow furiously shook her head, hot tears mingling with cold rain on her cheeks. She looked down at the little bottle and with trembling hands uncapped it, pouring some of its content on her open palm.

It was blood.

“I have blood! I have life!” She exclaimed titling her hand up to show it to Angelus. Her hand dropped on her side and she couldn’t help taking another step back when the vampire took a step toward her.

Angelus was holding something in his hands. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t see what it was. The vampire evilly smiled at her, he shrugged and said, “We both have, little girl...the point is...which one do you hold dearest?”

He got closer to her. He was so close to her that he could touch her, kill her. Yet he wasn't touching her...he just looked at her.

Willow could smell blood on him...or was it on her?

Angelus sniffed her. He tilted his head down then whispered against her face, "Come back to him and tell him the way you failed him"

Willow closed her eyes but blinked them open, when Angelus hit her with the object he had been holding in his hands.

Pain embedded in her body, reverberating in every fiber of her being for a moment, while Angelus pushed her against the golden light, and Willow felt like she was being ripped in two, as she fought not to enter it.

"Tell him the way you took life away from him!" The vampire coldly hissed.

Tears rolled down her cheeks while she weakly shook her head.

"I didn't...I...ca...can't" She half sobbed, while the golden light engulfed her.

"Childhood is over, little girl..." Angelus whispered.

Willow screamed while the pain in her body throbbed in sync with the golden light around her, until both of them slowly faded leaving her in the dark.

She felt air leaving her lungs when it was Spike's voice that talked to her through the darkness, saying, "Childhood is over, little girl"

#

It was just like drowning.

Willow took long, convulsed breaths, while fear, hot and raw, was still gripping her heart in a strong, too strong hold. She felt her body pressed against Spike's, she could feel his arms pulling her closer at him.

~ Come back to him and tell him the way you failed him ~

She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling hot tears rolling down her cheeks, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." She kept sobbing burying her face in the crook of his arm.

"Sssh...it was just a nightmare" Spike's voice was low, soothing. Willow lightly relaxed, she could breathe, now, although she could still feel her heart pounding in her chest.

He brushed her hair with his fingers, slowly whispering, "It's over luv, I'm here with you...you are safe now..."

*~I am *his* life, little girl... ~*

Willow swallowed hard, forcing her eyes open. She took a deep breath and slowly pulled away from

Spike.

“Are you feeling any better?” Spike asked.

Willow nodded, without turning to look at him. She had been so tired, when they had come back from Eric’s apartment to her dorm room that she had just wanted to rest for a while, before going to Giles, for another night of research.

She had fallen asleep in Spike’s arms, feeling his fingers, slowly tracing random patterns on the skin of her stomach through the thin fabric of her shirt.

“How long have I been asleep?” She asked, her voice still cracked.

She didn’t know how long she had dozed off; her nightmare had totally altered her perceptions.

“Less than a hour...”

Willow turned toward him, Spike was resting his head against the open palm of his hand and she couldn’t help the little smile, which, despite her still shaken state of mind, crept, on her lips.

She stretched a hand and brushed the soft skin of his lips with her fingertips.

Spike smiled at her and said, “I take you feel better?”

Willow nodded, ignoring the dryness in her throat, and the need she still felt to cry and said, “Way better...someone very wise told me a while ago, that having nightmares in our line of job is one of the sucking side effects...”

Spike cocked and eyebrow at her, while gently draping an arm around her waist to pull her closer to him, he kissed her left temple and whispered against her skin, “Whoever said that was right...so we can scratch out Harris, from the list...”

Willow playfully slapped his arm and said, “Hey, you’re talking about my best friend, here...”

Spike grinned at her and leant toward her to capture her lips with his. Willow circled his neck with an arm, responding to his kiss.

She couldn’t help the shiver that ran up her spine, when Spike dug his fingers in her hair, playing with it, while his talented lips didn’t leave an inch of the skin of her face untouched.

She felt his cool tongue wiping away the tears she had shed during her nightmare; she tilted her head up when his mouth descended on her neck tasting her soft skin, lightly scraping it with his teeth.

~ Will he love you, little girl? ~

She gripped his shoulders and was almost tempted, to crush him at her. Angelus’ words kept replaying themselves in her mind, making her heart beat faster in her chest, perhaps Spike had heard it, or perhaps it was just the strength of the bond they shared, Willow couldn’t tell, and didn’t care, especially when Spike’s hands went to her shirt and he started to unbutton it with aching slowness.

He suddenly stopped and said, “I won’t go away this time...”

~ *You just took what you wanted, little girl.* ~

Willow nodded her head. She swallowed before murmuring, "I know...."

Spike smiled at her, he grazed her damp cheeks with his fingers. He didn't utter a sound, he let his eyes talk, they bore into hers, and Willow couldn't help smiling while the images of his nightmare slowly faded from her heart, replaced by Spike's smile, by his fingers, which kept brushing her cheeks, by his love, strong...stronger than anything she had ever known or experienced.

"Make love to me" She whispered.

There had always been an urgency and a burning passion in their lovemaking, since the first time, almost as if it was something forbidden, something which could consume both of them to the core, if they had lingered in it, if they had really tasted it

<This isn't an illusion...this is us...this is reality.>

Her hands went on his shirt, to help him out of it. Soft smiles played on their lips, while Spike lowered his head to knead with his tongue her nipple through the satin of her bra. She softly moaned, digging her fingers in his hair.

Spike's hands went on her waist, she had still her trousers on, but Spike didn't attempt to pull them off. His fingers lingered on her naked skin teasing it with his fingertips. His mouth and tongue were still playing with her hardened nipple, and Willow couldn't help saying, half laughing, half panting, "Wouldn't it be better if I didn't have this on?"

Spike raised his head; there was a malicious grin in his blue eyes when he shook his head.

Willow frowned and mumbled, "You're getting a kick out of it, aren't you?"

He lowered his head without answering her, yet she could feel his lips stretching in a wide smile against the thin fabric of her bra.

His left hand slowly raised, brushing her skin, sending jolt of pleasure throughout her body, it went behind her shoulders, and slowly helped her out of her shirt.

She attempted to move, Spike, though stopped her, gently, but firmly, whispering, "Let me love you"

<I need to...we both do...>

His eyes told her and Willow had to blink back tears.

<No more tears>

She thought. Not there. Not with Spike.

She nodded at him and let him undress her. His movements were still slow, as he pulled her shirt off, then unclasped her bra, touching her skin at the same time with both his hands and mouth.

Willow was losing herself in a whirlwind of sensations so strong and intense that it looked like they were shattering her body.

She couldn't help a sharp intake of breath when Spike's hands went on the fastening of her trousers. She searched his lips with hers and kissed him, hungrily, and his response made her legs tremble with a liquid pleasure, that quickly shot throughout her body.

<Oh, my god...he's just like fire...he's melting me...>

She incoherently thought, while her hands roamed on his naked back marveling, once more, at its softness, at the fire that his skin stirred within her.

She cupped his buttocks through the denim of his jeans with her hands, pulling her at him and felt his face stretching, morphing against the naked skin of her breasts.

That alone almost sent her over the edge.

<I'm doing this to him...I'm making him lose control...>

"You're playing dirty, Red," He half growled and his cool breath against the sensitive skin of her nipples made her inner muscles quiver. She gently took his face in both her hands and lifted it.

His yellow eyes were sparkling, searching into hers. She smiled at him and said, "If you want me to stop..." She trailed, feeling breathless.

He was taking away everything from her: her will, her breath, her tears...yet just looking into his eyes, she couldn't help feeling whole.

Spike slowly shook his head morphing back in his human face. He kissed the open palm of her left hand first, then her fingertips, for some seconds.

He lightly pulled away from her and his hands went on her breasts, gently massaging them, until Willow couldn't hold back a moan, her hands went again on his buttocks, and she panted, "Where were we?"

His mouth descended on hers, surprising her with the sweetest kiss. They both had their trousers on, but although the arousal in both of them was becoming almost painful, none of them seemed in a hurry, they kept kissing and teasing each other.

Spike's right hand was still on the fastening of her trousers, playing with its buttons, while her hands, were roaming on his naked skin, taking pleasure from the low sounds he was making with his throat, taking pleasure from his skin.

When he unbuttoned her trousers, Willow felt her heart almost skip a beat. He helped her out of her trousers, brushing with his fingers the soft skin of her legs, tickling her inner thighs.

Her hands went on the fastening of his jeans, but Spike stopped her by gently grabbing her wrist.

"I'll do that..." He said, his voice low.

<He's as breathless as I am...>

She thought, fully knowing it was impossible, yet his voice was huskier, deeper. She nodded at him and stretched a hand to trace his face. Spike closed his eyes and leant into her touch.

She smiled at him when he opened his eyes and in a voice as husky as his, said, “Make love to me, Spike”

Spike grinned and Willow saw how the blue of his eyes was darker, flickers of yellow, gleamed behind them, but Willow didn't care.

<It's what he is...what made him whole>

“I'm happy to oblige,” He said, before his lips covered hers, kissing her mouth, loving it, just as his body was loving hers.

Her breath caught in her throat in anticipation, when he pulled his jeans off, she helped him with her legs, and then wrapped them around his hips.

Blue met green, and Willow was sure the world around them had faded, disappeared. She couldn't hear, feel or see anything but him, and she was sure, it was the same for him.

His fingers played with her hair, while he supported his weight on his elbows. Gently, he entered her and Willow couldn't help blinking, while her heart began beating faster and faster against her chest.

It looked like Spike's hands were everywhere on her body, leaving fire's marks on her skin. She gripped his shoulders, losing herself in his eyes, her breath became ragged while the pleasure became almost too intense to bear, their movements, became more urgent, Spike's face changed, while Willow's inner muscles tightened around him, she arched her back wrapping her legs tighter around his waist.

<I love you>

Her eyes told him, and the way he tenderly brushed some damp locks away from her face, the way he smiled at her, even if his smile was altered by his demonic visage, filled her heart with joy.

Pleasure, so strong that it skimmed pain shot through her, leaving her breathless, while her whole body convulsed in Spike's arms. Soon he joined her, searching her lips with his, kissing her; his fangs lightly scraped her lips with not enough force to draw blood, yet his tongue traced her lips' outlines.

“Your heart is beating so fast” Spike huskily said, his cool breath tickled against her warm skin. Willow closed her eyes and tilted her head up, running her hands through Spike's hair.

“It's you...” She whispered. She opened her eyes and wasn't surprised when she met Spike's. They were still joined, and neither of them attempted to move.

Willow lowered her hand, to graze his face, Spike leant in her caress, slowly morphing back in his human face

“Would you consider me, incredibly cheesy if I told you I love you, right now?”

Spike cocked an eyebrow at her and grinned before saying, “There is only a way to find out, pet...”

Willow widely smiled at his words, her fingers grazed his full lips, she shrugged and said, “Let’s find out, then...”

~~*~*~*~*~*

Spike’s crypt was in one of Sunnydale’s oldest cemeteries. It hadn’t taken long for Xavier to find the exact location. It was the logical place the Eletti could have picked and chosen to live in: not too far away from the Slayer and close enough to the demon activity of the town.

It was a large crypt, Xavier noticed, looking around: no personal belongings in sight, but he had expected that. An Eletti didn’t leave clues; an Eletti didn’t show any trait, which could allow identification.

Too many things were at stake. Xavier lightly shook his head, he had never really gotten that fixation the Eletti had about being Spartan in their lifestyles, but he didn’t complain. He always knew what to look for.

Smells. He flared his nostrils, his green-blue eyes wide open, focused on a non-existent point in front of him.

The stale smell of cigarettes, wax, a flowery smell, faint, but unmistakable, which probably belonged to the human the Eletti was in love with

<*Will wonders ever cease?*> He idly wondered.

There wasn’t magic in the air, there weren’t spells protecting the crypt, but that was to be expected, a magic trail would arise too many questions among demons, especially in the crypt of a vampire who was now openly fighting with the good guys.

Furthermore, because the magic one would find, had nothing to do with basic protection spells.

<*Good boy, Spike...you know your stuff...*> He thought.

He kept focusing his senses, there was a faint, metallic smell, and Xavier smiled, taking some steps forward, toward the makeshift bed, which was to the center of the crypt. He cocked his eyebrows, he understood living the cliché, but wasn’t a stone coffin a bit too much?

He inwardly sighed. If the Eletti left traces so could he, he couldn’t afford any weakness, not on the job.

After all he had been sent to Sunnydale for that very reason: weakness.
After all he had been chosen for a reason...for a mistake, for desperation.

The smell was a bit stronger; now. He circled the makeshift bed, paying attention to every single detail, which surrounded him.

Eventually he stopped, letting a light smile playing on his lips. He knelt in front of a big candlestick, his senses ready to intercept any intruders, and then extracted from his black’s coat pockets a pair of gloves. They didn’t have any smell, and would cover his skin’s; he took in his hands, the small black backpack: it was old; it looked like it had seen better days.

<Haven't we all? >

He silently wondered, while opening it: there were a couple of floppy disks, which probably contained the reports of the last months, words written in obscure and very dead languages, yet encrypted with modern technology, just in case they would ever be found out.

Xavier couldn't help a little snort, all that secrecy for naught...blindly following rules written in blood, all for naught.

Lives taken...for naught.
All forgotten, for the love of one single girl.

One. Single. Girl.

Was she different than other girls? Was her life more precious than other girls'?

Xavier shook his head; he had steeled himself for that mission, yet he couldn't help it.

He couldn't help it if it still hurt.
He couldn't help it, if he still felt the same pain.
He had chosen to die because of that pain.
Because he had wanted...what...revenge? Understanding?
He now just wanted to understand and forgive.

He needed that.

He rummaged through the backpack until he found what he had been looking for: a little key, well hidden, in the fabric of the backpack.

He got up from the floor, then proceeded to lightly push the lid of the stone coffin, which constituted Spike's bed.

Under the skeleton of a woman he found it, a medium sized casket. He opened it.

Which were the secrets of an Eletti?
Which were the secrets of the monster that spied the monsters?

~~*~*~*~*~*

The first stars had appeared in the sky, the rain that incessantly had poured down for most part of the day had stopped; the air was cool, filling the evening with its sweet smell. Buffy was in the terrace, sitting on a chair, her eyes on the evening's sky, she closed her eyes, tightening a blanket around her shoulders.

She tilted her head down, resting it against her knees, letting out a tremulous sigh, thinking about what had happened that afternoon, when she had cut herself, in her mother's kitchen.

She closed her injured hand in a fist. The cuts were already healing, yet her hand was still bandaged. What was happening to her? Blood wasn't supposed to arouse her; it wasn't supposed to leave her craving for more.

She wiped away some tears with the back of her hand and took a deep breath. She didn't want to admit she was beginning to be afraid of herself. Details she had overlooked until that afternoon were coming up in her mind.

She couldn't help thinking about how strongly she had been feeling her powers, she couldn't help recalling the sheer pleasure she had found in her fights, since she had gotten pregnant.

Her training sessions had become more intense; in a couple of occasions she had really hurt Spike or Eric ...without even noticing.

She recalled what Willow had told her that morning about Spike...she had been kidding, yet, the meaning behind her words hadn't been lost on her: she had hurt Spike...and she knew now that he didn't have to pretend any more, how much stronger than he appeared he really was.

She hadn't been afraid for her baby during her patrols, on the contrary the knowledge she was carrying a life inside of her, had made her stronger, had pushed her not to take useless risks. Her determination had increased.

<Are you sure you didn't mean your darkness? >

A little voice in the back of her mind suggested. She squeezed her eyes shut and hugged her legs, taking deep breaths, trying to calm the pounding in her chest.

"Luv?" Giles' gentle voice made her start. Buffy jerked her head up and turned to her left, toward his voice.

"I'm here..." She said, hoping he hadn't noticed how shaky her voice was.

"What are you doing here?" He gently asked.

Buffy smiled at him, the look in his eyes was as always full of love and concern. She shrugged and said, "I needed to take some air..."

"How did your lunch with your mother go?" He asked. He bent toward her, and softly kissed her lips, before taking a seat next to her.

"Fine...it went...just fine..." She said slowly emphasizing each word with slow nods of her head.

Giles frowned and looked at her, Buffy stifled a sigh, and the look in his eyes became if possible, gentler, when he asked, "What happened?"

She couldn't help the smile, which crept on her lips; at times she forgot how well Giles knew her. She weakly smiled at him and said, "Mom's got a job's offer...she's moving to St. Francisco"

Giles stretched a hand and gently squeezed her shoulder. Buffy closed her eyes. How was it possible, that his mere touch could give her such peace, such a sense of wholeness?

She had troubles remembering there had really been a time when they hadn't been together; when he hadn't been the first person she saw when she opened her eyes. Even when she had been with Angel or Riley, there had always been a corner of her heart, part of her soul that had belonged to him.

She smiled at him blindly seeking his hand, the comfort of his touch. They intertwined fingers, and the only thing Buffy wished was that the gnawing fear that was slowly starting to invade her went away.

“Luv, what did you do to your hand?” Giles asked, concerned.

Buffy opened her eyes and looked down at their joined hands, noticing she had stretched her injured hand, she shook her head and whispered, “It’s nothing, I cut myself with a glass” She hesitated before saying, “I shattered it”

Giles cocked an eyebrow at her. They both knew she was usually very careful and aware of her strength, Buffy noticed how the green of his eyes darkened.

Up to three months before, she would have probably stayed silent, she would have brushed it all off...things had changed, though, things had changed so much, so she swallowed and added, “And there’s something else...I didn’t hear it shattering, I didn’t feel the glass cutting my hand...I didn’t feel pain...it didn’t even sting”

She let go of Giles’ hand and murmured, “The blood... I wanted to taste it...I had to force myself not to...”

Giles lowered his head and Buffy couldn’t help frowning...he looked like he had expected something similar to happen, she stretched a hand toward him and gently forced him to raise his head. Her eyes bore into his, for some seconds.

The truth she read in his green depths, startled her, she let her hand fall, and she had to rest her back against the chair, “You knew this could happen, didn’t you? What’s going on, Rupert?”

Giles slowly got up from his chair; he put his hands in his pocket and lightly shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t look at her, and Buffy experienced a terrible sense of déjà vu...hadn’t Giles acted that way before telling her about the Cruciamentum?

“Answer me!” She said. She had intended it to be a demand; instead she realized it had come out as a plea.

Giles eventually looked at her, a pained expression on his handsome face, “I’m not sure, yet....”

She got up from her chair and got close to him, she didn’t even notice how her right hand immediately had gone on her belly. She swallowed and asked, “What’s happening to me? You’re not sure about *what*? What is it...a disease?”

“No, it’s not a disease” He said in a low voice.

Buffy hugged her arms, noticing how strained his voice sounded. Cold seeped through her body. She blinked when Giles continued, “It is triggered by the pregnancy...its name is Obscuritas ”

“Which means, what?” She asked, stepping toward him.

“It’s Latin, Buffy...it means Darkness.” He raised his head to look at her; Buffy could see tears glistening in his eyes. He swallowed before adding, “Pregnant Slayers have reached it in the past... their dark side came out”

Buffy took a step back; the blanket fell on the floor. She swallowed, while her eyes filled with tears,

“D...dark side?” She opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t utter a sound for some seconds, when she eventually managed to speak, she asked, “Am I reaching it?”

“Buffy...” He said shaking his head. He moved close to her

Buffy pushed him away, sending him on the floor and shouted, “AM I REACHING IT?”

“We are not sure, yet. The signs...” Giles slowly said.

“Signs?” She almost laughed then in a bitter voice added, “What do your signs say?”

They were both startled by her words, almost as if they had been slapped.

~ Read me the signs! Tell me my fortune! ~

Their eyes met for an instant, her words were bringing back, memories painful to both of them. Memories of another night, of another conversation.

«I’m sorry,” She whispered shaking her head.

Giles slowly rose on his feet, while Buffy avoided looking at him. How long had passed since that night, since that blind rage had filled her?

~ You’re so useful sitting here, with all your books; you’re really a lotta help! ~

“I’m sorry, Rupert...” She slowly repeated, meaning it.

“Buffy...” He started.

She shook her head. She had been so afraid that night, yet what she was feeling now, was much worse. It was like something was ripping life out of her. She had to swallow past the lump in her throat before asking, “What are the signs?”

“Increased strength, heightened senses, blood thirst” He hesitated before adding, “Compulsive behaviors, physical mutations”

“Ok, I get the drill...” She said stopping him, she sniffed then asked, “How can we stop it?”

When he didn’t answer her, Buffy lowered her head, feeling breathless.

“Am I going to hurt you and our baby?” She eventually asked, her voice but a whisper.

“We can’t be sure,” He said in a low voice.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” She asked after a moment of hesitation. How long had he known? How long had he kept what he had found out to himself? She didn’t even realize her voice had gotten louder when she continued, “What the hell were you waiting for, that I killed someone before telling me, ‘oh, by the way, luv...you’re not getting morning sickness, but never fear because the ever useful Slayer’s package for pregnancy includes going all psycho?’”

“That’s not fair, I was just trying to protect you!” He exclaimed.

“How? How can you protect me from this? How can anyone protect our baby?” She choked out

between sobs. She stepped closer to him, desperately wishing to touch him, to be held by him, to feel again warm, safe...but she was afraid to.

She was afraid to get too close to him. She was afraid to hurt him. When she had found him in the galleries, three months before, after those three long, terrible days, she had vowed no one was ever going to hurt him, again. No one...including herself. She often thought she had left her old life in Sunnydale's galleries. Yet, now...it looked like her old life...was coming back...with a vengeance.

She was hurting Giles, her Giles...her love.

Giles seemed to sense her hesitancy, because he wordlessly pulled her in a hug.

Buffy closed her eyes and buried her face in his chest, "I don't want to hurt any of you...I don't want to become a monster..."

Giles didn't talk, he just held her tighter at him. She closed her eyes, inhaling to full lungs his scent, finding even for a little while, peace. She nuzzled her face against the soft fabric of his sweater and asked in a low voice, "Can I fight it? Is there a way to stop it?"

She tilted her head up and met Giles' eyes; they were bright with unshed tears.

"I wish I knew" He said in a cracked voice, "we've been researching, but without the Council's resources, we haven't gone very far..."

Buffy nodded and lightly pulled back from him, before saying, "Keep researching, then...we have two Eletti, a Watcher, a witch who happens to be a hacker and a former demon...I want to know everything about this Obscuritas thingy...and the way to stop it"

"Buffy, this is not another..." He started.

She stopped him by raising a hand, her voice was as cold as ice when she said, "It is..." She took a step back and repeated, "It is, Rupert..."

She rested her hand above her stomach and said, "No one is going to hurt us...you promised me, remember? No *one!*"

She didn't have the courage to say it out loud but she was sure, from the sad look in his eyes that Giles had heard her when she had silently added, "Including me"

-5-

*I*t was a silent Buffy, who that night went patrolling with Spike. She had asked him to go with her, even if according to the schedule they had set up shortly after Buffy had announced her pregnancy, that night she was supposed to team up with Eric, while Spike and Xander should have taken the other circuit, which included the park and the morgue.

None of them had questioned her request, especially when they had taken in her pale face and puffy eyes and the palpable tension in her body.

They were walking down the graveyard, looking around for any signs of vampire's activity. Buffy could feel Spike's eyes on her. She knew he was waiting for her to talk. She almost shook her head, realizing how well she had come to read Spike for the past months.

If someone had told her that she would trust Spike so much she would have ever believed it...that had been until Willow and Giles had been taken. She had come to respect him even before knowing about his soul.

She knew that neither her friends nor Giles fully understood the strength of the bond, which had formed between Spike and she for the past three months, and to be honest, she didn't understand it either.

What she knew was that Spike had held her when she had cried, had protected her and fought by her side. That was enough for her.

"Ducks?" He asked in a low voice.

Buffy turned toward him, he was cocking an eyebrow at her, and in his eyes she could see curiosity. She didn't talk and just shrugged her shoulders.

"I know you want to ask me something..." He continued.

Buffy nodded, unable to do anything else. Her world had just turned upside down...what Giles had told her, kept ringing in her ears, making her stomach tie in painful knots.

She took a deep breath before saying, "Up to this evening, my main concern about my baby was... whether I would have ever seen its first birthday, you know...with me being the Slayer and stuff... little did I know that I could go all psycho..."

"You know..." Spike stated matter of factly.

"Yep...Rupert told me about it"

"Did he?" Spike asked surprised.

Buffy nodded. Did everyone but her knew about what was going on?

She shook her head, judging by the surprise in the vampire's voice, apparently yes. She was the only one who hadn't had a clue about the changes in her own nature.

"I cut myself-," She said in a low voice, without looking at the vampire, "I don't know how it happened. One moment I was talking to my mom, a moment later she made me notice I had shredded the glass in my hand. And you know what?" She swallowed and quickly said, "While I was looking at the blood...my blood...I found myself craving for more" She tilted her head up and weakly smiled at him before saying, "So...I wiggled and asked him what was happening. Image my surprise when he told me about..." She couldn't finish her sentence. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingers.

"Did he tell you we're not sure whether you're reaching it?" Spike said.

Buffy weakly nodded while looking around, she hugged her shoulders with her arms, and said, "I'd always believed pregnant Slayers would make perfect targets...you know...back in the day, when Angel told me that with him I could never even hope to have children...I told him I didn't want them...that I had even killed my goldfish...but actually? I was scared...scared of what could happen...scared I could get weak-" She bitterly smiled and hissed, "Instead yay us, we get darker,

cool uh?"

Spike opened his mouth to speak, but a growl coming from a nearby grave interrupted him, Buffy took a stake from the waistband of her trousers, and pointed at him with it saying, "We're not finished, got it?"

She didn't wait for him. She couldn't.

She needed to fight.

She needed to know.

She had to know, if she had already become a monster...and there was only one way to find out.

~~*~*~*~*~*

Spike snorted. Why had Giles let her out of the house that night? She was in no condition to slay. She was too scared, too unstable.

She needed the fights to channel her energies...but not when she was too scared of herself to think straight.

He followed the Slayer, which was proving to be quite difficult. Buffy was running almost as if she had the devil itself at her heels.

He stopped on his tracks, though, when he saw the newly risen vampire, being pummeled by Buffy. She effortlessly threw him against a headstone with enough force that the stone cracked.

No...not cracked. The impact pulverized the stone.

The newly risen vampire shook his head, stunned, and slowly rose on his feet. Buffy wasn't moving; she had put her hands on her hips, a bored expression on her face, "C'mon" She said, "I don't have all night...no, wait! I do, you don't..."

The vampire snarled and charged her. Buffy didn't move, she didn't even flinch. Spike frowned, puzzled. He could hear her frantic heartbeat...and something else...she was filled with energies...and from the look in her eyes, anger.

He took a step forward, ready to intervene, when the Slayer suddenly moved and grabbed the vampire that had charged her by the neck and threw him on the ground.

Spike opened his mouth and his frown deepened, when she knelt and purposely pierced the newly risen vampire's throat with her stake, pushing it into his throat with the heel of her boot.

Blood was gushing out from the vampire's throat and mouth as Buffy pushed the stake deeper and deeper. She looked at the vampire for some instants, a blank expression in her eyes as she extracted the stake from his throat. She held the vampire down with her right knee, her right hand gripping the vampire's torn throat, as she observed the bloodied stake, her head tilted on side, then with a quick, sudden, movement she staked the vampire.

She slowly rose on her feet, apparently oblivious of her surroundings and Spike slowly got close to her.

<Has she already gotten so far? >

He silently wondered. Buffy's voice made him lightly start.

"Don't worry, I'm still me," She said, turning toward him, she took a deep breath and continued, "Where were we, before we were so rudely interrupted?"

"What exactly were you doing, ducks?" He asked.

"Hmm...dunno...graveyard, night, stake...vampire Slayer...do any of these things ring a bell?" She dryly said.

"To a casual observer it might have looked like you were torturing the poor bloke..."

"What...are you feeling sorry for him?" She snapped. She shook her head and marveled, "Ok, I admit it, I went a bit over the top"

Spike cocked an eyebrow at her, but didn't say anything.

Buffy rolled her eyes and said, "Ok, make it way over the top...but it wasn't the Obscuritas...it was me...I decided to do that...I wanted to see whether I could do that..."

"Do what? What did you want to prove?" Spike asked.

They started walking again; Buffy was hugging her arms, and Spike couldn't help noticing how she didn't even care about the blood on her hands. They kept walking, in silence.

Minutes passed before Buffy turned toward him and said, "I wanted to see whether torture gave me the creeps or a happy"

"And the answer is?" Spike asked.

"It gave me the creeps" She raised her arm and quickly pulled up her coat's sleeve, goose bumps were covering her skin, "Look..." She took a step back from him and shrugging said, "so I guess it's official: I'm not a monster, yet..." She pursed her lips before saying, "Although that's the second time I've done something like that..."

"I already told you once, you're not a monster" He smirked, then added, "you can be a bloody pain in the ass, Summers, but you're not a monster..." He shrugged and added, "and besides, the other time you were looking for information. You were being the Slayer, although from what I've heard a bitchy one..."

"How do you know about...?" She started, then she rolled her eyes and said, "Sorry, I forgot...you even knew my shoe's size when you arrived here..." She sighed and whispered, "I wasn't a pregnant Slayer when you told me that"

She cocked an eyebrow at him when he snorted and said, "You know? You never told me about the second Slayer you killed"

"I did" Spike replied. He had ever talked to anyone about that night...not even to Eric. His reports about the event of that night had almost been a Cliff Notes version of what had really happened.

Not even Drusilla had really known...he had made sure she didn't...couldn't see, read that part of

his mind.

“Nope, you didn’t.” Buffy said breaking his train of thoughts, “You said, and I quote you here, ‘She was rogue, she was a bitch, the Eletti ordered me to kill her and I did’”

“I even told you not to stick your nose in it” Spike grumbled.

“So what? Bite me....” She deadpanned

“Not a smart thing to say to a vampire, ducks...” Spike replied grinning at her.

Buffy weakly smiled and shook her head. She toyed with another stake she had produced from the pocket of her black coat, and then asked, “When you said she was rogue...you meant Faith rogue... or ‘Gee-I’m-Pregnant-let’s-become-a-monster’ rogue?”

“Ducks-” Spike started.

“I want to know... I need to!” She hissed

“Why?” He asked. He could see her eyes bright with unshed tears. She really needed to know...yet, Spike didn’t know whether he could tell her. He didn’t know whether he was strong enough to.

“I want to know, what’s ahead of me,” She stated simply. She shrugged and asked, “Was she pregnant?”

He clenched his jaws. She had the right to know what could possibly happen to her.

< To aid the Slayer in her never ending battle against the darkness...to lighten her burden >

The words of the Oath he had recited so long ago came up in his mind. He had blindly believed in every word he had said, he had meant every syllable of it. Later, he had killed two Slayers in his unlife...but those words were still true to his heart, were still his reason of existence.

Whatever he had experienced that night was over. That Chinese Slayer...of what was left of her belonged to the past. The blonde girl, the Chosen One in front of him...was asking for his help, for his expertise. She was a friend, asking for help.

He was surprised by how easily the words came out from his mouth, “It happened during the Boxer’s Rebellion. I had been sent there, although I didn’t know why”

“What happened when you found out?” She asked, stopping walking.

Spike stopped walking as well, and looked around for some instants before saying, “She had already gathered the demons and the warlocks...one of us had blown his cover-”

“Heta7tantos” She said in a low voice.

Spike nodded, “You can say it, ducks....”

“What happened?” Buffy asked.

Spike didn’t talk at first. Buffy was looking at him, eagerly waiting for information, clues...

anything that could help her.

He swallowed before saying, "I don't know how many demons...how many people I bloody killed that night and last but not least I fought her..." He paused before adding, "She was eight months pregnant"

"How long did it take for you to kill her?" Buffy asked.

"Sorry luv, I didn't have a watch with me, didn't check it out..." He said, gritting his teeth. That wasn't true. He knew how long it had taken; he had relived that night in his nightmares enough to know. "Hours...it took hours. Those were the longest hours of my life." He shook his head then added, "She was very strong...she almost got me..."

"But you killed her...them"

"Yes...I did..." Spike coldly said. He gazed down at her and added in a cold voice, "There is something else you'd like to know? The way I killed her, perhaps?"

Buffy shook her head and said, "No...it's enough...it's enough to know, we're not unbeatable...." She tightened in her coat, and whispered, "C'mon...let's finish this patrol...."

~~*~*~*~*~*

Spike was actually beginning to feel sorry for the vampires that were getting in Buffy's way that night. Although she hadn't tortured any other vampire, she was hurting them bad, before staking them.

She hadn't uttered a single word, since he had told her about the second Slayer. She had barely looked at him, except to make sure he was watching her back while they were fighting.

They were walking now, they had almost completed the circuit, they usually reunited with the other team and together they escorted Buffy home, much on her insistence.

"Did she have horns?" Buffy suddenly asked.

Spike looked at her puzzled, "What?" He asked.

"Rupert told me there might be physical mutations ...did she have horns...a tail?"

Spike shook his head, "What in the bleedin' hell are you trying to do, ducks?" He looked at her; she had stopped walking and was looking at him, her arms crossed over her chest.

Spike let out an unnecessary sigh and said, "No, she didn't have horns, she didn't have a tail either...her skin was thicker...and her eyes were orange, though. Are you bloody happy, now?"

Buffy shrugged but didn't talk. She started walking again and Spike had troubles catching up with her, "Look, I know it's hard for you..."

She stopped walking and turned toward him, flashing him an angry look, "You know nothing, Spike!" She hissed, "You don't know what's like knowing you could harm your own baby.... you're never going to be a father..."

Spike got close to her, his jaws were clenched, Buffy shook her head and whispered, and "I'm sorry witness the return of the foot in the mouth disease" She swallowed and said, "I need to know everything, Spike...I want to know each detail...I'm the only Slayer who didn't stay dead, I defied prophecies and bad omens...I fully intend to have this baby..."

Spike nodded at her, a light smile crossed his lips, "That's the Slayer I know and..."

"If you say love, I'm gonna scream like..." Buffy's voice was indeed interrupted by a female scream, she shrugged and finished, "...that"

She didn't wait for him, and ran toward the voice. Spike rolled his eyes and followed her.

He almost ran into her, Buffy raised her hand to silence him, in front of them Electra had just begun feeding on a girl.

Buffy coughed and said, "Are we interrupting something?"

Electra tilted her head up from the girl's neck, her lips were dirty with blood, she snarled, "It's you..."

Buffy took a step forward saying, "Why, did you miss me?"

Electra morphed back in her human face, she held the girl against her body, she looked at both Spike and Buffy then smiling said, "What is this, the bottled blondes' night out?" Her gaze fixed on Buffy then she added, "You'll have to be careful now with that stuff, especially in your condition..."

Buffy sighed and said, "You know Electra? I've really had a crappy day...I'm not really in the mood for this...so let go that girl and get it over with..."

Electra tilted her head on a side, resting it against the frightened girl's, she shrugged and said, "Ok" She placed a kiss on the girl's temple and said, and "Sorry, honey...I'm busy now... " With a movement almost too swift for the eyes to catch, she snapped the girl's neck, taking a step back when the body fell on the damp grass.

"Bitch..." Buffy hissed.

She took in Buffy's horrified gaze and shrugging asked, "What? Oh, well..." The vampire said looking at the lifeless body at her feet, she tilted her head up to look at Buffy and quipped, "You asked me to let her go, you didn't specify how."

Buffy took a step toward her and so did Spike. Electra didn't move she arched a delicate eyebrow at them and said, "You don't really want to fight me, do you? Especially after last time...."

Buffy and Spike exchanged a glance then as one, moved toward Electra, the vampire sighed and said, "I guess you want after all..."

~~*~*~*~*~*

Buffy hit her first, her fist solidly connected with the vampire's face, sending her on the ground, balancing on her arms, Electra got up, punching Spike who had attacked her from her shoulders, managing to say, "I'm deeply disappointed, William...you're getting sloppy!"

"Shut the hell up!" Both Spike and Buffy said in unison

Electra smiled and shaking her head said, "Do your loved ones know how much in sync you are?" She dodged a punch from Buffy and pushed her away; she shrugged and said, "Sorry, sweetheart...I don't like fighting pregnant Slayers, that's William's ground..."

Spike's kick caught her in the stomach; she blinked and almost doubled over in pain. She shook her head and mumbled, "Whoa...that was good..."

She spun kicked, hitting him on the face, with enough force that she sent him flying on the damp grass. She was about to talk, when a noise caught her attention, Buffy who seemed apparently oblivious of it, took advantage of her distraction and slipped behind her, she circled her neck with her arm, pointing a stake to her heart with the other and hissed against her face, «Lesson the second, Electra... never underestimate your opponents »

Electra lightly frowned; she turned her head toward Buffy's and whispered against her ear, "Can you keep a secret?"

Buffy blinked, surprised, she pressed the stake more strongly against the vampire's heart and hissed, "Shut up..."

"You never learn, Slayer" Electra continued, her voice low and hypnotic against her ear, "*never* got distracted..." She kissed her cheek, and then surprised her by vanishing into thin air.

Buffy staggered, surprised, the skin of her arms had burned when Electra had vanished. Buffy looked around, and then sighed.

She was approaching Spike when a sudden sharp pain exploded in her left arm, she blinked surprised and lowered her head, a big dart, similar to those they had sometimes used on Oz, was emerging from her arm. She fell on her knees, gasping, taking in big gulps of air.

She looked around, while her head began furiously spinning. Electra had disappeared, while Spike was still lying unconscious face down on the damp grass.

She could hear blood buzzing in her ears; she couldn't help a weak cry, when with her right hand she removed the dart.

She clenched her teeth and shook her head, trying to get rid of the sudden dizziness, "Is this day ever going to finish?" She murmured.

She crawled on the damp grass, from where she was, she could see Spike, she took a deep breath, ignoring the sudden wave of nausea that seemed to tear her stomach up, her right hand went on her belly. She didn't even seem to notice she was still clutching the dart in her left hand.

<Please don't let them kill my baby...>

She thought. She swallowed and called in a cracked voice, "Spike?"

The blonde vampire slowly raised his head, he was in his game face, Buffy slowly crawled toward him, she abruptly stopped though, when Spike growled, "I can hear your baby's heartbeat",

"What?" She asked, shaking her head in disbelief. She closed her hands in fists, only then did she notice she was still holding the dart in her hand, "Bastards!" She whispered, realization dawning

"Ducks?" Spike asked.

Buffy jerked her head up, she looked at him, he had morphed back in his human face, and he was frowning, she slowly raised her hand and showed the dart to Spike, the vampire slowly got on his feet, then bent next to her, and helped her on her feet.

He took the dart from her hands and sniffed its tip, then threw it to the ground hissing, "They've given it to you!"

"What...what did they give me?" She asked.

~ It's an organic compound... of muscle relaxants and adrenal suppressers. The effect is temporary~

"The stuff they gave you for the Cruciamentum ..." Spike said, he looked around, and Buffy couldn't help shivering when Spike's eyes narrowed, she followed his gaze, she had to swallow while sudden goose bumps covered her skin, when she saw them: there were four men who were quickly heading toward them. All of them were armed to the hilt, with tranquilizer guns and crossbows, and they looked like they were ready and willing to use them.

Spike lightly grabbed her wrist, shaking her temporary numbness away, he started to run, and she had troubles catching up with him, he kept looking behind his shoulders as they ran through the graveyards, the four men at their heels.

She felt her heart beating so furiously in her chest that she was afraid it was going to burst in it, both for the fear and for the run.

They zigzagged through some graves and trees. Spike suddenly stopped and she almost tripped onto him.

There were three men in front of them, Spike snarled when one of them, a middle-aged blonde man, raised a cross brandishing it against his face. The vampire turned his head, growling while his grip on Buffy's wrist lessened

One of the men, a short brunette, who was on the right aiming a crossbow at them stepped up, he was slim built, his strong features contrasted with the gentle expression in his blue eyes, his voice was soft when lowering his weapon said, "We can make things very simple, without any bloodshed, it's up to you, Buffy..."

Spike loudly snorted at the man's words, and she took a step back, that man's voice stopped her, though, when he said, "Do you really think you can stop us, Buffy? The Council..."

"I'm not part of the Council anymore, I quit, remember?" She said, venom dripping from her voice.

The man stepped toward her, he looked at Spike and nodded saying, "I see though, that your acquaintances with vampires haven't diminished..."

"And you guys are still obnoxious asses...glad to know that some things don't ever change..."

The man smiled at her words and said, "Alas, some things **do** change, Buffy."

~~*~*~*~*~*

The patrol in the park had been uneventful, to say the least. Not a single vampire, not even a newly risen one, which had seemed strange both to Xander and Eric. They had completed their circuit in record time, and were now heading to the graveyard, to meet Spike and Buffy.

Xander hadn't uttered a single word during all the patrol, his mind still focused on the conversation between Giles and Spike, a conversation he had overheard. Not that he had meant to, he had wanted to go and warn Giles about what Willow had told him about Buffy. To say that what he had overheard that afternoon had upset him meant using the mother of all euphemisms.

Xander was scared and angry.

When he had gone to Giles and Buffy's apartment that night, he had been surprised to find a still shaken Buffy, asking Spike to go patrolling with her. They had left shortly after. Giles and Eric had exchanged a glance but hadn't talked.

Xander had asked Anya about the Obscuritas. His girlfriend had explained to him what it was: Slayers who got in touch with the dark side of their powers...and this could be possibly happening to Buffy...and it was something they couldn't fight, couldn't stop. It was something that was coming from within her.

He had avoided looking at Eric almost all night; he shook his head and said in a low voice, "I heard a very interesting conversation between Giles and Spike this afternoon ..."

Eric didn't answer him, Xander turned toward him, the vampire was walking next to him, looking around. His face was serious, he looked like he hadn't heard what he had told him ...or so Xander thought, because Eric stopped walking and said, "I know...William heard you, he told me about it"

"What's going on, Eric?" Xander crossed his arms over his chest, "Is there any way for us to help her?"

"She is the only one who can help herself..." The vampire shrugged and said, "We can't do anything..."

"What does it mean we can't do anything?" Xander asked.

Anya had told him more or less the same things, yet he refused to accept that! They had beat the Mayor and had prevented the Ascension, they had kicked the crap out of Adam and survived a night of vivid nightmares after that...nothing could be worse than dreaming of Snyder pretending to be Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, in his mind.

He stepped closer to Eric and said, "There has to be a way...there has to!"

The vampire turned toward him, his voice was low when he said, “Sometimes there aren’t ways out, Xander...” He put his hands in the pocket of his jacket and whispered, “At least not ways we like...”

Xander took a step back. “Do you think she’s going to reach it?”

“I don’t know...Buffy is very different from every Slayer I’ve ever met...or heard of” Eric replied.

Xander blinked surprised, Eric didn’t usually use Buffy’s name, when referring to her. He shook his head and opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced by Eric’s hand on his arm. Xander noticed how the vampire’s eyes had narrowed, he followed his gaze and his heart almost skipped a beat, when he saw three men heading toward a black van, parked on the street.

He noticed that all of them were bleeding; they had been probably hurt, two of them were carrying an unconscious Buffy in their arms, the other was walking, and he was looking around holding a crossbow in his trembling hands.

Eric dragged Xander behind a parked car. Xander looked at him, frowning, the look in the vampire’s eyes, was beyond cold. He sniffed the air for a second, while the grip on him became almost painful. Xander didn’t talk though. His gaze shifted again on the men, he was wondering why they weren’t rushing there to try and free Buffy.

“Who are they?” Xander asked in a low voice.

“The Council...they have found out about her pregnancy...” Eric hissed.

Eric turned toward Xander and the young man would have rather preferred seeing the dark-haired vampire in game face, than seeing the cold fury in his brown eyes, and how his lips had formed a thin line.

“Do you have a plan?” Xander asked.

Eric slowly nodded and said, “Go and warn Rupert...I’ll follow them and see where they’re taking her...”

“Why don’t we stop them, now?” Xander asked.

“Because if we do, there will be others...they won’t stop...not with a pregnant Slayer”

The grip on Xander’s arm lessened, and Xander already knew that his arm was going to be sore for days. He nodded at the vampire while he silently slipped in the shadows. Xander swallowed looking around, when he was sure the men were distracted, he began running.

Hoping Eric wouldn’t lose them.

Hoping they wouldn’t be too late.

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

The strong scent of fresh blood hit his nostrils, forcing Spike to open his eyes. He shook his head

and grimaced in pain and frustration as he looked around.

The bodies of four men were lying on the ground...and he knew neither Buffy nor he had killed them.

*~ Alas, some things *do* change, Buffy. ~*

He slowly got on his feet, the pain in his head was still throbbing and so that on his shoulder, it had all happened so quickly, he had managed to hit one of the men, before the chip had gone off, one of the men had held him, while another had kept him still, brandishing a huge cross at him.

Spike had seen other men appearing from behind a mausoleum, yet Buffy had run, but she hadn't gone very far, another dart had been fired, it had hit her on her leg, she had staggered for some seconds, then her body had gone limp on the ground.

She had been barely conscious then, their gazes had fixed for an instant, Spike had managed to break free from that man's grip and had kicked the man that had been in front of him, the other had used the cross to pierce his leg, and Spike's hand had burned when he had taken it off, snarling.

He had managed to hit one the men another time, before that pain, had excruciatingly exploded in his head. He had bent on his knees, but had jerked his head on a side, when from seemingly nowhere a bolt had been fired, hitting a man who was charging him

The man had fallen on the ground and so had others. He had rushed toward Buffy, he had knelt next to her, Buffy had blinked, trying to weakly warn him before losing consciousness, he had turned and the rifle butt of one of the tranquilizer guns had solidly and viciously connected against his face.

He had distinctly heard his bones cracking. He had felt a sharp pain on his left shoulder and their combination had overpowered him...even if for a little while.

It had been enough...because Buffy had been taken.

...And he hadn't been able to do anything to stop them from taking her.

*<Very good job...face it mate, you *are* getting sloppy! >*

His right arm absently went to the stake that was embedded on his left shoulder, luckily for him; the stake had missed the heart.

“Amateurs” He grimaced, removing the stake.

He looked around, whoever had fired those bolts, had done a remarkably good job; too bad it hadn't been enough.

The Council had taken Buffy. The same people who had pledged to defend and guide her had taken her.

While he slowly headed out of the graveyard, he couldn't shake away a little voice in his head, which couldn't blame who had taken Buffy.

He couldn't shake away the thought that once he would have done the same thing. A pregnant Slayer who already showed most of the signs associated with the Obscuritas was to be dealt with, no

matter what.

He clenched his jaws when images from a night of a century before filled his mind. "Won't go that way. Not this time" He hissed.

Yet, those words on his lips tasted bitter, bitterer than every lie he had ever told in his long life.

~~*~*~*~*~*

Watchers armed to the hilt, who had come all the way to Sunnydale to take away the Slayer in her own town.... that was something Electra hadn't expected.

She hadn't even known they had found out about the pregnancy.

"This qualifies as the worst timing, ever!" She growled, jumping from atop the mausoleum where she had hid during the attack.

With cat-like grace she landed on the ground. Spike had just gone away, she could see his fading form, she could smell his blood, and his rage.... she was delighted by it.

She let fall on the ground the crossbow she had taken from one of the men she had killed and shook her head, while a snarl fought to escape from her lips.

She knew what was going to happen to the Slayer. A pregnant Slayer posed a concrete danger, one that was going to be dealt with. Not that seeing the Slayer crying out in pain or Spike being stopped by humans hadn't been pleasant, on the contrary, but she had other plans for them.

She could have killed all the watchers who had attacked the Slayer and she nearly had but something had stopped her.

She would have been utterly surprised if she had known how much her thoughts matched Eric's; someone had to stop them for good...she had worked too hard, too long, to be stopped by the Council

She viciously kicked one of the bodies growling, "You couldn't have chosen a worse moment to grow a pair!"

She stopped kicking the body and ran a hand through her hair, her demonic features slowly morphed back in her human mask. She tilted her head up, observing the night sky for some seconds, a soft smile played on her lips

~ And it will be darkened by the ambition of he, who will try and lose she who was borne by mistake. ~

The night was still young, and she still had many things to do. She let out a chuckle and shook her head saying "Hell must be freezing over, I'm going to help the Slayer.... what's this world coming to?"

As corny and clichéd as it sounded to her own ears she couldn't help saying, "Hopefully to its end..."

~~*~*~*~*~*

His senses had been filled by what had happened on the graveyard. The smell of blood, pain, tears, adrenalin, fear, satisfaction had been so strong that Xavier was surprised his head hadn't started spinning.

Too much blood, too many deaths, too much pain.

And amidst all of that, the rogue Eletti.

She was strong, full of magic; she reeked of magic, it was so powerful that it wasn't even funny.

Not that there was something funny in what was going on.

The Council had taken the pregnant Slayer, ready to sacrifice her.

Because Slayers were expendable, they were just tools for the Council. It had always been that way.

Whether they called themselves Watchers or Eletti, they all swore to protect the Slayer; yet, they rarely did it, for real...and when some of them tried to serve the Slayer as their oath recited, they were blocked, defeated by a huge gear of rules, written in blood and tears, rules to protect the Council, rules to protect the secrecy of the Eletti.

Until, someone decided to risk everything...the pain, the blood, the tears...for one single person... or as in Electra's case, for her own ambition.

The rogue Eletti was planning something, Xavier was sure of that, not that it took a genius to figure it out. He had read between the lines of the report sent by the Eletti and the Gheraious...noticing the mistakes in her attempts to kill both the Slayer and the Eletti for the previous months: mistakes not even an Eletti in training made, and sure as hell not someone as old and experienced as Electra.

Why hadn't she spread the word about the existence of the Eletti? Why had she set in motion a heta7tanatos and let it fail? Why had she poisoned Spike? And now, why did it look like she had acted to protect the Slayer and the Eletti? He counted four dead men on the ground, and was reasonably sure the Slayer and the Eletti hadn't killed them.

He had seen how she had looked up at the sky, totally oblivious of her surroundings and then had murmured something about helping the Slayer before vanishing into thin air.

"Just like one of the frigging weird sisters ..." He mumbled

Xavier stuck his hands in the pocket of his coat, thinking.

There was just one thing he was good at: spying, being a shadow.

It was time to spy.

~~*~*~*~*~*

"*You can't do that, because it's *wrong **"

*Faith could see Buffy's lips moving, through the mirror of her bedroom. She stuck out her lower lip in an exaggerated pout and repeated, "You can't do *that* because it's wrong"*

She couldn't help laughing at those words, her laughter turned into a surprised gasp when her reflected image said, "You know the difference, so well...don't you?"

She took a step back, instinctively putting herself in a fighting stance.

*The image in the mirror crossed her arms over her chest and chuckled before mocking, "*you* can't do that, because it's wrong" She marveled before adding, "you've already hurt me so much..."*

Her arms fell on her sides and she couldn't help stepping back, while the reflected image jumped out of the mirror.

Buffy's face was dirty with blood; tears were rolling down her cheeks, her white sweater, under the black coat was stained with blood and grass.

"I've changed" Faith said.

"Changing face is not the same thing, Faith...that's cheating" Buffy's voice was weak and full of sympathy.

Faith brought her hands to her face, while Buffy continued, "Your changes haven't washed it away."

Faith raised her hands and looked at them; lipstick and mascara were staining them.

"You can't wash it all away just like that..." Buffy's voice continued. She stretched a hand toward hers; Faith took it and couldn't help noticing how weak her grip was.

"B. What's the what, are you afraid to hurt me?"

"I'm gripping your hand...but you're stronger now." Buffy said. They exited the bedroom and walked through the hallway, she realized Buffy was leading her to the bathroom.

Faith frowned, at her words. She could hear water running behind the closed door of the bathroom. Buffy opened the door, and Faith blinked, when the salty sea's smell hit her nostrils.

She took a step forward, smiling when she felt sand under her feet. They were on a beach, lit up only by the moonlight.

She turned toward the blonde Slayer saying, "Hey, B, since when you've brought sea here?"

"Don't you like it? You can't get lost ..." Buffy said, "You can wash it all away here".

"I can't...erase it all..."

Buffy shrugged, "Oh...well, you can start...you'll have to sooner or later...you know?"

Faith looked at the sea, it seemed endless, an endless sea of sapphire blue lit with silvery sparks. It was breathtaking. She looked up at the sky; it looked like the moon was calling her, like a beacon. She sighed saying, "B. isn't that beautiful? You know? I read somewhere that life started from the sea..."

She looked around, when she didn't answer, but the blonde Slayer had disappeared.

"B? Buffy?" Faith exclaimed, urgency in her voice.

"Slayer's not here, Slayer..." A male voice suddenly said from behind her shoulders.

Faith looked around, she knew that voice. She had already heard once.

She spotted a figure walking toward her...and she couldn't help starting when a lightning tore up the sky. The figure kept getting close, and Faith noticed how the lightning's violet light emphasized the pale skin of that man, his chiseled features, his blue eyes were sparkling with a mischievous gleam when he said, "What a wicked shame, isn't it, Faith?"

"Where. Is. She?" The brunette Slayer asked. "What did you do to her, Spike?"

Spike smiled at her, shortening the distance between them, "Like you care..." He said, "I didn't do anything to her...you're the one who bloody hurt her-" He took another step, closing the distance between them and whispered, "Again-" a beat, then the blonde vampire got closer to her, his lips whispered against hers, "and again"

"I can't erase what I did!" Faith shouted, pushing him away from her, and another lightning covered her words.

"So" Spike asked, "Are you just going to stay here and look at the sea?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her and turned his shoulders at her, slowly walking away.

"What else can I do? I don't...."

The blonde vampire turned and tilted his head on a side, just like he had done that night, the year before on the Bronze, saying, "Life started from the sea...but you know how sea works... it gives..."

Faith, stood still. The vampire looked down at the shore, then slowly added, "it takes back..." He looked at her then shrugging said, "That's why fishermen used to rely on lighthouses to find their way back..."

"Wh...what? I don't..."She trailed.

The vampire interrupted her, he looked around and said, "Slayer's still here, Slayer...just follow the light, don't hide from it...isn't it what you're looking for?"

He mock saluted her and turned, slowly walking away in that seemingly endless beach.

"Hey, wait! How can I follow it?" She called, running after him, but he was slowly fading, almost as if he was melting with the night and its dark colors.

#

Faith's hand went on her face as she slowly opened her eyes; the isolation cell was dipped in the dark. She hadn't realized until that moment, how much time she had been spending in the dark, lately. She wiped away sweat from her forehead and sighed, resting her head, against her pillow.

"Just once" She said in a husky voice, she tilted her head up and continued, "I wish you guys weren't so cryptic"

She slowly pulled herself in a sitting position, resting her back against a wall, she hugged her knees against her chest, murmuring, "Ok, I got it...she needs help, problem is...how the fuck can I get out of here?"

~~*~*~*~*~*

His eyes were on the window; on that blue night lit by so many stars that it almost seemed impossible it had rained for most of the day.

Giles shook his head trying to focus his attention on the book he had been researching on. He could hear in the background Willow typing on her laptop.

The truth about Buffy was out; he hadn't been surprised to know that Willow had already been on to something.

Buffy had asked him to keep researching, her whispered words and the grim resolve behind them were painfully echoing in Giles' heart.

As most of the Watchers, he had always believed the Obscuritas to be a myth, a legend told to scare them, the young, soon to be watchers, from caring too much for the Slayers.

Facts were proving him wrong.

He closed the book and sighed, the more he read about the Obscuritas, from the texts both Spike and Eric had given him, the more he was afraid.

How come had he never read such accounts, while he was in the Council? How come Watchers weren't prepared to such an occurrence?

Yet the text had been written... old reports about pregnant Slayers and the way the Obscuritas had slowly taken possession of them, eroding piece by piece their humanity, the Eletti had them, and the Eletti were watchers...they were part of the Council.

The watchers were supposed to help the Slayers, help them facing everything. Yet, in almost twenty years in the Council, he had never read reports about the Obscuritas.

Buffy was showing the same signs: heightened strength, more honed senses...and the craving for blood.

He took his glasses off and tiredly pinched the bridge of his nose. Spike hadn't told him a lot about the second Slayer he had killed, the one who had reached Obscuritas.

He had just told him she had put together demons and warlocks to end the world.

~ There wasn't anything human in her any more ~

His eyes went again on the window, while he felt his stomach twisting in sudden and painful knots.

He slowly got up from his chair, unconsciously gripping the book in his hand. He didn't see the way both Anya and Willow were looking at him.

His heart was strongly beating in his chest; he got close to the window.

~ Giles, I'm sixteen years old...I don't wanna die...~

"Buffy..." He murmured. She had been so young, so fragile, when she had told him she didn't want to die, yet she hadn't bailed from her destiny, she had met her fate, knocking him unconscious not to let him go.

Color drained from his face, when from the window, he saw Xander. He was running, fear and worry, clearly etched on his face.

His book slipped from his hand, but Giles didn't even hear its thump when it landed on the floor. The frantic beating of his heart was deafening him.

"Giles...what's going on?" Willow asked, concerned.

The former Watcher didn't hear her, he went to the door, and opened it, just as Xander, got on the threshold. The young man was panting, his face was very pale.

"Xand?" Willow's voice, was more than concerned now...she sounded scared.

Giles felt Willow's hand on his arm, he didn't turn to look at her, he couldn't. Her concern was coming to him in waves, now.

"What happened?" She asked her voice small.

The truth on Xander's face was too clear, too evident.

The Council ... they'd always known the Obscuritas was real, that's why they tried to kill the Slayers when they became too old, using that cruel ritual...using the Cruciamentum. That's why the watchers had to give themselves the test to the Slayer, to test their faith to the cause, their devotion to the Council.

Giles felt it, knew it even before he spoke saying, "The council...they've taken Buffy!"

-6-

Stunned silence.

Deafening silence.

Even the night's noises had faded.

The air in Giles' living room seemed still, no one dared to speak, as they observed Xander. The young man was at the center of the room, his face pale, he was lightly panting. He had just delivered the news of Buffy's kidnapping.

Giles was leaning against a wall, clutching his glasses in his hands, his head bent.

Willow was sitting on the couch, her face in her hands, silent tears were rolling down her cheeks, she covered her mouth with a hand and closed her eyes, but blinked them open, she quickly got up from the couch and headed toward the bathroom slamming the door shut behind her.

They all heard her throwing up and then her muffled sobs. Anya shot a glance toward the bathroom, then her gaze fixed on Xander. He was lightly shivering, she got up from the chair and got close to him, hugging him from behind, circling his waist with her arms, Xander turned and pulled her in wordless hug. He kissed the top of her head, and closed his eyes for a second.

This couldn't be happening again. Their family couldn't be in danger...not now that things were finally starting to work out for them.

"Giles..." He said in a low voice. "I'm sure Eric..."

"Xander, do shut up" The older man didn't raise his voice, yet it was stern...and cold.

Xander didn't think he had ever heard such a tone of voice on his friend...not even after he had found out about that stupid spell he had asked Amy to perform three years before. To think he had believed he had been angry, then.

Giles tilted his head up, and Xander noticed the green of his eyes was darker, "What will Eric do?" He said, "He is one of them!"

Xander shook his head, breaking away from Anya. The former demon squeezed his hand offering what little reassurance she could give him that way.

"Anya would you go and check on Willow?" Giles asked in a low voice.

Xander swallowed and turned to look at his girlfriend, she just nodded at the older man; she gave another little squeeze to his hand then quickly headed toward the bathroom.

Xander stepped toward Giles saying, "I'm sorry...I wanted to..."

"Nonsense" Giles said, "Eric was right Xander...they will keep coming, keep harming us..." He shook his head and murmured, "I should have expected that...I've been one of them half of my life..."

"You've never really been one of them" Xander stated simply.

Giles looked at him, surprised. Xander pursed his lips before asking, "Why didn't you tell us? About the baby...about the Obs...thingy?"

"We needed proofs..." He bitterly smiled and spat, "They don't need proofs..."

"Do you think...?" Xander started but couldn't finish his sentence; he shrugged his shoulders, and ran a hand through his hair.

"They will deport her..." Giles slowly said. "They will deal with her in England, within the safe shield of the Council..."

“We won’t let them, Giles...” Xander said stepping closer to him. He grabbed him by his shoulders and forced the older man to look at him, before repeating, “We won’t let them...”

Giles arched an eyebrow at him; he was about to say something, when Anya and Willow exited the bathroom.

Willow looked very pale, she ran a shaky hand through her hair and said, “Ok, research time, we have to find out where they have taken her...”

“Eric will be here shortly and...” Xander started.

“Then what?” Willow asked stepping to the center of the room; she looked at them then continued, “Do you really trust him with Buffy’s life? For all we know he could be involved in all of this... after all it’s been him who ordered Spike not to take the chip off, so forgive me for not giving a damn about him, especially now!”

She looked at all of them, her hands clenched in fists; she swallowed hard and wordlessly went to the desk, in front of her laptop, immediately starting typing on it.

The furious knock at the door made them start. Xander swallowed and looked at Giles before going to the door; he couldn’t help sighing in relief when he saw Spike leaning against a wall.

He still had problems trusting the guy, that much was true...but that didn’t mean he wanted him more dead than he already was.

Spike entered the apartment, grimacing. It was obvious he had been hurt. He was bleeding from various wounds on his body, his right hand was burned.

“Spike?” Willow hesitantly called, from the desk.

“Last time I checked...” He murmured. He turned toward Anya saying, “Be a luv and bring us some blood, will you?”

“You’re alive!” Willow exclaimed, taking tentative steps toward him.

Spike cocked an eyebrow at her and slowly slid his duster off, muttering under his nonexistent breath, “Not quite, Red....”

“What happened?” Giles’ voice made Spike turn.

The blonde vampire looked at him for some seconds, then he swallowed and said, “I tried...I really did...”

Giles nodded, although, as Xander noticed, he avoided to look at him, the former watcher put his glasses on and said, “Eric was going to follow them to find out their hiding place”

“Just once, I’d like the bad guys to play in an open field” Xander muttered.

“Can’t say I don’t agree with that,” Spike mumbled.

He took a mug from Anya who had just returned from the kitchenette, his gaze fixed on Giles when he slowly said, "They injected her with the same compound they use for the Cruciamentum..." He paused, "They shot her with a tranquilizer gun"

"Fucking bastards!" Giles swore, and Xander couldn't help blinking in surprise at the older man's use of swearings.

"What... how..." Willow trailed; she had got close to Spike, her hand on his uninjured shoulder.

"Watchers found out about that compound centuries ago. Never known how...they've been using it to administer that bloody test..." He stopped for an instant before hissing, "A Slayer and a vampire taken down by 'effin humans..."

Xander shook his head, and slowly sat on a chair. He tilted his head down, hiding his face in his hands, while Spike's words, kept ringing in his ears. "What are we gonna do?" He eventually asked, tilting his head up.

"I think we're going to set some major ground rules" Willow said, her hand was still resting on Spike's shoulder and Xander couldn't help noticing how part of the tension and the pain, in the vampire's body had faded.

Giles' cold voice added, "We shall declare our independence from the bloody council, once and for all..."

~~*~*~*~*~*

A lighthouse.

It stood out on an extremity of a deserted beach, just outside Sunnydale. It was old and it looked like it hadn't been used for a long time.

Eric was surprised and puzzled by what was going on. He could sense strange vibes coming from that old lighthouse, strong magical shields, confused them, but not enough not to be noticed by the vampire.

His skin itched with the mystical energies he could feel in that place.

The Slayer was still alive and so was her baby. He had been able to clearly hear their strong heartbeats, when those men had carried her unconscious body inside.

He understood now, more than ever, why The Powers That Be had made sure vampires couldn't sense or hear whether Slayers were pregnant. That tiny heartbeat held something ancestral, something which had stirred his demon's predator instinct and only the tight control he had on it had stopped him from coming out from his hiding place to attack her.

He wondered whether William had heard it, he wondered whether he had been staked. Eric shook his head blocking that thought and its implications out of his mind. He looked around, there weren't any men guarding the perimeter outside the lighthouse, which put him on the edge.

He got closer to the lighthouse, but his body shook as if electrocuted. He fell on the cold sand, gritting his teeth.

“What are they up to?” He wondered while rising on his feet. Something wasn’t ringing a bell.... something wasn’t right, that wasn’t the procedure when dealing with pregnant Slayers. Yet, the scenario looked somewhat familiar.

He shook his head and closed his eyes beginning his chants. He didn’t know what their plans were, exactly ...that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to find them out.

He loved a good challenge.

~~*~*~*~*~*

The woman's blood was warm and thick; its sweet taste flew into Electra's throat, feeding her, filling her with an almost physical pleasure.

The woman was weakly struggling against her body; her short nails were digging in her shoulders, Electra smiled against the woman's neck, while her body was slowly going limp into her arms.

Electra felt that woman's heart coming to an abrupt stop; she held her lips against the woman's neck for some more seconds, before letting her go.

The body fell on the pavement and her head made a strange noise that reminded Electra of a broken egg's shell.

Entering the parking lot had been easy; another matter altogether was entering the prison. Not that she was going to have problems with that.

She shrugged her shoulders, and closed her eyes, slowly chanting the spell. Her face, her whole body slowly morphed, it changed in that of the woman she had just drained.

She looked around before quickly hiding the body. She took a long look at the bleak, gray building. The dreams had already started; she had made sure they did. They were cryptic enough to piss anyone off, especially someone who was desperately striving for redemption, for atonement.

"First rule...surprise the hell out of your opponents..." She whispered.

She slowly headed toward the building, a smile creeping on her lips while she thought

<All of them...>

-7-

“What do you mean you don’t want me to go with you?” Eric asked looking at Spike.

Eric’s voice broke the silence in Giles’ living room. When he had returned to the watcher’s flat, he had been relieved to find out William hadn’t been dusted, he had been hurt but his wounds had already begun to heal.

They had all known what had happened at that point, Willow had been researching on Buffy's whereabouts, while Giles, Xander and Spike had already begun planning a possible way to free the Slayer.

Eric had read surprise in Giles, Spike and Anya's eyes when he had mentioned where Buffy had been taken.

They had all agreed on one thing: whatever the Council had in mind, was different from the standards procedures.

He had mentioned his suspicions to them and had had the surprise of his unlife when William had succinctly and clearly told him not to enter their plans.

Eric ignored the glares he was getting from the other people in the living room and asked, "Would you care to explain me why?"

Spike briefly looked at the other people in the room, and then pointed with his eyes at the kitchenette, Eric frowned puzzled, he followed the blonde vampire there and his frown deepened when the younger vampire closed the blinds.

"William?" He said. "I think it's a bit late for trying to keep the secrecy about our calling up! Our cover has blown for a while now..."

"I know..." Spike calmly said, he got close to him saying, "The old tossers are used to my methods, they know the way I work...but it's different with you, you're a Gheraious"

Eric cocked an eyebrow at him and slowly said, "So? I'm not sure I'm following you, here..."

"When a Gheraious starts bending their rules they tend to notice, when a Gheraious ignore their direct orders, they get brassed off. With you doing so? I'm surprised they haven't already sent you away..."

"What else was I supposed to do, William?" Eric asked.

"Time was, when you wouldn't have...and I bet that didn't go unnoticed on them..." Spike said.

Eric crossed his arms over his chest nodding, "Oh, I see...you don't want to risk losing your tie with Eletti..."

"Bloody well right..." Spike said, "especially now, with that bitch in town...and the Slayer's life at risk, we know how anal can they be with rules..."

There was something ironic in William's words, and for some instant Eric was tempted to snort at the younger vampire's words. William was right, though. He had broken too many rules; defied direct orders...the Eletti were going to do something about it...if they weren't already planning something.

He slowly nodded at his words and said, "Things are not going to be simple once you go there, you know that, don't you?"

Spike smirked at his words, “That would be a first in Sunnyhell.” His face became serious when he continued, “the only thing that matters is that when the old tossers contact you to ask you not to stick your nose in it, they will have to think *I* defied your direct orders...”

Eric nodded then asked, “Is something the matter, William? You usually don’t much...”

Spike stopped him, saying, “Something’s brewing, Eric...I can feel it...the Eletti are...” He sighed. “You know who they are...what they are...let’s not take risks, shall we?”

Eric nodded at Spike’s words. The younger vampire had no idea of what the Eletti were really capable of. He had no idea about how unforgiving they could really be.

William had been always spared because of the peculiarity of his assignments he had made sure he was...but he had no excuses.

A Gheraious couldn’t defy direct orders...he had.

A Gheraious couldn’t defy laws of nature...he had.

He had violated every rule they had...and what was worst, and he was sure the Eletti were aware of that, he would do that again.

He had jeopardized history in order to save William...and he knew there were going to be consequences.

“Alright,” He eventually said, “I will have to explain a few things to Rupert then, before you leave”

Spike nodded back at him, they were about to exit the kitchenette when he said, “Oh, and Eric? You and I are going to have a long talk when this finishes about that sodding chip; I want it out of my head! ”

~~*~*~*~*~*

The thin glaze that had filled Buffy’s restless drowsiness slowly faded, she knew she was awake; it was the pain in her body, which was reminding it to her. The mattress under her back was soft, but it didn’t lessen the ache in her lower back.

<Lower back? >

“My baby...” She whispered, forcing her eyes open.

She blinked, while stars exploded behind her eyes, she fought back a wave of nausea, taking deep breaths, while she slowly got in a sitting position, looking around.

The room where she had been taken was circular, the walls had been painted in a bright, almost dazzling white and she noticed that the windows had been walled up with black panels.

There weren’t neons hanging from the ceiling, yet the light in the room was so bright that it was giving her a headache.

She wasn’t surprised when she realized she hadn’t been tied.

<Why bother? I can’t do anything... >

She bitterly thought resting her head against a wall. She had to fight back tears; she kept blinking them away, refusing to give in to her fear.

She had to be strong, she thought, putting her hand over her belly. She had sworn to herself no one was going to hurt her baby, no one, including herself, and she was going to keep her promise.

She blinked her eyes open, when she heard the door opening. A tall, dark haired man entered the room. He took a look at her and gently said, "Hello, Buffy...I take you've regained consciousness"

"Why, aren't we perceptive?" She mumbled.

The man smiled at her, he was carrying a tray in his hands, he placed it on the floor saying, "I'd wager you are quite hungry"

Buffy shook her head saying, "I didn't ask for room service, thank you..."

"I know what you are thinking..." The man said taking a step toward her.

Buffy had to resist the urge to flinch when the man shortened the distance between them, towering over her. She wasn't used to being that scared, at least not of human beings; she swallowed and said, "Do you? I don't think so-" She looked at the man before hissing, "And it's Miss. Summers for you..."

The man shook his head at her words; he put his hands in his pocket and said, "Don't think this is easy for any us, Miss. Summers." Buffy frowned puzzled as the man continued, "Alas, I don't think we have another choice..."

"Oh, please..." Buffy said rolling her eyes at the man's words, "You're saying that bringing me here, isn't giving you a happy?"

The man shook his head no, he shrugged and said, "I'm just doing the right thing, this doesn't mean I like it. Your pregnancy..."

"I know everything about the Obscuritas!" Buffy exclaimed.

"Then you are aware of the risks...believe me, I wish there was another way..."

Buffy rested her head against a wall and said looking at him, "Forgive me for not believing a word you're saying...you have injected me with that shit, you have kidnapped me, you have probably dusted my friend. So far? Not so big with the trust in you guys..."

"As I said, we've just done the right thing" The man said interrupting her. Buffy noticed he almost looked ashamed of his own words.

He pointed with his eyes at the tray and said, "You'd better eat something, I can promise you the food has not been poisoned"

"Why should I believe you?" Buffy asked, ignoring the growling in her stomach.

"Because you don't have another choice..." The man headed toward the door saying, "Whatever the outcome will be, I want you to know the Council only acts for the sake of the world."

“Yeah, right...” Buffy mumbled. Yet, somehow, that man looked sincere. She hugged her legs and said, “You know, don’t you, that whatever the outcome is, you guys are **so** gonna pay for this?”

The man shrugged again. He looked at her for some long seconds, he didn’t talk, and Buffy knew he didn’t need to.

She felt it was exactly what the Council wanted. That was exactly what they had planned.

The man put his hands in his pocket and said, “You’d better eat something...”

He left the room, and Buffy couldn’t help noticing he didn’t lock it. Yet she couldn’t let herself going at the door to leave the room, she was afraid of what could happen if she did

Goosebumps covered her skin. They were all ready for Giles and the others to arrive. They expected them to arrive.

~ It would be best if you had no further contact with the Slayer.

I’m not going anywhere.

No, well, I didn’t expect you would adhere to that. However, if you interfere with the new Watcher, or countermand his authority in any way, you will be dealt with. Are we clear?

Oh, we’re very clear. ~

Travers’ words, sounded clear and incredibly dangerous in that moment. She had totally forgotten about that threat. Their lives had gone on after that night. There had been so much to do, after that, and she thought they had been safe, when she had left the Council for good.

Buffy closed her eyes

“So we’re the enemies now, uh?” She asked in a low voice to the empty room.

She opened her eyes, someone had told her once a Slayer wasn’t just a killing machine, and her powers went beyond her strength.

~ We’re not in the business of fair, Miss Summers; we’re fighting a war. ~

“Fine,” She whispered, “War it is, then...”

~~*~*~*~*~*

It was strange how life had changed in such a short amount of time, Spike thought. He was in the Watcher’s car; they were heading toward that old lighthouse where the Slayer had been taken.

Three months before he had been the enemy, the chipped vampire none of that group of people could kill because he was harmless, impotent.

He had actually been a silent helper; he had been alone, carrying on his mission, his assignment.

Everything had changed on a summer's night, when forces had conjured and had taken away the woman, the human woman he had fallen in love with. It had taken that event to made him realize the depth of his feelings for Willow...and the moment he had, all his life had changed.

All of his perspectives had shifted; saving Willow had become the most important thing for him... even more important than his calling.

His cover, a cover he had skillfully kept up for years had shattered and he hadn't cared about it. He had friends, now. Some of them, such as Xander Harris, were reluctant ones, others, like the Slayer, trusted him implicitly.

The young woman he had fallen in love with during his assignment, loved him back, with all of her heart. He could read the love in her eyes, feel it whenever she touched him, or talked to him. More than that Willow Rosenberg had made him feel human, again.

For a long time he had forgotten how it was like to feel...to be a man. He had forgotten what it really meant to have a soul. Before that summer night he had started wondering whether he still had a soul or if it had imploded along the way.

He shared a bed with Willow. They made love, each time as if it could be the last. They always loved each other with frantic urgency, the passion always burning them, almost to the core.

They shared his past. They shared recollections of a past he didn't like to remember.

She had been with him during the darkest moment of his life, she had been with him on his last day as human and even then— funny how the recollections were so vivid and yet almost evanescent in his mind- she had tried to help him...and he had used her.

He had shagged her on the hard floor of an almost empty room, while a lukewarm sun, bathed them both. He had barely looked at her after that...he had gone out from that room, and he hadn't thought about her. He hadn't though about what had happened.

He had just forgotten about her.

They hadn't really talked about what had happened that afternoon. They hadn't talked about that day. Once he had tried to tell her he was sorry, but Willow had brushed it all aside, telling him that whatever had happened that day, belonged to the past.

She had told him that it didn't matter, that there was nothing to be sorry about. Yet, she had changed...he had been able to see lines of worry on her face ever since.

She had told him to forget.

Time, though, didn't forget. It never forgot.

It was strange, his human self hadn't thought about consequences, he hadn't cared about them, yet in the back of Spike's mind, there had been doubts, there had been questions he hadn't had both the strength and the nerve to ask Willow.

Consequences.

The past hadn't changed. He had fallen in love with Drusilla, he had kept being an Eletti, he hadn't screwed everything up for that young redhead.

Yet, there were consequences...there had been for the past two months: Willow's dreams had been haunted by what had happened. Her nightmares had gotten uglier and uglier, even that afternoon, it had been her cries to wake him up and on her beautiful face there had been all the sorrow, all the fear that experience had given her.

Consequences.

Anya had told him everything about the Philomela spell and how Willow had been willing to take any risk to retrieve the blood to save him. The after effects of the spells used to send her back in time had taken its toll on her, yet she had been willing to accept the consequences.

Consequences...

Consequences...like the feeling he had, that their relative peace, their relative freedom from the Council and mostly from the Eletti was going to end. A gut feeling he couldn't push away. He hadn't been able to, since he had entered his crypt that evening before going to Buffy and Giles' apartment. He hadn't lied to Eric, something was brewing...he was sure of that.

Consequences...

There had been for the past two months and there were going to be...because Willow, his Willow was about to have a baby. She was pregnant, with his baby...William's baby.

He didn't know why he hadn't been able to sense it sooner. He didn't know why he hadn't been able to hear that tiny heartbeat.

He suspected it was one of the after effects of Eric's spells.

It didn't matter though. Willow was pregnant and she didn't even suspect about that. She didn't know. She just felt tired and cranky.

He hadn't heard that tiny heart beat until he had been about to leave the apartment. Willow had quickly tended his wounds, she hadn't spoken and neither had he.

He hadn't missed the way she had greeted him when he had come back from the graveyard. Once again she had been afraid to lose him, for good.

She had lived his death during his kidnapping, and had been there with him, when he had been activated...when his death's sentence had arrived.

He hadn't missed the way she had touched him, as if to make sure he was still there, that nothing had happened to him when he had entered Giles' apartment.

He hadn't missed the unnatural paleness of her skin.

He hadn't had the time to think about her worries, though. He hadn't let his worry for her entering his mind. Yet, while she had tended his injured shoulder and leg, he hadn't been able to stop himself from asking, "Are you ok, Red?"

“Peachy” She had answered, yet her voice had been broken, she had looked up at him and had mumbled, “I should be the one asking this question, though...”

They had been alone in Giles’ bathroom, Spike had been able to hear the others talking through the closed door, Eric had been explaining Giles how to pass through the shields which surrounded the lighthouse. Xander and Anya had been talking in low voices; Xander had tried to reassure Anya that everything was going to be fine, yet everything that had really mattered to Spike had been Willow.

He had tried to assure her he had been fine, Willow hadn’t looked convinced by his words, but she had known as well as not to ask any more questions.

“Be careful,” She had whispered, once they had both been on the front door.

Spike had nodded, and had wordlessly pulled her in a hug. He hadn’t heard anything at the beginning, just the sound of Willow’s heartbeat, and of her breath against the fabric of his shirt. Only when had he tilted his head down to brush her lips with his, had he heard it for the first time.

The baby’s heartbeat. It had been so clear that for an instant it had been all he had been able to hear.

The other sounds had faded and he had been almost deafened by it.

Images of that afternoon of his last day as mortal had filled his mind, his heart, his soul. The feeling of Willow’s heart beating against his, her green eyes so full of love and understanding...and the life, his life entering her, filling her.

He had pulled back from her, feeling angry, confused, scared...and knowing he had to push away those feelings for the sake of the Slayer.

A pregnant Slayer who just a few hours before had told him he was never going to be a father...and she had been right. He wasn’t going to be a father...because that child was William’s not his. It hadn’t been conceived out of love, it had been an act of desperation, of selfishness...

“Bloody, soddin’ hell” He said through clenched teeth, slamming a hand against’ the steering wheel.

Xander shot him a puzzled glance but Spike ignored him.

“What’s the matter, Spike?” The dark-haired boy asked from the driver’s seat.

Spike snorted and mumbled, “Not your business, Harris...”

“O-ok” The boy said. Spike shook his head, hanging on all of his knowledge to block out those feelings.

He couldn’t think about Willow now.

He hadn’t had time to talk to Eric, before leaving the Watcher’s house, but he was sure that if he had been able to hear the baby’s heartbeat, Eric was going too.

...And so were all the vampires on the Hellmouth.

<Very nice image, are you planning to think about it while bloody trying to get the Slayer free, you ponce? >

He thought all but snarling.

He had been so proud of the control he had always had on himself. He had been able to fool anyone into his facade of reckless vampire...yet now that he really needed that cold blood he had been chosen for, he couldn't let himself to stop thinking about Willow, the baby...and what was about to happen to them.

To all of them.

-8-

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

She had to keep counting, while the muscles of her arms trembled with the effort she was putting them through.

It had come back. The rage, that black, gnawing creature she knew so well was whispering to her, again.

It whispered to her how it didn't matter how hard she tried. It whispered to her that she was never going to really change. The creature was still inside of her, sinking its sharp, little teeth into her soul, making it bleed.

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Buffy needed her. She knew it; she could feel it in her guts, and God knew whether she wanted to help her. She didn't think she had ever wanted something more...she wanted to help her as much as she had wanted to destroy her once.

One

Two

Three

Four

Five.

Sweat was dampening her hair; it was slowly tracing a cold path along her spine, making her shiver.

How could she get out from there? She had to. It would be so simple.

Simple...she just had to take down one of the guards; she wouldn't even hurt them...

She gritted her teeth. Was she going to keep feeling that need forever? Was she going to keep craving for violence, as much as she craved for redemption?

The door of her cell, her isolation cell opened, then immediately closed behind a figure she couldn't exactly pinpoint in the obscurity of the cell.

She was often in an isolation cell. She needed to be alone; she had to be, especially when she felt on the verge of losing what she was achieving.

"Faith?" A female voice called her. It was a soft, harmonious voice, a voice she had never heard in her life.

Faith narrowed her eyes, when a shaft of light seemed to light the whole cell.

<Time, too much time in the dark...>

She thought.

"Yep..." She said, slowly rising on her feet.

The woman, who had talked to her, stepped toward her. Her long, blonde hair almost sparkled like a golden cascade, she was dressed in a cream colored dress, she almost looked like an angel.

"Who are you?" She eventually asked.

"I'm here to help you, Faith...you want to find your way back, don't you?" She got close to her, and Faith could see her eyes, they were green, the look in them was soulful and old, very old.

"I don't know what you're talking about" Faith said lowering her head.

"Your sister of blood is in danger...she needs your help," The woman explained.

"Aw, well...in case you didn't notice I'm kinda stuck right now..."

"You're striving so much for redemption. You need to show to yourself you have changed...but you're just spending time in the dark, brooding as your savior...is that your idea of atonement?"

"Hey, I'm paying for what I did...cell, prison, any of it ringing a bell?" Faith almost snapped.

"Man's law is different...there are other laws, older than this...you were supposed to fight for those forces..."

"Spare me the Cliff notes version of my past, will you? I know it...I was there! I..."

"You relive it, each moment of the day; you see the blood of the men you have killed on your hands..." She paused and took a step toward her saying, "you wanted to be the strongest, the more powerful...didn't you?"

"It's the past!" Faith exclaimed, "I can't change what I've done...I can't erase the hurt..."

The woman shook her head, "You have the chance..."

"No, you don't get it...do you? I could spend the rest of my life trying to atone for what I did, it wouldn't change anything..."

“But you can prevent the person you wounded the most from losing what she has now...”

“B.?” Faith asked. “What’s happening to her?”

“She’s struggling with something powerful Faith, something which comes from within herself and there are people who want to hurt her and the people she loves...”

“I can’t help her...” Faith said barely resisting the urge to look down.

“You can’t or you don’t want to?” The woman asked, “Are you so afraid to face those people...are you so afraid that they will see you haven’t changed after all? Are you so afraid that they will just see how good you’ve gotten at hiding your darkness?”

“I’m fighting it...who the fuck are you to come here and tell me all of this? Aren’t you supposed to help me?”

The woman shrugged, “I can’t, if you don’t want to be helped...you are the only one who can help her...really help her...”

“I can’t get out from here...I’d disappoint so many people who trusted me...I’d disappoint myself...”

“You would help ...you would have the chance to see whether it’s worth it...” The woman gently smiled at her and continued, “I’m sure Angel would understand...”

“Can you get me out of here?” Faith asked, “I ...don’t want to kill...”

The woman’s smile widened while she nodded at her, “Yes, I can...”

Faith couldn’t help blinking in surprise when the woman’s features changed, morphed and she found herself looking at herself.

“Son of...” She mumbled.

The woman gently smiled at her and said, “Step at the center of the room. You will not have weapons...it’s not on them you have to rely on...you can’t even imagine how really powerful a Slayer can be, Faith”

Faith swallowed while she stepped at the center of the little room. She could feel her powers; she had always been able to, much more than Buffy. Perhaps it had been her loneliness, her rage against life, or perhaps just the fact she enjoyed her strength and heightened senses while Buffy had been scared by them. She wondered what had happened to her, to let her discover her dark side.

“How will I come back?” She asked.

“Do you want to?” The woman asked.

Did she want to come back to prison? Of course she didn’t want to. She hated being in prison, but she had to. She owed it...to the people she had killed, to Angel who had gone against everything, including Buffy to defend her, to Wesley who had once told her that he felt that there was still something good inside of her...and she owed it to herself.

She nodded, unable to do anything else.

“I will bring you back, then...” The woman said.

“Who are you?” Faith asked.

“Does it matter?” The woman said.

Faith shook her head; she hated all the mystical crap that surrounded Slayers...she always had.

The woman chuckled at her puzzled face then said, “Now just relax...”

She began chanting, in a language Faith had ever heard. The magic in the room was so strong, so powerful that her skin was starting to itch, and she had to close her eyes while the woman’s voice grew louder and louder, yet it didn’t lose its harmonious edge.

She felt matter and space dilating, folding while she left that dark cell. She didn’t know where she was headed; she just knew she had to help Buffy...

Help her...or die trying.

“I can’t believe it!” Electra exclaimed when Faith left the cell, “that’s too easy...”

She shook her head and sat on Faith’s bed, producing out of thin air a little, oval mirror. She knew she couldn’t do a lot, but she was curious to see how things were going to unfold.

She knew the Slayer had been taken to an old Lighthouse, that told her a lot about what was going to happen. The ritual based itself on the Slayer’s powers...she was pretty sure about that. The presence of the other Slayer was bound to have consequences.

The council had to be stopped, one way or another. The Slayer had to carry on her pregnancy...it was necessary for her plan.

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

“It’s too strange, no one is blocking us...” Giles said in a low voice looking around.

They were on the beach, in front of the lighthouse. While Spike and Xander checked out the perimeter around the lighthouse, making sure no one was watching them, Giles had begun chanting.

He was right, though; no one had attempted to block them, so far. The former watcher glanced at Spike; he could see doubts in his eyes.

“I don’t like it-” Spike said, “This is not the procedure...”

“Just out of curiosity, what’s the procedure?” Xander asked.

Giles looked as Spike clenched his jaws. “The Slayer gets deported to the Council, and after that she is killed.” He eventually said.

“How nice...” Xander mumbled.

“This...” Spike said pointing at the old building, “is not the procedure. It smells like a trap”

“Oh, you know how they say” Xander said, “If it looks like a trap, it smells like a trap, it walks...”
He shook his head and mumbled, “We can’t let them kill her...”

“I know...but I don’t like it...” Spike said.

“I agree” Giles commented. He knew what they were doing was probably what the Council expected.

Not even for a second he doubted that the Council had something in store for them. But what else was he supposed to do?

He had sworn to protect the world from any kind of harm...even before pledging to assist, guide and serve the Slayer.

But Buffy...

She was his world.

Letting her die, despite what he had learned for the past weeks had never even entered his mind.

Regardless of what the consequences could be.

He thought about Buffy, her green eyes bright with joy when they had told their friends about her pregnancy. He thought about their plans, their projects.

The Council had decided otherwise, the Council had decided to storm into their lives, without giving them a chance. They had already decided Buffy had reached Obscuritas, and therefore, she had to die...and so had their baby.

Eric had warned him about the strong vibes he had gotten from the lighthouse and Giles couldn’t help agreeing with him and Spike...that wasn’t the procedure...it was something else, altogether.

It was something definitely more powerful...and older.

He swallowed, and began casting the other spell necessary to pass through the magic shields created by the men of the Council.

He opened his mouth to utter the last words of the spell, when a female voice made him start.

A voice he had hoped never to hear again.

Faith’s.

“Hello guys, did you miss me?” Faith said, getting close to them.

“We **so** didn’t need this!” Xander exclaimed.

Giles’ shoulders slumped, he exchanged a quick glance with Spike, he could see worry in the vampire’s eyes and he knew it wasn’t just due to Buffy.

He nodded at Spike and said, “Faith...we all believed you were in jail...”

The brunette Slayer got close to them, only when the pale moonlight lit her, Giles could see how different she looked from the last time he had seen her: her long hair framed her pale face devoid of any make up; there was sadness in her dark eyes that were surrounded by deep circles that Giles had never noticed before.

“I was...but it’s a long story, to make it short...I’ve been sent here to help you...” Faith explained.

“By whom?” Spike asked.

Faith looked at him for an instant before shifting her attention to the lighthouse, she shrugged and said, “Beats me, I haven’t the faintest” She looked at Giles asking, “So, that’s where B. has been taken?”

It was Xander who spoke, saying, “Yes, it is...and by the way what are you up to this time, Faith?”

“I’ve been sent here to help you freeing Buffy...” She shrugged and said, “Hey, if the chipped one can help you, why can’t I?” She shook her head and asked, “So what’s the plan?”

Giles looked at Faith, Buffy had told him about what had happened in Los Angeles a few months before, he knew everything about Faith’s apparent changes. Perhaps that was the moment to verify those changes.

He exchanged a long glance with Spike, the vampire nodded at him, only then did he turn toward Faith saying, “All right, but I warn you, Faith...if something bad happens to Buffy because of you, I will kill you myself.”

Faith nodded at him, “If something bad happens to B, because of me, I will let you...” She couldn’t help grinning at him before saying, “Glad to know you guys have finally tied the knot, Giles...”

She ignored his puzzled face and asked, “So any of you up to a bit of action?”

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

“The first one has passed through the shield,” Maximillian Hawthorne said. He was sitting on the floor of a big circular room, similar to the one where Buffy had been taken. The man was sitting within a white pentacle.

“Perfect” Daniel said. He swallowed, feeling the energies filling the lighthouse. He had been warned about what was going to happen once the ritual began...but he hadn’t been prepared to such feelings. He hadn’t been prepared to the burst of energy that lit up the walls, making the white brighter, almost dazzling.

“Sir?” Charles asked.

“Yes, Mr. Dutton?” The man asked.

“There might be an occurrence we hadn’t foreseen,” He said.

Daniel frowned before asking, “Specify”

“The other Slayer is here.” Charles said.

Daniel was sure there had been a hint of satisfaction in his voice. “It can’t be possible,” He said. “She was in jail not even an hour ago...we made sure she was put in an isolation cell tonight, before carrying on with the procedure”

“The second one has passed through the shield.” Maximillian said. He looked up from the floor and said, “Sir, it looks like things weren’t so sure...”

“I don’t think this is a moment for understatement, Maximillian!” Daniel said. He got close to the man and asked, “How long until she passes through the shield?”

The blonde man closed his eyes, waving his hand over four white crystals in front of him, before saying, “A few minutes...”

“Block her.” Daniel said.

“I can’t...” He replied. “Her energies are too strong...”

Daniel shook his head. He went to one desk, which was under a covered window and took a little black box from his suitcase. He approached the man and handed him the box saying, “Use this...”

Maximillian looked at him, perplexed, but before he could talk Daniel said, “We didn’t overlook the possibility of such an occurrence...use it!”

Maximillian opened the black box; inside of it there was a blue crystal, yet under the light it sparkled with an unnatural orange light. Maximillian took it in his hands and stretched them up, murmuring a few words.

Daniel couldn’t help blinking in surprise when Charles, who had been next to him until that moment, took a step forward and grabbed the blue crystal from Maximillian’s hands.

“Bloody hell, Mr. Dutton, what are you doing?” Daniel exclaimed.

“I’m giving the Slayer a fair fight.” Charles replied, throwing the crystal on the floor and stomping his foot on it, shattering it. Blue and orange sparks crept under his foot.

“I will inform the Council about that...” Daniel hissed.

“It is within your rights...” Charles said. “I don’t agree with the procedure, but I’m willing to let it happen. What I won’t tolerate is the death of another Slayer, sir!” He basically spat the last words.

“Sir,” Maximillian said, interrupting him before he could talk, “I’m holding the Slayer back...but the shields won’t hold for much longer. Should we abort the procedure?”

“It’s too late.” Daniel said. “Proceed. Let her pass. The procedure needs to be performed...”

“Yes, sir.” Maximillian said. He took a deep breath then a few seconds later he said, “The Slayer has passed through the shield...”

“Mr. Dutton, I hope you are satisfied.” Daniel said, “You’ve given the Slayer the chance for a fair fight. Of course, it goes without saying that you have probably given her the chance to unleash hell on Earth...”

He smiled at the young man and said, “Now, would you go and bring the pregnant Slayer to her loved ones?”

~~*~*~*~*~*

*T*hey had entered.

There had been a problem when the brunette Slayer had tried to enter the Lighthouse for a few minutes, but in the end she had succeeded.

No one of them had noticed him; Xavier looked around, taking in his surrounding. He looked at the old lighthouse; his senses overwhelmed by it, strong smells came from it, he could sense them, sense the Eletti, the Watcher, the boy and mostly the two Slayers.

He gritted his teeth.
They had names: William, Rupert, Xander, Faith and Buffy.
They were people...
And they were in danger.

He knew what was going to happen and he couldn't do anything to avoid it.
No one could.
Not the people inside the Lighthouse, not Electra with her powers, not Eric with his.
He couldn't do anything to help them.
Even if he had had the powers, he couldn't have helped them.
God knew whether he wanted to help the Slayer.
But the only one who could help Buffy was herself and her baby.

The Obscuritas.
The power of the Slayer...it could be their end, or their only hope.

If they exited the lighthouse he was going to set things in motion.
Until then, he had to wait...and hope.

-9-

*D*arkness.

Too much darkness. It was thick and full of smells not even Spike could fully recognize, probably because his knowledge of magic was rusty and it involved just the basic spells he had learned during his training.

They had lost their weapons the moment they had passed through the shields. Both Giles and Eric had foreseen that occurrence, that, though, didn't mean he liked the idea of all of them being unarmed.

Why had he asked Eric to stay out of their rescue mission? He was trying hard, so hard to clear his mind from his thoughts, from his worries but it looked like it was an almost impossible task. 130

years as Eletti weren't of much use, probably because none of the Eletti had had friends and a pregnant significant other.

<Bloody marvelous...>

He thought, all but snarling. He closed his eyes for an instant then said in a low voice, "Stay close to each other" He turned to look at the others and saw them nodding at him, through the half-darkness of the room. He didn't miss the puzzled glances Faith shot at them.

Giles and Xander had gotten used to his real identity and didn't put up much of a protest when he gave them orders. Faith on the other hand didn't know anything about him...except what she had seen that night at the Bronze when she had been inside Buffy's body.

Willow had told him about what had happened...although he had had a vague suspicion from the beginning...Buffy had used other tactics to frustrate the hell out of him, hitting on him hadn't been her style.

"It's too dark in here." Xander said.

"I can feel magic...but it has nothing to do with this darkness..." Giles announced.

Spike nodded, he turned toward Faith and asked, "What can you feel?"

"Rotten fish smell...does it count?" The brunette slayer asked.

"No..." Spike almost spat.

"We're alone," Faith said, "and there aren't demons here...except for you, of course..." Spike didn't miss the unspoken question in Faith's eyes: why was he there.

Why was he helping, giving orders and why did the others act as if that was a normal occurrence for them to take orders by William the Bloody?

Spike shrugged, ignoring her words. There were already too many people who knew about his identity, last thing he needed was for a rogue Slayer who had been saved by Angel, to know about him and his calling.

A single Eletti couldn't blow millennia of secrecy...

<Bloody Hell, I'm starting to think like Eric...next thing I know, I'm going to start talking in riddles!>

He thought shaking his head. He tilted his head up, "I'm not feeling anything either." He eventually said, "and I don't like it..."

"I'd say we should split up and look for B." Faith said.

"Did you hear me, pet? We're to stick together...and that's final..." Spike said, "We can't risk one of us getting lost...not here..."

Spike heard Faith snorting at his words and say: "I can take care of myself, thank you..."

“Can you, really? Because from the looks of it I wouldn’t say so...” It was Xander who talked and Spike couldn’t help rolling his eyes

Just what he needed right now.
A quarrel between old enemies.

Couldn’t life get just a bit more complicated than that?

A white, dazzling light lit up the room, forcing them all to close their eyes.

“It was a bloody rhetorical question”
Spike mumbled, feeling his skin itching.
“Stay close to each other” He repeated, although he almost couldn’t hear his own voice, covered as it was by a shrill noise.

And then silence.
And then darkness.

“Bugger...” He murmured.

He was alone, in the dark and he had the distinctive feeling that was just the beginning.

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

*H*is arms were tied behind his back.

It hurt.
It hurt breathing. It hurt existing.
He knew that kind of hurt.
He had already felt it once.

Giles lightly shook his head, as he slowly became aware of his surroundings, of the excruciating pain in his fingers.

<*What in the bloody hell is going on?*>
He wondered, opening his eyes.

It was dark.
Darkness all around him, gone were the others.
Gone was that blinding white light and Giles suspected it had something to do with what he was experiencing.

Darkness.
Too much darkness.
Yet he could recognize the smells.
Blood, sex, death.
Just like that night.

“I must say I’m impressed, Rupert.”

Giles swallowed recognizing Angelus’ voice.

<Great...just...bloody fantastic! >

He thought.

He was reliving his ordeal on Angelus' hands, courtesy of his former peers.
Wasn't life just marvelous?

"I must say, I'm not!" He spat.

He couldn't see Angelus, but he could hear his voice. The vampire chuckled at his words and said,
"Oh, well...give me time!"

"For what?" Giles asked.

He looked around trying to see the vampire, but the darkness was too thick.

"To know if she's worth it!"

Giles blinked.

All right...he hadn't expected that!

"Who?" He asked, although he already knew the answer.

"Who else, Rupert? Your slayer, my girl..."

Angelus slowly came out from the shadows and added with a smile.

"My sweet lover..."

Giles had to swallow not to answer him. He still recalled how Angelus had told him about Angel's night with Buffy as he had tortured him, the way that beast had taken an act of love and had stained it with his voice, his laughter, his hatred.

"So, Rupert? Is she worth it? Is she worth the pain, the humiliation, the heartaches? She fell in love with a vampire...she lost her virginity to a vampire...and she set me free"

Giles closed his eyes.

Which kind of sick games were they playing?

"What...cat ate your tongue, Rupert? I thought I had asked you a simple question: is she worth it? She's so bossy and cheeky. She is so strong...yet she couldn't kill me."

The vampire got closer, before kneeling in front of him.

"Just think about that... if she had. If she had done me, I wouldn't have killed so many people..."
He laughed and added, "I guess the problems started when she did me...don't you think?"

"Are you finished?" Giles asked.

"As I've already said, I'm not impressed!"

<Try to live over and over again your worst nightmare for three days, then we'll talk, mate! >

"I killed Jenny, Rupert...I snapped her neck...I brought her to your house...do you remember?"

Giles swallowed.
He remembered.
He recalled every single detail about that night.

He recalled how he had felt his heart shatter when he had seen Jenny in his bed; her eyes open... dead...but so very beautiful.

He recalled how he hadn't been able to shed a single tear and how he hadn't been able to look at or smell a red rose ever since.

Mostly he recalled Buffy holding him outside the burning factory. He recalled how the tears had finally come, for both of them, hot and fierce, and how it had felt right for him to cry in his slayer's arms.

<You can't leave me...I can't do this alone! >

Giles grinned.
He had promised to himself he wouldn't ever leave her, that night.
That promise, had helped him to withstand torture on Angelus' hands that night.
Things weren't going to be different...

"Odd..." He finally said.
"I mostly recall hitting you with a flaming baseball bat..."

Angelus chuckled.
"Yeah, you did...but you still haven't answered me, Rupert...
Is. She. Worth. It?"

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

"You killed me, man..."

Xander opened his eyes when he heard Jesse's voice.

<Alright>
He thought.
<What about these guys finally got a clue, and stopped messing with our heads? >

"How ungrateful of you..." Jesse's voice continued.

Xander rolled his eyes, trying to adjust to the darkness.
How come they always ended in sucking scenarios like those?

And why was he imagining Jesse of all people?

"Don't you want to answer me?"

"You're not real, pal...just bloody stop it!"

< Bloody stop it? Great...now I'm channeling Spike! >
He thought shaking his head.

“Well, my death was real, man...and painful...and all because of her...”

“O-ok and this is this the part where I should just smile and nod, right? ‘Cause I’m not sure I’m following you, J...whoever you are...her?”

“Your friend...the blondie...you wanted her so much, didn’t you?”

“And that’s supposed to make sense? You were killed by a vampire!”

“And she didn’t save me...out of all the people she saved...she couldn’t save me...your best friend...yet you kept following her around. Gee...what’s so special about her? Is she such a good lay?”

Xander shook his head, gritting his teeth. “Listen...whoever you are...”

“Answer me, Xander! She got me killed...”

“*You* got yourself killed! By the way did I tell you how much of a dumbass you were?”

“And have I ever mentioned how much of a jerk you were for dusting me?”

“I did not stake you!”

“Did too!”

“Did n...” Xander stopped talking. Was he really having an argument with...God knew what...in an old lighthouse?

Jesse was smiling, he was dressed like the last time he had seen him, at the Bronze, shortly before he had been dusted.

“If that helps living with yourself, man, be my guest! But we both know that’s not the truth...I died because of you and the blonde bitch...yet she didn’t kill Angel...”

Xander gritted his teeth, frustrated. He was trying to remind to himself none of what he was seeing was true...yet Jesse’s words were hurting him.

“He had a soul...he was different” Xander murmured, and wasn’t surprised when Jesse rolled his eyes at those words...how many times had he done the same thing?

“Lame-o, you lost your best friend and that’s all you can say?” Jesse got close to him, whispering against his face. “How was he different than me? Both vampires, both ruthless killers without a soul...oh yeah right, I hadn’t given her a happy” He sniffed him then asked “and what about you? Did she give you one?”

Xander pushed him away. Jesse laughed, and then calming down he asked, “So, Xand...is she worth it?”

~~*~*~*~*~*

Not that she had expected a red carpet to welcome her to Sunnydale. Faith had known that was going to be hard on her.

To say she was surprised, though, meant using an euphemism...first there had been Spike, acting like he was some kind of a leader, with Giles and Xander following his orders as if that was something usual.

To top her already surreal evening there had been that annoying white light, followed by ...

A darkness that smelled of blood and pain...that exploded in every particle of her body when she tried to move, to breathe, to exist.

Had he felt like that, that night?

Her wrists were bruised where she had been tied, the rope was cutting her skin, she had tried to break free but to no avail.

She had been kicked, hard, in the stomach, the pain was intense...she had forgotten what pain was really like.

Being the Slayer had made her forget the bruises, the cuts.

It looked like someone had wanted her to remember...with vivid all too vivid details, what it felt like.

“So...are you getting comfortable, Faith?”

“Oh, c’mon!” She exclaimed, hoping nothing of her real feelings would come to the surface as she spoke “You’ve got to be kidding me...that’s your master plan? Fucking with my head? Too late!”

He made a step forward, getting close to her and she couldn’t help flinching.

The pain...it was dancing in her body, playing with her skin...yet she welcomed it. Anything was better than looking into his eyes.

“No, Faith. That is not my master plan. I’m here to ask questions...” He said.

Faith cocked an eyebrow at him: “A please woks wonder or so I’ve heard”

He smiled at her, a cruel smirk, which made her hair stand.

“For humans maybe, but not for rabid dogs...and that’s what you are, Faith. You are nothing but that.”

Faith couldn’t help rolling her eyes at him, “Oh, c’mon...that’s all you can do to hurt me?” She let out a laughter; “I thought you knew me better than this.”

She narrowed her eyes saying, “Not so long ago, you were the one sitting on this chair, Wesley...”

~~*~*~*~*~*

He could hear water running. Spike knew that sound. He had relived it over and over, in his nightmares, he had heard that sickening sound just before starting assignments, he had believed even Drusilla had been able to hear it, spells notwithstanding. That water wasn't clean, he clearly recalled it. The water had been stained by blood and the smell of dead bodies, demons and humans alike that had met their deaths in that cave.

Bodies of humans and demons he had killed, dead bodies whose smell had filled his nostrils, and made his eyes water.

Here he was, again. As if time had stopped, had frozen on that night. Spike was beyond angry, that was the Council's plan?

“So vampire...did you have fun killing me and my baby?”

Spike clenched his jaws, fighting the urge to let his demon take over. He knew that it was an illusion. He had killed that young woman with his own hands, hands that had been red with blood at that point.

He still recalled how his hands had long past the point of actually feeling pain when he had eventually killed the Slayer. Too many punches, too much pain had washed over them.

He had taken care of the bodies after, burning them and silently watching as the flames eroded what had once been a young woman whose only fault had been being a Slayer in love.

It was an illusion, yet that voice was making his skin ache.

“I can't even have an answer, can I?” Her voice was slow, heavily accented. What was worst? She seemed genuinely hurt by his silence.

He tried to picture her as he was hearing her footsteps approaching him.

He recalled a short girl, with long black hair, a thick iridescent skin. He recalled blows that had made him double over in pain.

He recalled how quickly, too quickly she had moved, how her long nails had scratched his skin making it bleed, and a warm, wet tongue licking the blood away.

What he recalled mostly was her swollen abdomen, and how the baby, if one could call it a baby, had moved deforming it.

“I loved my baby so much, vampire...” She let out a coarse laughter, “She made me feel alive...and whole...and you killed her. My. Little. Baby. Yet you're willing to save hers. Why? Is she worth it?”

Another step toward him. Other everlasting seconds in which Spike relived that night.

Heta7tanatos. A stupid code to describe hell on heart.

And he was reliving it, again.

~~*~*~*~*~*

She was going to find out soon.

Eric kept his eyes on the book he was pretending to read from. He wasn't reading though, all of his senses were focused on the redhead who was sitting at the desk, consulting books, while her eyes kept going to the watch on the wall.

She was waiting for her family, for the man she loved to come back. She hadn't even talked to him since he had come back. Her anger had come to him in cold waves, and he had been sure to see a look akin pure hatred in her eyes.

She hated him.

Once again William had been hurt, once again she had seen his flesh bloodied, once again she had seen him in pain.

She had lived over and over William's death when she had been taken, and then she had seen him dying, for real. He had let her see Drusilla killing him, draining him under a pouring rain.

He had held her while the man she loved had been killed. He had felt her body pressed against his, her hot tears mingling with the rain, and he had trembled, while in his heart the feelings for her were rooting and becoming powerful.

She hated him.

She still saw the cold-hearted bastard who hadn't shown any feelings while condemning William to die. She didn't know how much he had changed...or she didn't want to. Not that he blamed her; he hadn't given her any chance to see how things had changed for him.

And now...now he could hear it. He wondered whether William had as well.

Willow was pregnant. She was carrying a child conceived more than a century before...and she didn't know yet.

He was pretty sure about it. He had learned to read her feelings, her states of mind pretty well. They had tried not to change history...had made sure William wouldn't fall in love with Willow who on the other hand had allowed him to put a spell on her so powerful that it had taken more than a century for him to find a way to undo it.

And all for naught.

Willow was carrying William's child.

"I hate it!" Anya's voice broke Eric's musings, the vampire looked at her: she was holding an open book in her hands.

"What are you talking about?" He asked, keeping his eyes on her, feeling Willow's eyes on him.

"What do you think she's talking about?" Came Willow's sharp retort. "Our friends, our family is in danger...they're risking their lives because Buffy dared falling in love...and getting pregnant! Because of the Council, Eric! The guys who are supposed to protect Buffy! Why do they send watchers anyway? They could just take the Slayers to the Council and send them out just to fight!"

"Willow...you don't know all the facts...you don't know how dangerous a pregnant Slayer can really be."

Surprisingly it was Anya who talked. “Granted, the Council’s behavior about it sucks...but if you think you have seen evil Will, wait until you see a pregnant Slayer who reaches Obscuritas, it’s quite nasty if you ask me...”

“So what do they do with them, take them down as rabid dogs?” Willow asked.

“Yes...that’s what we do...” Eric said in a low voice, “What William was ordered to do, once...”

“The second Slayer he killed...” Willow murmured, she pursed her lips for an instant before adding, “Spike never talks about it...”

“He has never been the same after that...” Eric said closing his book and getting up from his chair, “it was very hard for him...she had reached Obscuritas...the Council hadn’t gotten there in time.”

“We...we don’t know for sure whether Buffy is going to reach Obscuritas, ok...she has showed some of the symptoms ...but most of the times she just ...zones out...”

“And she’s kicking the crap out of everyone who trains with her, and is too strong even for a Slayer...” Anya said.

“Were you trying to help?” Willow snapped.

The former demon snorted then said, “I’m just stating the facts Willow! For God’s sake, look at what’s happening!”

“You mean my best friend kidnapped, my family searching for her, the man I love risking his ass again? I kinda got the memo, thanks!”

Anya sighed, “Willow...”

“You know what?” She said getting up from her chair, “I’m not going to stay here and wait. You can come with me or not, I don’t care...I want to help them.”

“No!” Eric exclaimed blocking her way.

“No?” Willow asked, tilting her head on a side in a gesture that reminded Eric of Spike.

<Great, old boy. Get her and her baby killed. William is really going to like it! >

“There is no way I’m going to let you out of this house. You can’t help them!”

“Maybe, but sure as hell, I’m not going to stay here and wait. This is killing me!”

“Going there will make you permanently dead.” Anya chimed in.

Willow turned toward her flashing her a hard gaze, “Just because you’re...”

“If you go to that lighthouse, you will get William killed. He will be too worried about you to...”

“Don’t you dare Eric! Don’t you dare guilt tripping me! I’m going to that Lighthouse!”

“Do you think that was a guilt trip? Well, here is one: do you remember that afternoon in my house? The one you spent with William in **my** meditation room?”

“What the hell are you...?” Willow started, but was interrupted by Eric who said, “You are pregnant Willow!”

She took a step back, looking at him wide eyed. “You’re lying!” She said in a low voice.

Eric shook his head. “No, I’m not. I can hear its heartbeat, and so will be able to every single vampire in Sunnydale. Do you have any idea of how exciting this sound is to vampires? It’s like a beacon, even more so to the people from the Council: imagine the possibilities with a baby conceived in 1880...”

Eric saw Willow’s face paling and the young woman clutching a hand over her heart, she shook her head and opened her mouth to speak, but Eric stopped her by saying: “You can go there...and get the man you love killed, you can go there thus jeopardizing your ‘family’, or you can stay here and wait”

Willow didn’t talk; she just tilted her head up, shooting him an angry glance. Eric gave her a brief look, but didn’t attempt to get close to her. He turned his back at her, and went back to his chair, opening again his book, pretending to read from it. He heard the bathroom’s door slamming, and Willow’s muffled sobs and resisted the urge to gripping the book’s edge.

No one had to know.
No one could ever know.

It was Anya who broke the silence saying, “So...not big with the subtleness ain’t we? ‘My meditation room’? Couldn’t you have been a little more...”

“Anya...” Eric started. “It’s not...”

Anya though, waved a hand in the air and interrupted him saying, “Please! I’ve been around longer than you, made a living out of deceiving...the Eletti are not the only one who can lie well, you know? Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone...”

She got up from her chair saying, “I’ll go and check on Will...you try and see if there’s a way to bring them back”

She left without another word, leaving Eric alone.

Alone. As always.

~~*~*~*~*~*

She had been ready to do everything in order to free herself when she had heard the steps getting closer.

Buffy had gripped in her hand the shred of one of the plates on the tray that man had left in her room. She had broken one of the plates, in the frantic attempt to find a weapon.

Three months before she had believed she had been ready to kill a human being in order to free Giles and Willow, but when time had come, she hadn't been able to, although everything inside of her had screamed to kill that woman.

Yet, she hadn't been able to.

Now, things were different. She had been ready and willing to slit the throat of whoever had entered the room.

She had ignored the strange itching in her skin at that thought, and the now familiar craving...

Craving for blood, craving for being the Slayer.

She had focused on Rupert, instead. She had focused on his eyes, so gentle, so warm, while he told her he loved her.

She had focused on Giles' face the night they had discovered she was pregnant, and how he had held her all night long.

She was gripping the shred of the plate, and was waiting, her face pale, her heart strongly beating in her chest.

She swallowed hard, just before the door opened, then without thinking charged the man who had just entered the room, and found herself being easily disarmed.

The man didn't hurt her; he just gripped at her wrist and let the shred fall on the floor.

"Miss. Summers" The man said still holding her wrist; he wasn't hurting her, yet Buffy couldn't help the tears from blurring her sight. "We do not want to harm you, unless it is necessary"

"You already have!" She said in a nasal voice, "Don't you remember? You took away my strength..."

"It was for your own good." The man said, and Buffy felt sick to her stomach.

"I suppose I should even thank you guys, don't I?" She asked, her voice dripping with venom.

The man shook his head and said, "I've come here to bring you to my chief, shall we?"

"Like hell!" She hissed, taking a step back.

The man, the same who had brought her food, looked younger than Giles, tilted his head on a side, looking at her. She couldn't read him; she couldn't understand what he was thinking.

Buffy swallowed, holding his gaze, trying to hold back her fear.

<I'm Buffy Summers. >

She thought.

<The vampire Slayer. There's more in a Slayer than just kicking asses. Those losers will not break me. >

"Very well" The man said, letting go of her wrist, "I will inform my peers to proceed."

The man turned his back at her, and Buffy couldn't help whispering, "Proceed to what?"

The man turned. He looked at her and his eyes were blank, although his voice was soft as he said, "We shall kill your friends." The man took a step closer to her. "They are trapped in here."

Buffy blinked, "I didn't hear them...I didn't hear a thing."

"Nevertheless they have come. It didn't take them long." The man continued, and Buffy had no doubts he was telling the truth.

Giles had come to her. He had found her.

"You knew they-" Buffy started.

"They care about you Miss. Summers, but we were already aware of that. What we want to know is how much do you care about them..."

"What do you mean?" Buffy asked. Although she knew what he had meant.

"It's up to you, Miss. Summers. You can stay here, and let them die..."

"Don't you dare..." She hissed taking a step toward the man.

"Or what? In case you didn't notice, Miss Summers, you are in no position to threaten us, or give us orders..."

"What...what will happen to me if I go with you?" Buffy asked, interrupting him.

"You will be deported to the Council..." The man said. Yet he wasn't looking at her. Actually he had stopped looking at her since he had told her about her friends. Just like when he had brought her food, he looked almost...ashamed.

"Then I will be killed, won't I?" She asked, shaking away her previous thoughts. If it was war they wanted she would give it to them. She was going to go down fighting. "What will you guys choose to kill me?" She continued, her voice low, stern, "A bullet, a knife? Or will you throw me in a room with a vampire like you did when I turned eighteen?"

"Nonsense..." The man said in a low voice. He stuck his hands in the pocket of his trousers and said, "It's your decision Miss. Summers, I can wait, but I seriously doubt your friends can..."

Buffy shook her head. "How do I know you won't kill them if I come with you? How do I know they aren't already dead?" She asked.

"Because we are not interested in them. Because they cannot harm the Council..." The man stated matter-of-factly.

Buffy ran a hand through her hair. How could she choose? Why did she have to? She let out a sigh, knowing within herself there wasn't a choice to be made. "Let's go..." She whispered.

She was going to die. She was going to let her baby be killed.

<I'm sorry Rupert...>
She thought.

<I can't let you die...>

~~*~*~*~*~*

The first thing Buffy noticed once she exited her room was the smell: it was strong, sickeningly bitter sweet like burnt coffee and molasses, it made her throat twitch with the urge to vomit, but she ignored it. She walked, her hands tied behind her back, blindfolded, the man was behind her, grabbing one of her arms, his presence, somehow, oddly comforting.

She could hear the sea, or at least she thought it was the sea. Relying on her senses was proving to be more difficult than she had thought. She was trying not to let fear and worry clouding her senses.

The man stopped and she did the same, they had gone down some stairs, and she had carefully counted each step, while trying to focus on other details, besides that smell and the noise of the sea. She could hear a dim buzz, yet she couldn't exactly determine its origin.

“What...” She started.

“Do shut up, Miss. Summers.” The man interrupted her.

“Or what? You tie my hands behind my back and blindfold me?” She snapped.

She heard the man snorting at her words and a few seconds later he untied her hands and freed her from the blindfold.

She had to squint her eyes shut, just like the room she had been in; the walls were painted in a bright, almost iridescent white. She opened her eyes again, and looked at a door: it was a simple wooden door, yet, Buffy was afraid.

She tilted her head on a side and looking at the man said, “Now what?”

“Enter the room, my chief is already waiting for you.” The man said.

Buffy's lips stretched in a thin line before she asked, “How does it feel like?”

The man looked confused, but didn't talk, Buffy lightly shook her head before adding, “You know? Here I was, thinking I was becoming a monster...but now? I know I'm not...I'm looking at a monster right in the eyes...I'm nothing like you!”

The man didn't answer her and Buffy wasn't surprised, she grabbed the doorknob and whispered, “You will be surprised when you realize something...what's your name again?”

“Charles” The man said, his voice was lower. She hadn't been wrong...he looked ashamed.

“Surprised by what?” He asked.

“You'll be surprised when you realize what a Slayer really is...”

The man shook his head then said, “Open the door miss. Summers”

Buffy had already opened it, when she heard him whisper, “And may God forgive us all”

~~*~*~*~*~*

The light had been so harsh that it had hurt her eyes, and the strong, sickening sweet smell she had smelled as she entered the room, had become almost unbearable.

She had felt her body shivering from the cold that suddenly had engulfed her, yet, her forehead was beading with small drops of sweat.

Buffy couldn't open her eyes, it didn't matter how much she was trying to, she just couldn't...not when the voices were so loud, so full of pain and venom.

She took a deep breath before slowly forcing her eyes open. "O-ok..." She whispered, through her dry throat, "what the hell is going on here?"

She looked around; all her friends were in the room, standing still in various spot of the circular room.

Se blinked when she saw Faith, she was leaning against a wall, her eyes wide open, her mouth moving, forming words...

She was relieved when she saw Spike. She had feared he had been dusted in the graveyard, after she had fainted.

Just like the others. They were all talking, aloud, simultaneously, she couldn't understand what they were saying, such was the cacophony created by their voices. She shook her head trying to shake away the numbness and the surprise.

Later, she would think about what was really happening, for now, her only goal was to get to her friends and...

<What? Wake them up? Saying hocus pocus to free them? You have no clue about what's going on...>

"Buffy...no..." She heard Giles, saying, and turned her head to his side: the man looked like he was staring at her, yet he wasn't really seeing her.

"Rupert!" She called aloud, moving toward him. She hadn't made but a step that she was thrown back, landing on the floor, in time to see Giles collapsing on his knees, tilting his head down.

Crying.

The others stopped talking, at once. Their eyes opened, unseeing.

She watched, unable to do anything else.

She had to get them out of there.

~~*~*~*~*~*

He was on his knees now.

The force of what he had seen, what his mind had conjured to weaken him had hit him. He had walked, after Angelus had finished with him. He had walked in the darkness, carefully trying to banish away any thought. Angelus had kept asking whether she had been worth it.

The same question, asked over and over while, just like that night of three years before, he snapped the bones in his fingers.

His questions hadn't left him, even when his image had disappeared, leaving him alone, in the dark.

The question had echoed in his mind while he had walked, through a seemingly endless darkness.

Was she worth it? Was she worth the pain? Was she worth the heartaches? Was she worth the humiliations?

He had been distracted by the questions, as he kept walking only when, after what it had looked like years spent in the dark, he had started recognizing his surroundings, he had realized he was in one of Sunnydale's cemeteries, the one where Spike lived.

He had been able to sense the others; relieved as he had been to find out they were still alive. The only presence he hadn't been able to feel was Buffy's.

He had started walking through the graveyard, spotting Spike's crypt, wondering about Buffy, her whereabouts, wonder if she was still alive.

Was she worth it? The question had started ringing again in his ears.

Images of her had filled his mind, images the first time he had seen her, so young, so carefree...so reckless...so full of life.

Is she worth it?

Images of the night after she had made love to Angel. She had been so fragile, so broken. He had felt that a part of her had died when Angelus had broken her heart.

Is she worth it?

Images of the night she had come back to Sunnydale, after a summer spent away, hiding herself from what she had done, from her mission, from her friends and loved ones.

Is she worth it?

Images of the night of the Prom, so beautiful and sad...yet pride had shone in her eyes...and he had watched her dancing with Angel. He had been relieved when she had told him they had broken up, yet, in that moment, he had only wished her to be happy...even if with Angel...or anyone else. Even thinking that, his heart had broken, thinking his, was bound to be an unrequited love.

Is she worth it?

Images of the night he had been kidnapped, a few months before...images from his nightmares... where he held her in his arms as she died, feeling his soul dying with her.

Is she worth it?

Images from the last months...he could see her, beautiful and his...

Is she worth it?

Images of Buffy, training with him, a soft smile playing on her lips.

Is she worth it?

Images of Buffy...training with Spike, fighting alongside the blonde vampire, trusting him, relying on him...

Is she worth it?

He hadn't even realized he had started running, in the vain hope of banishing the voice and the images: Buffy fighting with Spike in that very graveyard, their movements fluid, perfectly in synch, as those of two dancers...

Is she worth it?

He had kept running, ignoring the pain, which stolidly throbbed throughout his body, and his heart, pounding in his chest. He had sighed, when he had finally reached Spike's crypt.

He had taken some tentative steps, toward the door, but had stopped, when he had heard Spike's voice.

"Does he suspect?" He had said, his voice low, relaxed, a hint of curiosity in his question.

Giles had felt ice seeping through his veins; he had swallowed, steeling himself for what he had been about to see.

Was she worth it?

The question had become louder and louder, it had hurt his ears to hear it, his heart crazed for the run had contracted in his chest, and he had had to force himself to remind that nothing of what was surrounding him was true. It wasn't any real than Angelus' torture.

Yet it had taken all of his willpower to move, to lightly open the door of the crypt, to go toward the voice.

"Who? Mr: 'I-worship-the-ground-you-walk-on'? Gotta be kidding me..."

It had been Buffy's voice, she had talked in a low voice, but Giles hadn't missed the bitterness in it.

<It's not real. >

He had thought.

<It's not her...>

Yet he hadn't been able to walk away, he hadn't been able to stop looking, to stop hearing.

"Not a nice thing to say about your fiancée, luv..." Spike had said.

Buffy had laughed at his words, and Giles had closed his eyes, clenching his jaws.

“He thinks we patrol together...” She had said emphasizing her last words, Giles had opened his eyes and had taken another step forward, forgetting everything about the pounding in his heart and the sharp throbbing in his hand, where Angelus had broken his fingers.

“They will find out sooner or later,” Spike had said.

Buffy had snorted at his words, “What did he expect? C’mon Spike, he’s old...he doesn’t even look young, like you or Angel!”

He had taken another step. His mind had known it hadn’t been real; yet Buffy’s words had been real...it had hurt him, more than Angelus’ tortures.

“Rupert!” Spike had exclaimed, breaking his thoughts. The vampire hadn’t looked surprised, Giles had glimpsed amusement in Spike’s eyes.

“Buffy!” He had said, ignoring the vampire.

The Slayer had looked at him, her green eyes cold, not a trace of love in her eyes, when snorting had said, “What are you doing here?”

“Told you he would find out” Spike had said.

“Guess so...” She had replied, leaning toward the vampire, placing a kiss on his forehead, she had snuggled against him and had continued, “C’mon, don’t look at me that way. Not exactly a saint, here...”

Giles had shaken his head, “It’s not real...”

“What, honey...what isn’t real?” Buffy had asked, tilting her head on a side, exposing her neck to Spike, who had begun kissing it. “You are, indeed, old...ain’t you?” She had asked.

“You...what I’m seeing it’s not real!” Giles had protested.

Spike’s laughter had filled the crypt and the throbbing pain, inside of him had exploded.

“Yet” The vampire had said, “here we are. Don’t tell us you don’t fear this. If it’s not me it will be someone else, watcher...in the mean time I can be everything she needs” He smiled when he said, “I can be a friend, a lover, a father for her child. I can be her watcher...”

Giles had looked at him, half expecting Spike’s face to morph into Angel’s or Riley’s, while he had said those words, but it hadn’t happened.

“And you can keep being what you think you are, what she makes you think you are: the faithful watcher, the faithful lover...but we both know she isn’t worth it, don’t we?”

“Yes, Rupert...you can tell him...am I worth it?” Buffy had left Spike’s makeshift bed and, naked, had gotten close to him.

“Am I worth Rupert?” She had asked, pouting, circling his neck with her arms. She had stood on her tiptoes whispering in his ear, “Am I worth, Rupert? I was happy when Jenny died; the bitch had

screwed up my relationship of Angel. Speaking of Angel...I set his monster free...and after he tortured you, I didn't even stay long enough to see if you'd recover...am I worth it?"

Giles had pushed her away, "Buffy no..." He had said shaking his head.

Laughter, they had laughed while they had gotten close to him.

"Am I worth, Rupert?" She had kept asking, her voice sweet, now, almost sympathetic.

"Is she worth, Rupert?" Spike had asked, his voice low.

Their voices had started growing with intensity, echoing in the crypt, making his heart twisting in his chest.

<Rupert! >

That's when he had dropped on his knees. The question, always the same, asked by them over and over.

Was she worth it?

Was she worth it?

~~*~*~*~*~*

Spike hadn't known the name of the Chinese Slayer he had killed during the Boxer Rebellion. He hadn't asked for her name, when he had been sent to stop her. He still didn't know her name. He still didn't know a lot of things about her.

Had she been in love before the Obscuritas had devoured her? Had she loved the father of her child?

Would it have been possible to save her, had her watcher really known about the Obscuritas?

Spike looked at the dead body in front of him: the Slayer...of what remained of her. They had fought, again, just like that night.

She had been deadly precise in her movements, just like that night. She had been cruel, just like that night.

She had kept asking questions...actually, a single question, throughout their fight: is she worth it?

She had fought, and although he had known what he had been experiencing hadn't been more real than the nightmares he usually had about that night, he had been afraid.

Just like that night.

He had been wounded, just like that night, and the pain felt real...

Too damn real.

<I'm getting too old for this...>

He could still see the body of the Slayer; it was the only visible thing ...there was darkness all around him now, even the smell and the noises had faded. The Slayer had kept asking whether she was worth it. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Was she worth what? And since when that was the procedure with pregnant Slayers, anyway?

Spike shook his head, tired. He tried not to let his mind wander. He couldn't afford another replica of his past, of his fears now...he had to find a way to get the hell out of there.

"Help me, please!" It was Willow's voice, getting closer and closer to him. Spike gritted his teeth, at the sound of her voice.

"Somebody help me, please!" Willow's voice kept crying out for help.

Spike stood still. He tried to clear his mind from any thought, from any recollection, from any fear.

The darkness all around him was fading, he could see a form approaching him...and he could smell blood.

It was Willow's blood, sweet and thick and intoxicating, filled with love, magic and despair.

He could see her, she was wearing the blue gown she had been wearing the day they had made love in Eric's house...it was dripping wet with rain and blood. The darkness around him faded some more, revealing more details: her face was wet with rain.

<Hadn't been raining the night I died? >

He silently wondered. Neither Willow nor Eric had told him a lot about what had happened. His recollections stopped with his death. The last time he had seen Willow had been when he had left that room. He hadn't even looked back; he had stopped thinking about that redhead and had focused on the mission...on his impending death. What had happened to her after he had left?

"Help me!" Willow was screaming, from the top of her lungs, running, in a seemingly endless hallway.

She had screamed the same words when she had returned from the past, wet with rain, scared. He now recalled even through the thick cloud of pain that had engulfed him her pale face, her puffy red eyes.

Rain. It was pouring down, all around him, yet, he wasn't really there...he was just looking at what was going on.

None of that was real...not the rain, not Willow's cries, or the smell of her blood. Yet, when he glimpsed the figure at Willow's heels he couldn't help snarling, while he felt his human mask shattering revealing his demon's true face.

Angelus. He was chasing Willow, a cruel smirk playing on his face, his chin wet with blood, her blood, the rain pouring down on him, unnoticed.

He moved toward them, then. Yet, the more he tried to run, the more slowly he went.

"Willow! Here, I'm here luv...come here!" He shouted, not giving a damn about the fact that it wasn't real.

“Please...” Willow sobbed, “Someone save me and my baby!”

She wasn't seeing or hearing him, he realized. She couldn't.

Yet, Angelus looked up, at him, his smirk grew into a smile and the look in his eyes was unmistakable: he had heard him, he had seen him...that was only adding to his excitement.

Willow stopped, doubling over in pain, probably to catch her breath, but suddenly screamed in pain and he could clearly smell new blood adding to the one she had already shed.

She was losing her baby...and Angelus, was about to catch her.

Spike closed his eyes; he knew what was about to happen, yet he blinked them open when he heard Willow's cries and his voice...Angelus' voice saying, “Look at me, William”

He swallowed, ignoring what his mind was telling him, ignoring his training as Elett...ignoring his soul, which was roaring with the rage at the sight: Angelus was keeping Willow, he had circled her waist with an arm, pulling her closer and closer at him. Only then did he really notice her swollen belly, Angelus was idly caressing her head with a hand.

Once again, he tried to move, but he could barely make a step. “Let her go” He said.

Angelus chuckled at his words, he trailed Willow's face with a finger before saying, “I'd love to... but I have to make sure whether she's worth it, first...”

Spike tried to move, to prevent what was about to happen, he tried to get close to them, but to no avail.

He helplessly watched as Angelus tilted Willow's head on a side, exposing her neck before lowering his head and sinking his fangs into it.

Spike heard Willow's desperate cries as Angelus drank from her and struggled to get close, struggled to move, to stop what was happening.

He froze when Angelus tilted his head up, leaving Willow's neck. “You have to tell me, William! Is she worth it? Because this-” He said dropping Willow's body on the ground, “isn't”

Spike cried Willow's name, as he finally was able to move.

“Tell me, William. Is she worth that much for you? You let me kill your red-head...without answering.”

“Sod off!” He spat, rushing at Willow's side. He knelt, taking her in his arms.

“Not until you answer me. What is it with you and this Slayer, by the way?”

Spike didn't answer him; he was holding Willow's body in his arms. He searched for a pulse, although he had known she had died even before kneeling next to her.

She was dead.

Dead because of him.

Dead because of...

“You can say her name, William...” Angelus said, reading his mind, proving once more that what was seeing, experiencing wasn’t real, although that awareness didn’t change what he was feeling, didn’t change the fact that he was holding Willow’s lifeless body in his arms.

“She’s dead because of the Slayer. You couldn’t move because she was holding you back...”

Spike tilted his head up, looking at Angelus: his lips were still red with Willow’s blood. “What are you talking about?” He asked.

Angelus shrugged at his words, and pointed with a finger to the spot he had previously occupied and Spike couldn’t help following his gesture with his eyes, only to meet Buffy’s smiling face. She waved with a hand at him.

“She was keeping you. She still is.” Angelus said.

To prove his point, Buffy showed her other hand; the end of a rope was wrapped around it. “Ops...” she said. “Didn’t you feel it, Spike?” She shrugged. “Am I really worth so much?” she smiled and continued, “Color me impressed.”

Spike shook his head, then looked down at his legs, noticing for the first time, the ropes wrapped around his ankles and legs, almost like snakes.

“And I wonder...” Angelus said. “Why? You love the red-head...is she really worth so much?”

“I don’t understand!” Spike said, pulling Willow’s body closer at him.

Had he let Willow die?

“What’s to understand?” Angelus asked, kneeling next to him.

“Your question, you git!” Spike hissed.

“Is she worth it? Didn’t she make your life miserable? Didn’t she screw up all of your plans? Hell, she set me free...while you were incapacitated...yet, you let Willow die...”

“She’s the Slayer...” Spike said in a low voice. “I’m sworn to protect her.”

Angelus got close to him, then whispered. “Honestly, William? Didn’t look like that with Emilie... didn’t you let me torture her almost to death? Didn’t you snap her neck? You were sworn to protect her as well...”

“I couldn’t...” Spike said in a low voice.

Angelus shook his head, “Really? But you still haven’t answered my question, William: what’s so special about her?”

“Yeah, Spike...I kinda want to know, as well...” Buffy said, getting close to them, she knelt in front of them and asked, “What’s so special about me? Am I really worth so much? ‘Cause gotta tell you, until you told me about your soul? I thought nothing of you...yet, you’ve had your girlfriend killed because of me...so spill...what’s so special about me?”

It wasn't real. It couldn't be.

He let go of Willow's body and slowly got up.

"You know what?" He said looking at the two of them. "Piss off! I'm done playing this game..."

He looked around before closing his eyes, grateful, more than ever for his training as Eletti.

He let go of his thoughts, of his pain, of his memories, blocking them all out, as so long ago he had been taught to do. He had forgotten the lesson...he forgotten what an Eletti was supposed to be.

He had been trained to become a shadow, a spot of light within the darkness. He had been trained to be a savior and a warrior.

That charade had lasted long enough.

He smiled when he felt the edges of the invisible cell waver and the air around him changing.

It was time to set records straight with the Council, once and for all.

~~*~*~*~*~*

"Sir-" Maximillian said, "We have a problem"

Daniel took a step forward saying, "Report..."

"One of them has broken contact," The man explained.

"Who?" Daniel asked.

"I'm not sure, it's not very clear, the other Slayer's presence makes it difficult to determine it..."

"We can't get in, you know that...don't you?" Charles said. He hadn't talked since he had come back from escorting Buffy to the room where the procedure was taking place.

Daniel let go of a sigh and said, "I'm aware of that, Mr. Dutton." He ignored the younger watcher's glare and turned toward Maximillian, who looked tired. The procedure was taking its toll on the young watcher. So far he had been efficient in channeling the Slayer's powers, he wondered, though, whether the other Slayer's presence would weaken him to the point he wouldn't be effective any more, yet in a casual tone he asked, "How are the others holding up?"

The young man, almost as if he had read his mind said, "The other Slayer is following another path."

Daniel looked at the white pentacle, one of the crystal, which had started glowing when the procedure had begun, was now cracked, it had stopped glowing when they had lost contact with one of the people in the room.

"You said that we had lost contact with just one of them..." He said. "How can you be sure?"

“The energies have changed a few minutes ago.” The man explained. “She must have transformed her cell...”

“Into what?” Daniel asked.

The blonde man let go of a sigh and said, “I’m not sure. From what I’ve been able to feel she had been alternating the procedure with dreams ever since the beginning.”

“Did she fall asleep?” Charles asked. His voice couldn’t hide amusement.

Daniel shot him a look, but the man didn’t seem to mind. “What about the others?” He asked.

“We’re making progresses...but we’re not there, yet.”

“Did you find out who the father is? Is it the boy or the watcher?” He asked.

“We’ll know for sure only when it finishes...”

“Sir?” Charles said interrupting Maximillian.

“What?” Daniel exasperatedly asked. “You’re getting what you wanted for her...what else do you want? Mr. Dutton I need you to understand this: the only reason you are still here is because your associates made it clear that this was the only way they could ever agree to the procedure. But once this finishes, I’ll make sure you spend the rest of your life regretting this night.”

“I already will, sir.” Charles bitterly said. “I talked to the Slayer...she may be...rude...but I don’t think she is ever going to reach Obscuritas”

“And you are basing this assertion on what, pray say?” Daniel asked.

Charles shook his head but didn’t comment any further.

They didn’t know for sure whether Buffy Summers was reaching Obscuritas but they were going to find out very soon.

If she was, the people in the room, her loved ones would take care of that.

If she was reaching Obscuritas, the father of the child would kill her.

~~*~*~*~*~*

She was pregnant.

Willow was looking at her reflected image in the mirror. She didn’t notice anything different in her figure, in her face...yet she had changed, she was changing...

Pregnant.

She hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it since Eric had told her. She was pregnant with William’s child...Spike’s.

She let out a sigh, wondering whether Spike knew about it. Did he hear the baby's heartbeat before leaving?

Even if he had found out before leaving, he hadn't shown...and Willow wasn't surprised. Spike was good at hiding things, especially during a mission.

The worry for Spike, for her friends...her family, was coming back to her, now, stronger than before...it had been hours since they had left, and there hadn't been any news. More than once she had been tempted to get out of the house and going to the old lighthouse...Eric's words had stopped her, though.

She closed her eyes, but blinked them open when she heard knocking at the door. She had been hiding in the bathroom ever since Eric had told her about her pregnancy.

"Come in" She said. She slowly turned, in time to see Anya entering the bathroom.

The former demon looked at her, she crossed her arms over her chest and said after looking at her for a second, "You don't look well."

"Tell me something I don't know..." Willow replied, leaning against a wall.

Anya pursed her lips before saying, "We may have found something..."

"What? What did you find?" Willow said, getting close to her.

The former demon looked around before asking, "Why are we talking in a bathroom?"

"Anya? Spill!" Willow exclaimed.

Anya sighed, "Alright. I talked to Eric, we compared notes about the Obscuritas, and we noticed something...all of this...the setting, the shields, are not the normal procedure with a pregnant Slayer...usually they just strip her from her powers then kill her. Then I recalled something...there had been a Slayer once...we're talking about five or six centuries ago, who had tried to keep her pregnancy a secret...the Council, of course found out about it...they got her, the father of the child and her watcher...and closed them off in a tower"

"What happened to them?" Willow asked.

Anya didn't talk at first; Willow grabbed her by her shoulders and asked, again, "What happened to them?"

"We don't know for sure. There were talks...people said the father of the Slayer's child had killed her, then killed himself...and her watcher had gone crazy. Someone said they were buried alive. Anyway Eric went out to check on something ..."

"Is there a way to stop what's going on...?" Willow asked.

"That's what we're trying to find out. ..." Anya tilted her head down, and Willow followed her gaze only to notice that she was still holding her by her shoulder.

Willow nodded and let her go. "We need to do something. I can't stay here..."

Anya shook her head. “No, we can’t go there...you heard Eric...”

“I’m not going to try and get into the Lighthouse, but I want to be there...I need to...aren’t you worried for Xander?”

“Of course I am...” She said, and judging by the worry clearly etched on her face, she had no troubles believing her.

“We won’t do anything...unless it is necessary...I promise...” Willow said.

Anya looked at her and said, “Alright, but if you try to get in the Lighthouse, or try something funny I’ll...”

“I won’t. I promise...” Willow said, interrupting her. She smiled and said, “That Slayer...the one you told me about...didn’t have friends, didn’t have us...”

She left the bathroom, without hearing Anya who under her breath said, “yeah...but she wasn’t Buffy, either...she wasn’t that powerful”

-10-

She didn’t understand.

Buffy had been trying to get to her friends...hell, she had even tried to get to Faith! She had screamed, she had charged the invisible barrier, she had punched it until blood had stained her hands.

The first one to fall on his knees had been Giles, then it had been Xander, then Faith...and finally Spike had fallen too. The cacophony of the room had faded, now there was only silence...even that annoying buzz had vanished and Buffy hated that silence. She hated that the only thing she could hear in the room was her heart, beating too fast and her labored breath.

Her head hurt... and the bright light, emphasized by the white walls was only worsening her headache...she was tired...more tired than she ever remembered being. She rested her head against her knees...and sighed...so that’s how it was supposed to end? With her watching the people she loved suffering without being able to do a thing about it?

“Slayer...”

It was Spike’s voice. It was faint, barely more than a whisper, but at least he was awake now. She tilted her head up only to meet his eyes.

“How are you feeling?” She asked.

The vampire chuckled at her words, she rolled her eyes and said, “I take this as a: ‘I’m feeling better thanks for asking’”

Spike nodded and slowly got up, Buffy watched as he looked around and couldn’t help following his gaze: there was nothing in the room, nothing they could use to get out of here.

“Didn’t look that big when we got here...” Spike mumbled. “Of course...there wasn’t all this light, either...”

“How long have you been here?” She asked.

“Don’t know...feels like forever...” He said. He took a step forward, still warily looking around then stretched a hand touching the invisible barrier with his open palm.

“You can’t get out...” Buffy said.

“That’s not what I want to do...” Spike said. He turned, looking at the other occupants of the room, they were all still unconscious then he looked at her.

“They’ve been like this for hours...” Buffy said, answering to his silent question. “What’s going on, Spike?”

Spike shook his head, “I’m not sure, ducks...”

Buffy blinked. Why did she feel that Spike was lying to her? Granted, he had lied to her for years... he had lied to all of them, but she had learned to read him pretty well for the past months...and she was sure he was now hiding something from her...and there was something else, whatever it was... was pissing him off. Big time.

Spike knelt next to Xander, he looked at him for a second before saying, “He’s alive...his heartbeat is steady...I don’t think they have him...”

“Uh?” Buffy said. “They?”

Spike ignored her and got up, he checked on Faith, who was unconscious, and Buffy noticed the smile that crept on his lips when he said, “I think she’s just sleeping...”

“Faith screwing up the Council...what a news...” Buffy mumbled, yet she couldn’t help being grateful. Whatever was happening to her she was glad it wasn’t touching Faith. She frowned realizing that she hadn’t been surprised when she had seen the brunette Slayer.

Somehow it had made perfect sense.

<Being pregnant is really making you sappy, Buff...>

She thought. She then looked at Spike and asked, “Can you feel the baby’s heartbeat? Is everything alright?”

Spike stopped, he looked up at her and said, “I can...your baby is fine, ducks...” Only then did Spike really look at her and asked, “Did they hurt you?”

She slowly got up and took a tentative step toward the barrier saying, “Except for the part where I’m being all damsel in distress and stuff? I’m fine...”

Spike just nodded at her as he knelt in front of Giles who was lying on his back, on the floor. Buffy noticed how he checked for his pulse and then for his eyes, she noticed how he took a few more seconds observing him, she clutched a hand against her chest and with a small voice, a voice she barely recognized as her own asked, “Is he...”

“He’s alive...” Spike said interrupting her, while still checking on him

Buffy let out a shaky breath that she hadn't even realized she was holding: Giles was alive.

"How is he?" She eventually asked.

Spike didn't answer her at first, and Buffy took another step not caring, for a second, about the invisible barrier, but froze in her spot, when Spike almost shouted: "Stay away!"

The vampire had tilted his head down hiding his face from her and she could see his hands lightly twitching, as he fought to control their trembling.

"What's going on?" She asked.

When he didn't answer, she couldn't help looking at Giles' face: under that white, bright light his face looked pale...too pale, and she couldn't help blinking in surprise when she noticed new lines marring his handsome face.

"Just...stay away," Spike said in a shaky voice.

"Is it me?" She asked in a low voice. She looked at her friends, taking in their pale faces...and couldn't help taking a step back when she noticed the white in Xander's hair.

"Oh, my God..." She whispered. "What am I doing to you?"

Spike slowly got up, his head still tilted down; just looking at him she could tell he was in pain.

"Spike?" She asked.

"I'm not sure, ducks..." Spike eventually said.

<Am I gonna hurt you and our baby?>

Buffy closed her eyes. Giles had dropped on his knees shortly after she had shouted his name and had tried to rush at him.

They had all stopped talking when she had been thrown back by the invisible barrier, they had fallen...dropping on the floor like rag dolls, one after the other every time she had gotten close to them....

How could she had been so stupid?

She turned her back at Spike and looked around for the door...she hadn't even bothered looking at it since she had entered the room...she hadn't even taken a step when Spike's voice stopped her.

"Don't move" The vampire said.

She turned, angrily shouting, "What am I supposed to do? Tell me something useful, dammit!"

Xander cried in pain interrupting her tirade.

Spike took a look at him, then at her and said, "Shutting your mouth would be a good start..."

Buffy nodded. She ran a hand through her hair and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. "Alright..." she eventually said, "how is he?"

"Still fighting..." was Spike's only reply.

"Fighting what? Whom?"

"The council, luv...who else? They're using you, your powers to..."

"Hurt them?" Buffy chimed in.

"Judging by what I saw? They're using your powers to hurt you...through us. They're trying to brainwash us"

"Huh?" Buffy shook her head, "I don't get it...why didn't they just kill me? Why all of this..." she gestured around at the white, circular room they were in. "What's with the brainwashing?"

Spike wasn't listening to her, though. He had started pacing the room, his hands on his hips, his head tilted down, a deep frown marring his brow...and Buffy for a moment thought that if he had been wearing glasses he would have probably started polishing them. She almost smiled at the thought, but then, a look at Giles made her smile implode, twisting her soul in a painful vice.

He was paler now, so pale that she could clearly see the veins of his face, and she could almost feel the pain he was feeling, it was clearly written all over his face.

"I'm hurting him...I swore I'd ever do that again..." She whispered.

Spike loudly snorted at her words.

"What?" She said in a low voice, slowly sinking on the floor.

"The *Council* is doing this, ducks...get over yourself" The vampire said.

She closed her eyes asking, "Then why you couldn't look at me before? What did you see when you were unconscious?"

"Nothing to write home about, ducks..." Spike said, and once again Buffy was sure he was lying to her.

"Have you any idea about how to get outta here?" She opened her eyes and looked around saying, "Why Eric isn't here? Maybe a bit of mojo would..."

"Do nothing useful...not here, not now."

Buffy looked at him, afraid he would tilt his head down, refusing to meet her eyes; it didn't happen, though. Spike was a bit paler than usual, but aside for that, he was just his usual self. His eyes were darker, though...with concern, and Buffy couldn't help the little shiver that ran up her spine.

"Besides, you wouldn't want the wanker here...not when they're trying to brainwash us into killing you..."

“So let me see if I get this straight: my boyfriend could kill me when he wakes up? My friends would lend him a hand?”

“Exactly”

“Nice...” She said. She tilted her head on a side and slowly got up, she looked at Spike for a second before asking, “how do I know you’re not going Terminator on me?”

Spike shrugged, “I hoped you’d ask this...you don’t. I willed myself out of there.”

“Eletti and all, uh?” She said. When he nodded she snapped, “Fine...now what?”

Spike grinned at her “Now that you’re starting to resemble your old bitchy self we can start working. We have a few aces on our sleeves.”

He looked at Faith who looked sound asleep then at her and said, “Listen to me, Slayer...”

Buffy did.

~~*~*~*~*~*

*I*t was raining.

The rain had started when the two girls had arrived on the beach and had stopped in front of the Lighthouse.

If one could still call it a Lighthouse...

Xavier had noticed how it had grown bigger for the past hours.

“What the...” The former demon, Anya, had said when she had first looked at it.

“My thoughts exactly” Willow had said.

Xavier lightly moved from his hiding spot to better look at the redhead. He had seen her of course, since he had arrived to Sunnydale, but that was the first time he really had the chance to observe her, to take in her features.

For her, Spike, the Eletti, had gone against the rules, blowing his cover.

For her, he had risked his very existence.

Only for her.

Xavier closed his eyes, while he heard a thunder; it was tearing up the silence of that dying night.

<For naught. It’s been all for naught...>

He blinked his eyes open, that lone thought, though, kept dancing in the back of his mind and he did nothing to shake it away.

A sound did. He moved forward, to make sure he had actually heard it. It was a heartbeat, a third, tiny heartbeat...and it was coming from Willow’s body!

<What the...>

He thought.

The red-head was pregnant...it took him a moment to fully get the implications of what he had just discovered...and another to notice, for the first time, the ring Willow was wearing on her left ring finger.

He had had a similar ring during his training ...a simple golden band with a sapphire on it. He recalled giving it back to his Gheraious after hearing the news he had been activated...that was just one of the stupid rules the Eletti so blindly liked to follow...when it suited them.

He shook his head and quickly returned to his hiding spot, forcing himself to file away that thought and its implications for another moment, especially when he smelled the change in the air...it filled with magic and a moment later the Gheraious appeared on the beach.

The older vampire looked around, before greeting Willow and Anya. He hadn't looked surprised to find the two young women on the beach; he had just cocked an eyebrow at them. He took a look at the Lighthouse and said, "The procedure is about to start..."

"How can you tell?" Willow asked and Xavier couldn't help noticing the distrust in the woman's voice.

If Eric noticed it, thought, he didn't show when he said, "They have been using the Slayer's powers to build room for the first part of the procedure...literally"

"Uh?" It was Anya who spoke "what do you mean?"

"They need her powers to make this work..." Eric suddenly stopped talking and turned, he looked around and Xavier was almost sure he had been seen.

Not that it mattered any more. He had all the elements he needed, now. His assignment was to spy on the Gheraious and the Eletti, to gather information and take any measures he might find necessary.

Eric, in the meantime, had mumbled some words, and then Willow, Anya and he had disappeared.

It didn't matter. He wanted the Gheraious and the Eletti to help the Slayer. Only then, when what was taking place in the Lighthouse would end, was he going to set things in motion.

His first priority, was the Slayers' safety...

As it had always been.

~~*~*~*~*~*

"What's with all the secrecy?" Willow asked looking around.

Eric didn't answer her at first; he kept looking around, through the deserted beach. He couldn't see anyone...yet, he couldn't shake away the feeling he was being spied on. William's words, shortly

before he left were echoing in his mind. Something was going to happen, possibly very soon. His contact at the Eletti had hinted at something...yet, oddly enough, he didn't care...not in that moment.

Later he would face what was ahead of him, for now he had to help the Slayer...and William. He owed his Eletti that much. He inwardly sighed and was about to speak when Anya said: "I kinda like it...it's still raining, you know?"

"So," Willow asked "are you planning to tell us what's happening any time soon?" Her voice was sharp, bitter.

Eric looked at her: she looked very tired, she was very pale, paler than how she had been in the Watcher's apartment and her eyes were too bright, too green.

"You shouldn't be here..." He eventually said. He couldn't show concern for Willow, not there in front of Anya. Not ever. The time for indulging in any feeling he felt for the redhead was over.

"I know..." She said in a low voice, breaking his train of thought. "I didn't want to do anything...I just needed to be here..."

"I told her it was a stupid idea..." Anya chimed in.

"It doesn't matter" Eric said tersely. Yet for a moment he had barely resisted the urge to smile at Willow, especially when she looked at him, with a half-smile creeping on her lips.

"What did you find?" She asked.

She wasn't looking at him any more, she had turned toward the lighthouse, her eyes fixed on the only lit window from which it came a strong, white light.

"It's a ritual...conceived as a punishment, actually. What Anya said, got me thinking...the common procedure with a pregnant Slayer is usually much more simpler than that..."

"Simple?" Willow said, turning to look at him for a second, "that's not how I'd call it..."

"I don't mean to discuss semantics with you, Willow. The fact is that a Slayer who reaches Obscuritas is known for a fact to be far worse than any demon she might have fought. In this Slayer's case, can you imagine facing another Master...Angelus, the first Evil, your former Mayor and Adam all rolled into one?"

Eric saw Willow lightly paling at his words and her green eyes welling up with tears, and had to block out that sight. He forced himself to.

"I know..." She eventually said in a nasal voice, "I get it. Spike still dreams about it..." she continued. "This doesn't mean I have to like it..."

She crossed her arms over her chest and said, "So, the common procedure is to take them down like rabid dogs...why all of this, then? What's different, then?"

"The Slayer...and the Council" Eric said. He took in their puzzled faces and looking at Anya asked, "What do you know about the other Slayer? The one you told me about?"

Anya blinked a few times before saying, “Not much...she was quite old, for a Slayer, nineteen I think...”

“That’s one thing, the other?” He asked.

“I don’t know...” Anya said.

“She had called it quits with the Council...” Eric said. “it hadn’t lasted long, her watcher had convinced her to come back...but she had quit, after the Cruciamentum.”

“So when she got pregnant they did what?” Willow asked.

“They chose to punish her...and her watcher...they closed them in a tower...and let her powers work **their** magic” Eric looked at the Lighthouse, it was growing bigger under their own eyes.

“And they’re doing the same to Buffy and Giles?” Willow asked.

“Yes, that’s what I think is going on...” He paused. “The people who entered the lighthouse will be tested...broken, and the Slayer’s lover will kill her.”

Willow shook her head, “Like hell! Giles would never kill her...”

Eric shrugged, “That’s what I’m hoping...” He stifled his hands in the pockets of his coat and said, “Right now we have two advantages...the bond between the Slayer and the Watcher...and William. He’s been trained to face that kind of situation...”

“You mean the Obscuritas?” Willow asked.

“No” He replied. “The brainwashing. What worries me is that he has now something that can be used against him...”

“That would be me, right?” Willow asked.

“The baby...” He whispered hating himself for the hurt he was causing her.

Willow shook her head and turned giving her back to him, Anya looked at her mumbling, “Way to go with the subtleness, Eric”

Willow turned toward him, her brows knitted, she took a step toward him asking, “What about the Council?”

Eric didn’t talk for a second, pondering what to tell her. He had been taught loyalty to the Council; after all he was still part of it. Yet what he had learned, what his contact had told him about the current situation could be pivotal.

He had been a watcher, once... he had believed in the cause, he still did after four centuries. The Watchers swore to protect the world...but their first goal, their first reason of existence was to guide, assist the Slayer.

“Not everyone on the Council wanted to kill the Slayer. A lot has been discovered since the last time we faced the same situation...the only reason why they have come here now and not last month

when they found out about the Slayer's pregnancy...was that the Council has been this close to a civil war."

"What happened?" Willow asked.

He was about to speak, when the lighthouse lit up with a bright, white light. It only lasted for a second, then it became dark again.

"What the hell was that?" Willow asked.

Surprisingly it was Anya who talked. She tilted her head up and looked at the lighthouse, the light had disappeared, it now looked darker, it was almost black, with the exception of that lone, single window, from which came light. White, blinding. "They don't need the room anymore..." She said.

Eric nodded at the former demon's words, and slowly said, "They have just found out who the father is..."

Willow closed her eyes for a second. He could hear her heart beating, it was pounding against her chest, yet, her voice was calm when she said, "Tell me about the Council, Eric...tell me how to bring it to its knees!"

~~*~*~*~*~*

"So, the father is the watcher?" Daniel asked.

He shook his head. He had been warned about the strength of the bond between the Slayer and her Watcher...only...he had expected another kind of relationship...

"Father's love for his child..." He mumbled, before sighing.

"Is that a problem, sir?" Maximillan, asked.

"No," He replied, "this is actually one of the good news we've had since we lost the boy...I was sure he was the father...he had been so hard to break..."

He knew Charles was looking at him, he could feel the younger's man eyes on him.

"Do you want to know why is it a good news Mr. Dutton?" He asked turning to look at him.

Charles nodded: "I don't see how a watcher killing his Slayer can be seen as something good, to tell you the truth"

"Because" Daniel slowly said, "he is the only one who can actually kill her..."

"She is powerless-" Charles hissed. "don't you remember? We took away her powers! Any of us could kill her, now..."

"We didn't take away her powers, Mr. Dutton...what we took away was just her physical strength... we can't take away what makes her the Slayer...no one can, but-" He said " we can borrow it. That's what we are doing here."

Charles took a step toward him, disbelief and disgust clear on his strong features.

“The father of the child is the only one who can kill her...” Daniel said after a second.

“How?” Charles asked, “What makes you think her watcher will do that? He didn’t pass the Cruciamentum, he was fired because he cared too much about her...and she wasn’t carrying his child back then!”

“That was the purpose of the first part of the procedure. We tested them to make sure the father would comply” Daniel said.

The procedure hadn’t been used for centuries, but it had always succeeded...it broke the will of the people involved, until the right thing was done.

“I think you’re forgetting something, sir.” Charles said in a low voice, “we don’t know what’s really happening. We don’t know what they are seeing! You aren’t just about to kill the Slayer, you’re harming civilians! The situation is out of control!”

“It is...” Daniel said. “It’s been out of control ever since you allowed the other Slayer to pass through the shield. You wanted to give the Slayer a fair fight, Mr.Dutton? She has almost killed one of her friends with her powers...”

“Don’t you dare...” Charles hissed. “Don’t you dare trying to make me feel guilty for what’s happened. I didn’t choose this ritual!”

The younger man went to a corner of the room and then took a gun from one of the crates, but stopped when he asked, “What are you doing, Mr. Dutton?”

“What needs to be done,” Was the man’s only reply.

“That would be? If it’s the Slayer your concern, I can promise you, we are already taking care of the problem.”

“The problem has a name!” Charles said, “She entered that room knowing she was going to die but she did it anyway...she wanted to save the people, the man she loved, not to brainwash him into killing her! The procedure is merciless...” He showed them the gun and said, “At least I will make it quick for her”

“You know you can’t,” He just said. “You said it yourself, Mr. Dutton, no one can get in or out of that room, not until the procedure is complete! We will have to wait. Should the procedure fail, however, I will be glad to let you make it quick for her” He looked at the gun, the man had lightly shifted his aim, so that now it was pointed at him, “If I were you, now, I would put that gun down... and forget everything about this...”

Charles nodded, slowly, his eyes fixed on him and Daniel was sure, for a moment that he was going to do something foolish like firing the gun at him or on himself. It didn’t happen, though, the man handed him the gun and then went to sit in a corner of the room, on the floor, his eyes closed.

“What’s going to happen now?” He eventually asked, after a long silence.

“He should wake up any minute, now.” He said, sitting on one of the crates.

Daniel Laughton closed his eyes. He didn't like the procedure. He considered it merciless...and unusually cruel...but those had been the orders he had gotten...and he had no choice but to obey. He had been sent to Sunnydale for that precise reason: he obeyed orders...even the one he wished he hadn't got. Yet, the Slayer had to be stopped.

He thought for a moment about the very detailed orders he had received regarding the procedure. He wondered if Travers had known about the changes in the relationship between the Slayer and the watcher and if that had been the reason he had specifically chosen that old, forgotten procedure to deal with a pregnant slayer.

Or maybe not...maybe he had just wished for those Slayer and Watcher to die by each other's hand.

Whatever the original purpose had been, he was going to get what he wanted.

The Slayer and the Watcher were going to die.

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

Darkness.

Endless darkness.

Blood...

Faith could smell it, thick in that stale air.

She could hear a baby crying...and other faint cries of pain.

Darkness...all around her: the tunnels smelled of it, she was walking down a gallery...filled with darkness.

Yet it hadn't always been that way...

She had seen...

She had seen faces...the faces of the people who, once, had been her friends, distorted with pain, lit up with joy, lost in ecstasy.

She had seen...

Anya...her face a horrible mask of vengeance and despair, walking down the streets of an almost deserted Sunnydale, tears streaming down her face, a black tunic hanging from her shoulders.

Darkness...and a woman, crying.

She had seen things.

She had seen...

Spike...chained up to a wall. Only...only his eyes, were green now.

*Darkness...
All around her...laughter, cries...a sweet thick smell invading the darkness.*

Faith wondered if that was how sin really smelled like.

Seen...she had seen things.

Buffy, wearing a white dress, a wedding dress, a smile creeping on her lips.

Giles...and lust in his eyes as he kissed someone...a woman...not Buffy...his memories, his mind, lost.

And the others' lost too.

She kept walking, feeling nearer and nearer to those cries: a woman and a baby.

*Seen.
She had seen...*

*A tall, blonde man, crying as he talked to a girl, a dead girl...
The blonde man had hit Spike...his green-blue eyes filled with tears of grief and heartache*

The cries were close, now.

Faith stopped: Angel, she had seen Angel.

Angel...lost...his soul imploded, as he kissed Darla, while Spike and Drusilla looked at them, laughing.

Faith shook her head at those images.

A nightmare within a nightmare...

<The light within the darkness>

She heard a male voice saying those words, over and over. It was a voice she didn't recognize but, at the same time, it was oddly familiar...comforting. It was the voice of the guide, the Watcher, the protector, she thought as light came to her, hurting her eyes. It spoke to her soul, to her heart.

Light, all around her, burning light within her as she went on walking.

Willow...she could see Willow, or had she already seen her?

<Faith, you have to wake up! >

She had seen her, lying on a table, blood under her, stains of blood on her hands and fingers.

Willow...she could see her crying, holding out a hand...looking, striving for something...

Light...

*A baby...crying.
A baby...dying.*

Spike.

She could see him...laughing, while a monster, a woman, kissed him.

Light...

*Too much light, now.
Too much pain.*

It hurt.

<Faith open your eyes...I need your help>

Buffy...

She needed her...they needed each other.

Light...

She needed...

*Light...
Too much light...
Too much death... #*

Her face burned.

Faith had still her eyes closed as she held up her hand, blocking Spike's wrist, before he could hit her again.

How come things always ended up being so messed?

First there had been Wes, willing to torture the crap out of her...then he had disappeared, she had made him go.

Screwing with her mind? Not too bright an idea...

And then she had started walking...and seeing things. Or had she dreamed of walking as she saw those images? She wasn't sure...

She couldn't think about what she had seen...dreamed...experienced, that had to wait for another moment. The only thing that mattered now was helping Buffy, but first she had to open her eyes.

She forced her eyes open, the light in that room, was too bright, she had to squint her eyes shut.

"Don't you..." Buffy started in almost a panicked voice.

"Chill out, B." She said in a husky voice, "I'm awake...but *damn!* Those lights are way too bright..."

Yet she opened her eyes again, only to see Spike, kneeling in front of her, his palm pressed against his forehead.

“Quite a headache are you, pet...” The blonde vampire said, looking at her.

“So I’m told...” She dryly said. She followed Spike’s eyes only to find out that she was still grabbing the vampire’s wrist.

“Would you?” He asked.

She didn’t know what possessed her when she pushed him away, making him fall flat on the floor.

She got up and looking at Buffy asked, “So, anyone wanna tell me what’s going on here?”

Buffy sighed and Faith despite herself couldn’t help smiling a little seeing the Slayer: she looked trashed, dark circles under her eyes, her hair was a mess, a side of her face was dirty with what it looked like mud...yet...there was something in her eyes, in her whole body, which made her look radiant...whole.

“Hey B. nice to see you by the way!” She said, meaning it.

Buffy nodded then said, “We don’t have much time now, Faith. Rupert should wake up any minute now...we’re trying to break through the Council’s brainwashing, but I need your help.”

Faith actually frowned at her words. Buffy needed her help?

Things were wicked seriously fucked up if Buffy was actually asking for her help.

Brainwashing? Had she really talked about the Council brainwashing Giles? Why would they do that? It didn’t matter, she decided. If there was something she had learned the hard way about Buffy since they had met, was that no one, could mess with her boyfriends...**ever**.

If the boyfriend in question was Giles, who had been one of the most important people in Buffy’s life even before they got together...she could only imagine the magnitude of Buffy’s wrath.

Those guys were **so** toast!

“The whelp needs help, let’s skip the kumbaja for now...”

Faith turned too look at Spike, who was checking on Xander: the dark-haired boy was sitting on the floor, his lips pursed, his eyes open, unseeing.

“What do you want me to do?” She asked, slowly turning to look at the blonde Slayer.

Seeing Xander like that, was creeping her out, which added to the general uneasiness she had been experiencing next to Spike ever since she had materialized to the beach, was saying something.

“What do you want me to do?” She repeated looking at her.

She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling Spike’s eyes on her. She didn’t like him...didn’t...couldn’t let herself even near trusting him...not when the images from her dreams kept replying themselves on her mind.

Not when she felt like crawling out of her own skin for the weird vibes she was getting from the blonde vampire. Yet it looked like everyone had trusted Spike until that moment...including Buffy...and he seemed genuinely concerned about Xander.

“Get close to her...” Spike said.

“That’s it?” Faith asked, “piece of...” she stopped when she realized that she couldn’t move a muscle, “What-” She trailed. She looked down at her legs: nothing was blocking them, yet she felt them wrapped in lead. “B...can’t move...” she said, “what’s happening?”

“You can...” Was Spike’s reply. His voice was stern when he said, “You have to. Don’t forget who you are, Faith”

Faith shot him an angered look. Who died and made him the boss? What the hell was his problem?

Yet, she tried moving. It hurt...the muscles in her legs were burning with the effort she was putting them through.

“Get close, ducks...” Spike said, “It works both ways...”

Faith looked at Buffy...she lightly shook her head no, before saying, “You know what’s going to happen if I do...it will hurt you...”

“What’s she talking about?” She asked.

Buffy looked at her and Faith could see helplessness in her eyes. She didn’t think she would ever live enough to see such a look in Buffy’s eyes.

“To make a long story short-,” Buffy said in a dry voice, “big invisible shield thingy around you guys...I get close, you hurt...”

Faith cocked an eyebrow at her, “Sure about that? ‘Cause I didn’t feel a thing...”

It was Spike who spoke, saying, “That’s what we’re counting on, luv...”

“Spike...” Buffy started.

“Do it, ducks...before he wakes up...” The vampire said. No...he had basically ordered her to.

Faith didn’t know if her perplexity showed on her face, it had to, at least judging by Buffy’s words: “I will tell you, Faith, I promise...”

“Later” Faith said, managing a smile: “You said it, B! We don’t have much time...”

Buffy nodded and took a deep breath before taking a step and a moment later, she heard Giles’ moan, and Spike’s growl...and she didn’t need to turn and see them to know they were both in pain...

It was coming to her in waves, cold waves that made her shiver.

Her eyes were fixed on Buffy’s...the blonde Slayer wasn’t really looking at her. She was shutting everything out...blocking anyone, anything out, focusing only on the task ahead.

“Try again” Spike told her, breaking her train of thoughts.

Faith nodded. It was still difficult for her to move, but now it was different...she was being pushed back, it was like swimming against an invisible current.

Spike who had just gotten close to her dropped on his knees when Buffy took another step toward them, and Faith saw her blinking and closing her eyes when Giles moaned.

“Don’t...bloody...do that!” Spike hissed and Faith was surprised realizing they had been probably thinking the same thing. They had both thought Buffy would stop.

Although it was clear it was taking all of his strength not to cry out in pain, Faith heard Spike telling Buffy to keep walking, over and over.

She looked at him, and couldn’t help kneeling next to him, to try and help him standing...she might not like him

<Understatement>

She thought, but she couldn’t deny he was trying to help Buffy...
She couldn’t deny that he seemed to care about what was happening to them.

“Don’t-” Spike said in a shaky voice, “Move toward her...” he said.

Faith nodded at the vampire’s words, she slowly got up, and looked in front of her: she hadn’t realized Buffy had gotten so close.

She was so close they could have...hugged each other.
Or kicked each other’s assess.

“What, now?” She asked, instead.

Buffy shrugged and moved her hands toward her, her palms up. She followed Buffy’s gestures and couldn’t help whispering, “Son of a...” when she saw orange sparks, cracking in front of her.

“Ready?” Buffy asked.

Faith smirked, “As ready as I’ll ever be”

She imitated Buffy’s gestures.

“Oh, my God” Faith whispered and she could hear Buffy whispering the same thing. She sought Buffy’s hands and took them in hers, intertwining fingers.

The power...their power...it was there...it was them.
They were bathing in it.

Faith felt every particle of her being coming to life: every cell, every pore, every breath she was taking was filling her with energy...their energy...the power of the Slayer.

It was breathtaking...she could see them all, now...all her sisters of blood and soul...she could feel them living again, once more in her skin...in her heart.

It was so clear now...how her powers went beyond physical strength, how the physical strength was actually just a shred of what it really meant to be the Slayer, to be the Chosen One.

~~*~*~*~*~*

A Slayer was a warrior...a killer...a victim.

She was the Slayer, born out of darkness and light, daughter of Chaos and Control.

She, Buffy Anne Summers, was the Slayer, the Chosen One. She had been chosen, gifted with powers that were now filling her whole.

For a moment, Buffy saw them all: she saw the Slayer who had been chosen before her, she had fought hard, until she had called her, with her dying breath. She heard them; thousands of lives were passing through her eyes.

Life...and death, they were made out of it.

The Obscuritas...the darkness was part of her...it had always been, it would always be...it was rooted in her; it was the mother of her own powers.

Yet, love, was the father.

And that's was what she was looking for. She was looking for the father.

The other part of her.

The part that made her sane.

The part that made a Slayer, a force to be reckoned with for demons.

She looked for the father as she felt Faith's life flowing into her, their heartbeats similar, so similar to each other's.

She could see the colors of Faith's souls, blossoming under her eyes...it was beautiful and pure...so pure.

The father...she was looking for the father, in a white, bright river of strength and memories...love and pain.

The father...her love, her life.

She couldn't see him...but she knew he was close, she could feel him. Never had Buffy felt so close to someone as to Giles' in that moment.

She touched him; touched his soul...and her body cried out in pain as she felt the pain his soul had been enduring for her.

She loved him: body and soul, darkness and light...

"Rupert," Her soul whispered, "come back to me..."

She knew her body was feeling pain, and that she had to get away from there, from her own strength and powers before being burned to the core by them...before she killed Faith and everyone else in the room.

Yet, she touched him again, whispering, "I love you..."

Only when did she open her eyes, feeling breathless, did she realize something.

She had touched Giles' soul...but his hadn't touched hers back.
Giles...her Giles hadn't answered her.

~~*~*~*~*~*

She could barely stand on her legs. Buffy helped Faith by circling her waist. The brunette Slayer staggered for a second, then she took a step back, breaking their contact.

"What a trip...now what?" The brunette Slayer asked.

Buffy ignored her question, Spike had told her to use her own powers against the shield...and try to reach Giles'...she had improvised, and judging by the fact that she was touching Faith it looked like she had succeeded.

At least she hoped she had.

"Spike?" She asked. The blonde vampire was lying on the floor, "can you hear me?"

"Loud and ...too bloody clear..." He mumbled. He slowly got up, he was in his game face, but she instinctively knew it had been a natural reaction to what had happened. The vampire shook his head and a moment later he returned to his human mask.

"Do you think the shield is still up?" Buffy asked.

"Only one way to find out..." Faith mumbled.

Spike shrugged at Faith's words, "You heard the lady, ducks..."

Buffy took a step forward, part of her afraid that, despite everything they had just done, she was still going to be thrown back by the barrier and that her friends, once again, were going to be hurt by her powers. She smiled when she passed through the shield, and saw that both Faith and Spike were doing the same.

She scanned the room with her eyes: Xander was still sitting on the floor, his eyes still open, yet she knew he wasn't really there, he was lost somewhere inside of himself...

Giles was still lying on the floor, she could see his face more clearly now: he was still very pale, but looked calmer, now...almost peaceful.

She was afraid...of what was going to happen, she was afraid she had failed Giles, once again. She was afraid of what Spike had told her...and was terrified about the things he hadn't told her.

Faith got close to her asking, "How do you feel?"

Buffy looked at the brunette slayer. She had indeed, changed, she had had a glimpse of her soul... but she shouldn't have needed seeing it...the changes she had gone through were on her face, in the way she moved...in the way she talked. She was a different woman, different from the girl she had faced on the roof of Angel's building what it seemed a life ago.

"A little better, I guess..." She mumbled, managing a little smile.

"Cool" Faith said, she pointed with a finger to Giles, and said, "'Cause I think he's waking up..."

Buffy looked at the man in front of her; he had moved, he had still his eyes closed, but he was awake, she could tell it by the way the lines on his face had hardened...and besides she had spent enough nights watching him sleeping for the past months that she would have immediately recognized the difference.

"Cover my back..." She whispered.

"What..." Faith said.

"Do what she is telling, luv..." Spike said.

Giles' chuckles interrupted Spike, and Buffy couldn't help swallowing past the sudden and painful lump in her throat.

She watched him open his eyes and then turn his head to look at her.

<Those aren't his eyes>

She thought.

She didn't step back, though. She kept looking at him as he slowly got on his feet and took a step toward her. She was right...never she had seen such a look into Giles' eyes: it was dark, it was the look of a dangerous predator.

Buffy realized she was afraid. For the first time since she had met him, that afternoon in the high-school library, she was afraid of him...of what he was about to do, of what he represented.

"Rupert?" She called.

A smile crept on her watcher's lips. He tilted his head on a side and softly said, "Yes, Buffy?"

Buffy couldn't keep her eyes off of him. She wasn't even aware of the other people in the room, any more. There was only Giles; whose eyes were boring into hers, whose smile almost looked like a mockery of the gentle one she knew.

<Have I ever told him how much I love his smile? >

She silently wondered for a second.

<Will I ever have the chance to? >

She shook her head, trying to ignore how much Giles' smile, in that moment reminded her of Angelus' cruel smirk, the morning he had shattered her heart.

"Are you...alright?" She eventually asked. It had taken a moment for her to trust her voice, again.

Again, Giles chuckled and Buffy hated that sound. She hated what it was doing to the already frantic beating of her heart.

"Actually-" He said, "I'm surprisingly good. I'm free..."

Buffy frowned at the man's words. Despite what her instinct was telling her to do, she took a step forward, toward him.

"Free?" She asked.

"Yes, Buffy..." He said, replicating her gestures. He shortened the distance between them. He looked at her before adding, "For the first time, in such a long time I am free..."

"B. don't get too close to him!" Buffy heard Faith saying, somewhere behind her. It was all becoming a blur for her.

Was it Giles who was talking to her? Was it his voice?

It couldn't be...Giles would never look at her like he was doing. He would never use that tone of voice: so cold, so...impersonal.

"Buffy!" She dimly heard Spike shouting.

It was too late, though. Giles' closed fist violently connected with her chin, making her staggering back, while white stars of pain, exploded behind her eyes.

"Free" He repeated.

Buffy looked at him, her heart was beating so fast in her chest that it was hurting her to breathe.

It hurt...

She didn't remember ever feeling that kind of pain, she felt blood on her mouth, where Giles' ring had pierced the tender skin of her lower lip.

She had always known Giles was strong: he was her watcher, he had trained her, he knew her weaknesses.

Giles knew how to hit her.

He knew how to hurt her.

"You should have listened to them, Buffy" Giles said, "But listening to other people has never been one of your strengths, doesn't it?"

She didn't even recognize his voice, now. Yet, she said in a low voice, "Rupert...don't do that."

“Don’t do what?” He asked. He closed the distance between them, and hit her, again. “Hitting you?” He continued, “Why shouldn’t I? After all, from what I’ve been able to gather from your disastrous record in relationships, this is some kind of tradition for you.” He smiled at her when he said, “Should I remind you about Angelus, dear?” He hit her, again as he softly said, “As I previously said, I’m free. Pay attention!”

Buffy felt numb. She didn’t even feel the pain. This couldn’t be happening to them...she shook her head. She had been so sure that she had touched his soul.

“Rupert” She whispered, “It’s not you...you’re stronger than this...”

He attempted to hit her, again, this time, though she was able to dodge his punch. She took a step back repeating, “It’s. Not. You”

“On the contrary” Giles replied, his smile pouring ice into her veins as he said, “It’s me, Buffy. It’s Rupert. I want you to keep this in mind!”

Buffy closed her eyes.

She had failed. She hadn’t been able to save Giles.

The only thing she could do, was trying to protect herself and her baby.

From him.

From Giles.

~~*~*~*~*~*

“*He* has started” Was the only thing Maximillian said.

“Very good.” Daniel replied. He took a seat on one of the chairs before asking, “How about the others?”

“Except for the boy they are all awake,” Maximillian replied.

Daniel took a look at Charles, who was still sitting in a corner of the room. He wasn’t looking at them; he was apparently lost in thought.

“How are the shields holding up?” He asked, turning his attention to the blond, exhausted man, still sitting within the pentacle.

“No changes, Sir,” He said, “Should I exit the pentacle, now and prepare for the next phase?”

Daniel took a look at the crystals on the floor, they were still glowing, one of them almost blinding in its intensity.

“We will have time for the second phase, I want you to stay there” Daniel said.

Maximillian nodded at his words, and closed his eyes, as he kept waving his hands over the crystals.

“You know?” Charles suddenly said, “The Slayer asked me what it felt like to be a monster...she knew about the Obscuritas...and was afraid of it...”

He got up and took a look around, “She told me she knew what it was like...because she had looked at one straight in the eyes...” He swallowed and looking at him said, “I can’t help concurring with her.”

“We are doing the right thing Mr. Dutton...”

“Are we?” He asked. “You are forcing a man to kill the woman he loves...his own child...and that would be the right thing?”

“When we come back, you will have plenty of time to discuss the procedure with our peers. You will need to...”

Charles shook his head and went to one of the windows. It had been covered, yet they could clearly hear the furious tickling of the rain. It hadn’t stopped raining for over a hour.

“How long?” Charles asked.

Daniel took a look at Maximillian, who let out a sigh before saying, “Not much...the energies are changing...”

They were close to the end. He had been waiting for that moment for hours, yet, he was almost afraid now.

Afraid of what they would see once they entered the room.
Afraid of Charles’ words.

He was afraid the Council had indeed become worse than the demons they had been fighting for millennia.

-11-

The lighthouse had stopped growing. Anya had been right; they didn’t need room any more. Willow was looking at the old building. She had been getting strange vibes for minutes now.

Dark, powerful magic. It was calling her, whispering in her blood words, making sounds she didn’t fully understand.

She was scared...she was tired...she was angry.

She ran a shaky hand through her damp hair and asked Eric, “What happened when you tried to get close to the lighthouse?”

Eric had warned her not to get too close. He had said it could be dangerous. Yet, the vibes she was getting, the energies she was feeling didn’t tell her the same thing.

“It felt like electrocution.” The vampire replied. She turned, he was looking at the lighthouse, even if he had felt the strange, dark energies surrounding the building she couldn’t tell...he looked calm, controlled, an unreadable expression in his eyes.

They were still inside the green light; she knew they were virtually invisible to anyone on that beach. The redhead chose not to think about what had happened last time she had been inside that kind of spell.

She had to.

“Do you think they are still alive?” She eventually asked.

“They wouldn’t need to protect the lighthouse if they weren’t” Eric said matter-of-factly.

“I’m tired of staying here...without trying anything...” Willow said.

“You promised you wouldn’t try anything stupid...and this is one of those things...” Anya said.

She got close to them, observing the lighthouse and whispered, “I’m worried about Xander...”

Willow sighed, as she took Anya’s hand for a moment in hers and gave it a little squeeze. She looked at Eric who had taken a step forward, exiting the green light. He hadn’t uttered a sound, hadn’t told anything. She was surprised that the spell was still going on, even without the vampire who, in the meantime, was stretching a hand toward the lighthouse.

She saw orange sparks, creeping out from the walls as he approached the building. He was thrown back. It took him a moment to get up and when he did he was paler. He entered what she was now calling “the dome of bloody light tricks” and said, “Just what I thought...”

“Care to share?” She asked. Her voice had come out sharper than she had meant. She took a deep breath and added a please.

Eric cocked an eyebrow at her, before saying, “The spell has lasted...even without me”

Willow sighed, “Yes, I noticed...”

“It’s your baby, Willow...” Eric said.

“Uh?” Willow asked blankly. “What about my baby?”

It was the first time she said it aloud: her baby. She was pregnant...she really was. She now understood Buffy...how fiercely protective she was of it...how proud she had been of it.

“That’s why we couldn’t hear its heartbeat...it’s the magic...” Eric said.

Willow’s hand went to her still flat belly. “I don’t understand...” She said. “Are you saying my baby is infected with magic?”

Eric shook his head. “Think of it as a sponge...it has absorbed the magic...”

“What? Is it even possible?” Anya asked.

Eric shrugged his shoulders, "It shouldn't be...but..."

Willow shook her head, "Wait a second...so my baby kept your shield thingy up...do you think it could help me to pass through theirs?"

"Willow..." Eric said in a low voice. "We don't know which kind of spells have they used ...you saw what happened to me"

Willow nodded, "There is only a way to find out, don't you think?"

"Don't think about it..." Eric said.

Willow didn't listen to him, though; she exited the green dome, shivering for the sudden cold, and the rain, which poured down on her.

The Lighthouse was huge, she could feel the powers coming out from it even more clearly now. She realized her hand was still over her belly. Was she making a mistake? Was she risking her baby's life and Spike's?

She was afraid, yet, nothing showed on her pale face, as she kept getting closer and closer. The noises around her seemed to be imploding, as much as her surroundings. She could only see the walls of the lighthouse, wet and translucent with rain and magic.

It was a dark power, darker than anything she had ever felt...but the more she got close to it, the more she felt it to be somewhat familiar.

"Let me pass..." She whispered, over and over as she kept getting closer.

She could feel her fingertips itching and a burning feeling growing inside of her. She closed her eyes and couldn't help yelping in surprise and horror when an image flashed in her mind's eyes.

Giles. His eyes dark with resentment watching Buffy who was kneeling on a white floor, her face bloodied and bruised.

They were holding him. Spike...and someone else. She couldn't see whom. Yet, their grip was lessening...and it could nothing against the bitterness of his voice, as he spat out words of hatred to Buffy.

It hurt.

He was hurting her.

She squinted her eyes shut, trying to shake away those images. The burning feeling was getting stronger, now. It was getting almost unbearable. She stretched her hands, toward the lighthouse, screaming, "Let me pass...and do it now!!"

She collapsed on her knees, her eyes still closed, panting.

She could feel tears streaming down her cheeks, through her closed lids and the acid taste of bile in the back of her throat.

She took a deep breath, and forced her eyes open, afraid that she would see again Giles' face, his cold eyes as he hit Buffy.

What she saw, however, made her sprung on her feet. She had passed through the invisible shield, without even noticing it. She hadn't even realized she had been getting past it. It had had to happen when she had closed her eyes.

She looked around. She couldn't see anyone on the beach; she was seeing anything through an orange blur.

The door was in front of her. Now that she was close, she could feel more clearly the powers...

It was then she realized it was Buffy. It had been her all along. Eric and Anya had been right. They were using her own powers to shield the lighthouse.

They were using her own powers to kill her.

She grabbed the doorknob, and pushed. The door opened without resistance.

It was time to get her family home.

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

*W*illow was starting to be afraid. It was almost as if Eric's words had opened up something inside of her. Something that needed to be freed.

She hadn't had any troubles passing through the invisible barrier surrounding the Lighthouse. She had felt her hands itching with powers that had been unknown to her until then.

She had seen things before entering the Lighthouse, she had no idea where those images had come from, but there had been no doubts in her heart, that what she had seen was real.

Images...of Giles and Buffy.

Images that had scared her into passing through the invisible barrier.

Her body was still shaking with the aftereffects of what had happened. Her body was still shaking with magic.

She was scared of what she was feeling. It was far beyond anything she had ever experienced, and what scared her the most was that she didn't know.

She didn't know whether it was her...her powers, or her baby's.

She couldn't afford the luxury of being afraid, though, she decided. Not in that moment. Not when she was inside the Lighthouse.

The first thing she had noticed upon entering the lighthouse was the cold. It was freezing, now she took a look around, noticing how everything had been painted in a bright, unnatural white: from the floor to the steps of the huge spiral staircase which was at the center of the room. She noticed the weapons her friends had brought with them when they had left Giles' apartment. They were on the floor...almost like toys forgotten by careless children.

Only...they hadn't forgotten the weapons. Willow instinctively knew they had lost them upon entering the room.

The room itself was big and circular, there wasn't any furniture in it, the windows had been covered with black, thick panels. She couldn't hear any noises, yet, she knew she wasn't alone. The people from the Council had to be there, and somewhere in what it looked more and more like a fairytale-like tower than an old decrepit lighthouse, there had to be her friends, her family.

She blinked, all that white was giving her the mother of all headaches, the air was strong with the powers she could feel flowing in the room. Was it Buffy's powers? Was it something else? She wasn't sure...there was too much energy, too many trails to be sure about pretty much anything.

All she was sure of, however, was that neither Buffy nor the Council's people were in the room she was in, so she went to the stairs, trying to follow the energy's trails. She had to rely on her senses, since the unnatural light in the room was altering her perceptions. She wondered what the others had felt when they had first seen it but halted when she touched the stairs' handrail.

Images filled her mind's eyes. They were clear, even more so than the ones she had seen outside the Lighthouse.

Once again she felt her fingertips itching with power and she was surprised by the abruptness of the feeling...she tilted her hands up, surprised when she didn't see sparks of energy coming out from her fingertips.

Images were filling her mind. She could see Buffy and Giles: they were in a room similar to the one she was in, only much bigger...and brighter. She had to close her eyes to stop her head from spinning.

The images were even clearer now. Her senses, her whole being was focused on what her mind's eyes were seeing.

She could see Giles looking at Buffy and the look in his green eyes was beyond cold; a cruel smirk was playing on his lips while he looked at the blonde Slayer.

Willow refused to believe in what she was seeing. She refused to believe in such coldness, such contempt in her friend's eyes; she knew how much Giles loved Buffy. How much he had always loved her.

She was dimly aware of her feet moving, climbing the stairs as she kept seeing the bright, snowy white of the room.

It was different somehow...and she had to stop again, when she saw the dark-red stain on the floor.

It was blood. Her mind's eyes wandered through the room and she couldn't help a yelp when she saw Spike. His hair and face bloodied, yet she could see underneath it how pale it really was.

She had always thought she knew what fear was. Hell, she had been scared when she had entered the lighthouse...yet, she knew that what was feeling now was real fear.

Fear...was what blocked her, on the spot.

Fear was what gripped her very core, her soul with fire and ice at the same time.

Her hands were hurting now because of the power ...the newfound power she felt rising inside of her. She ignored it...she ignored the need she was feeling of tearing that place apart, afraid that if she started...nothing, no one could have stopped her. Afraid she would end up hurting her friends... her baby.

Was that what Buffy had been feeling?

She took a deep breath, trying to calm down and she started moving again, while she kept seeing.

Someone...something was holding back Giles, but she couldn't see what...or whom. She couldn't see, didn't matter how much she was trying.

Was Buffy alright? She knew she was still alive, but was she all right? She could feel her powers, more strongly now...yet she couldn't help being worried about her best friend.

Almost as if her heart had conjured her best friend's image, she finally saw her, and she felt tears in the back of her throat: Buffy looked tired, huge bruises had formed on her chin and her jaw, her swollen lower lip was torn in one point and dirty with dried blood, a rivulet of it was staining her chin and her neck. It was the look in her eyes, though, that it was making it difficult for Willow to breathe: it was hollow, blank.

And there was something else...something she couldn't exactly put her finger on.

She had never seen such a look in Buffy's eyes.

She had been worried the previous morning when Buffy had showed some of the symptoms of the Obscuritas...but now...she was beyond worried.

She was terrified by the look in her friend's eyes.

She had to stop again, when she spotted Xander, he was lying in a sitting position under the only window in the room. He was sitting on the floor...and he wasn't moving. He looked like he was barely breathing

What the hell was happening to him?

As hard as she tried she couldn't feel her friend.

She could feel Buffy and Giles, even Spike on a lesser extent...but not Xander...she could just see him...in what it looked like catatonia.

Her mind's eyes returned to Buffy. She was looking at Giles while a heavy, painful silence seemed to be hovering over them.

"So, where were we before being interrupted?" Giles said pointing with his eyes at Spike's unmoving form. "What-" He continued, "Have you lost your voice, my dear? Was I not telling the truth? Feel free to tell me that I'm wrong. Feel free to tell me that you didn't deceive everyone you claim to love in order to protect Angel!"

Giles's voice was dripping with venom, with hatred...she didn't think she had ever heard him using that tone of voice...not even to Ethan Rayne. Yet, Buffy didn't answer him. She just kept looking at him.

“Poor, little Buffy!” Giles was going on, “Now that you had finally found someone who was willing and ready to spend the rest of his life putting up with your self-involvement...how sad, isn’t it?”

Giles chuckled and Willow couldn’t help swallowing at that sound.

That...man wasn’t Giles...it couldn’t be him.

“Shut the fuck up!”

It took all of Willow’s willpower not to jump in surprise when she heard Faith’s voice.

<What is this? >

She thought

<Some kind of a sick joke? >

Faith was there. She was in the same room with Buffy, Giles and Spike. And it dawned on her that it made sense, in a hellmouthy, sick, twisted way.

She sighed as she kept climbing the stairs and she couldn’t help feeling like she had been climbing thousands of steps. She didn’t dare open her eyes afraid of losing her balance; she felt that if she kept walking with her eyes closed, she would find the room where her friends had been taken. She knew that somehow she was safe.

“Nobody cares!” Faith was saying.

“Oh, Faith!” Giles replied. “I’m so very moved by your concern for my Slayer. But you see? Nothing, which comes out from your mouth, can be considered either sincere or interesting enough to be taken into consideration. So I’d suggest you not to bother! As you so succinctly put it: ‘nobody cares’!”

She could clearly see Faith now. She looked different than the last time she had seen her and Willow was finally able to identify part of the energies she had been feeling.

It was Faith...her powers, her Slayer’s essence. And she was surprised realizing that it wasn’t as dark as she might have expected.

Faith was strengthening her grip on Giles’ arms and shoulders, and Willow was surprised when she didn’t hear any bones cracking.

“Where you about to say something, my dear?” Giles said, and Willow could hear pain in his voice. Maybe Faith had indeed hurt him.

“Oh, yes...” Giles continued. “You weren’t talking. The last thing you told me was that I had to fight this. I had to be stronger than this. Am I correct, my dear?”

Willow half expected Buffy to say something, she saw her blinking at Giles’ words, but the blonde Slayer didn’t talk, she kept looking at Giles.

And Willow thought that her friend had to be numb with grief, she could tell it by her posture.

She had to do something. She had to arrive to that room before...

<Before what? >

She thought.

<Before he kills her? He would never do that! >

It was then she recalled what Anya had told her about that Slayer...being killed by her boyfriend. She recalled what Eric had told her about the Council, about the ritual.

She let out a little moan. She was hurting now. Her whole body was hurting, yet she kept climbing the stairs. She had to arrive to that room. She had to stop Giles...before he killed Buffy...and himself.

~~*~*~*~*~*

Something was going on. Faith was looking at Buffy, she hadn't made a sound ever since Giles and Spike had fought. It had happened when Giles had struggled and freed himself from their grip, which admittedly hadn't been very strong to being with. They had been still too stunned by his actions to fully realize what was happening.

Spike had punched Giles...and then had grabbed his head in pain, and Giles had taken that opportunity to knock him out, banging his head against the floor, over and over until the vampire had lost consciousness.

Alright...she had ever even suspected Giles to pack such a wallop. What was worrying her was that Spike was still unconscious...although, she couldn't be sure.

She couldn't be sure of pretty much anything as far as Spike was concerned. He had crept her out ever since the beginning both with the strange vibes she had been getting from him and with his whole attitude.

And that wasn't the only thing that was creeping her out. There was that whole thing with Giles pulling an Angelus with Buffy, telling her all kind of nasty things.

And then there was Buffy...who wasn't replying to a word Giles was saying.

That was crazy!

Giles was getting on her very last nerve...very fast.

"So" Giles said, "Aren't you going to tell me that I'm better than this? Aren't you going to tell me that we're stronger than this...that I have to fight it, them? Oh, Buffy" Giles shook his head. "Poor, little, self-absorbed, selfish thing..."

Faith could hear how fast the watcher's heart was beating, yet his face was the very picture of calm and coldness when tilting his head on a side he commented, "All you can do is staring at me wide

eyed, with a trembling lower lip. Did you look at Angelus that way? Was it because of your utter incapacity to do anything useful that he killed Jenny? Yes, I think it was that...”

Faith saw Buffy lightly flinching at those words, almost as if she had been slapped. She had no idea about who this Jenny person was, but it was clear it was a sore point for both of them.

“Too self absorbed, to grasp anything that goes on under your own nose, except for your life, your feelings, your priorities of course.”

“And your point would be?” Faith asked. “Cause, gotta tell ya...it’s getting old!”

Faith didn’t exactly know what was going on. It looked like Buffy and Giles had finally stuck their heads out of their ...respective fears and had smelled the coffee, which was of the good...but at the same time, the Council wasn’t exactly supportive of them...and was pissed off.

It looked like Giles had been brainwashed into...she didn’t know what, exactly, because, as per usual, no one had told her.

What she knew was that she had to do something.

“Stop it!” Buffy said.

Faith looked at her. Buffy’s voice was surprisingly loud and clear, especially given how long she hadn’t talked and how bright with unshed tears her eyes were.

“Stop what, my dear?” Giles asked. “All I’m doing is...”

“Not you...” Buffy said. “I’m talking to Faith...”

“What?” Faith asked, “Stop what? I didn’t do anything, B!”

“Let him go” Buffy said in a low voice.

“Huh?” Faith blurted out.

She was perplexed. When the blonde, angel like, chick had come to her cell, blabbing about freeing Buffy, she had expected something along the lines of fighting a huge demon or something like that.

She didn’t know what she had expected, but sure as hell, in her mind it had been all different than what she was experiencing now!

First there had been Spike acting like the boss from hell, then the whole dreaming Wesley torturing her and seeing things that had made so little sense that they **had** to be prophetic. Then there had been the whole living the Slayer’s lives in her skin, Buffy acting polite to her, Xander playing possum, Giles freaking out...and now Buffy was telling her to let Giles go?

Did she really have a death wish?

“B. look! I know you are...” Faith started.

Buffy interrupted her, though, saying, “Faith, just do it, please...let him go”

“Did you hear her?” Giles asked, tilting his head to look at her. “Maybe Buffy has come to her senses, at long least...”

“You” Faith said. “Have to shut up...before I rip your jaws out and play clapper with them!”

Giles chuckled at her words and Faith realized that she hated that sound. It was creeping her out, even more than the blonde vampire.

It wasn't right.

Last time she had seen Giles, he had been outside the tweed, but still insufferably stuffy...and head over heels for Buffy. She kinda missed that Giles, the one who had sworn to kill her if she hurt Buffy, before entering the lighthouse.

Looking at the blonde Slayer, though, she realized that something had changed. The look in her eyes, perhaps. Hell...the whole air around air seemed different, more electric. Maybe Giles had been right...maybe Buffy had really come to her senses.

Yet, she asked: “B. are you sure? Cause...from where I'm standing? Doesn't look like a good idea!”

Buffy just nodded at her words. She had crossed her arms over her chest and she almost looked like the Buffy she used to know.

She looked like she was ready for the kill.

Part of her didn't want to let Giles go. She was afraid of what would happen if she did.

She was lessening the grip on his shoulders, however and Giles took that opportunity to break free from her.

“So” Buffy said, “Are you finished talking? Before you go on: I'm a little, obnoxious, whiny, sniveling, self-involved, selfish bitch. Did I forget something?” she tilted her head on a side and said, “I. Got. It. Moving on already!”

Giles almost smiled at Buffy's words. He took a step forward; toward the blonde Slayer and Faith realized she was following him, ready to intervene.

“Something in you, Buffy...is dark” Giles said, “rotten.”

Buffy cocked an eyebrow at him and took a step forward, shortening the distance between them as she said, “Yeah, well...that's called bad attitude, being a bitch...and oh, wait! Being the Slayer. Because that's what I am, the Slayer. You know...darkness, killing things that go bump in the night, blood, gore...that kind of stuff? It's me...it's who I am.”

“The chosen one...” Giles said.

Faith couldn't help smiling when Buffy said, “One in each generation, except this one...’cause...behind you? There's the other one...so, pretty much the whole speech is screwed”

Buffy shrugged her shoulders as she said, “There's darkness inside of me? Well, duh! It's taken me a hell of a long time to accept that. You can't spend six years killing monsters without getting a bit

dark yourself” She closed the distance between them and added, “but there’s more than that... there’s more than darkness. I’m more than the uber bitch you’ve just described.”

Faith took a step forward; she was right behind Giles, now. She kept looking at Buffy. She didn’t think she had ever seen her so confident. She didn’t think she had ever seen such a look of resolve in her eyes, not even the night she had gutted her.

Not even when they had fought, before and after swapping bodies. The look in her eyes was different; it spoke volumes of the changes that had taken place into her life, ever since.

She was about to get closer, to do anything in her power to lend a hand, to make sure Giles wouldn’t hurt her, but halted, when she heard Spike’s voice. It was barely more than a whisper, so low that only her Slayer’s hearing could get it.

“Don’t...” The blonde vampire said. Faith looked behind her. Spike was still on the floor, his face bloodied because of a deep gash on his forehead. He was conscious, looking at the scene that was taking place in front of them. His battered face was the very picture of concentration.

She crossed her arms over her chest, and shook her head. What the hell was Spike’s problem, again? Why wasn’t he on his feet, trying to drag Giles away from Buffy before he tried to kill her? How long had he been conscious?

Why did he look like he knew what Buffy was doing?

<Am I the only one out of the loop here? >

She wondered. Spike looked back at her, and said in a low voice, “Not yet...turn around, pet...”

She frowned at his words, but did as she had been told, and couldn’t help blinking in surprise when she saw Buffy taking Giles’ left hand in hers and placed it on her belly.

The meaning of Buffy’s gesture wasn’t lost on Faith, yet, the brunette Slayer wasn’t surprised. She didn’t know why or how...but Buffy’s pregnancy made sense...a part of her had almost felt it.

She didn’t move but her eyes followed their gestures more closely.

She tried not to think about the Council. She tried not to think about what they had planned to punish Buffy...she tried not to think about what would happen to Giles once he snapped out of their brainwashing if he succeeded.

She focused on the two of them: Buffy long looked at Giles and there wasn’t fear in her eyes, there wasn’t darkness. The only thing Faith could read in Buffy’s eyes was love.

“There’s life too...and love, Rupert.” Buffy’s eyes were filling with tears now, the blonde Slayer swallowed before saying in a nasal voice, “The only thing you have to ask to yourself is if it’s worth it”

Time stood still around them for a second. The light in the room, that dazzling white which had made her eyes hurt from within, was now throbbing, she could see tiny orange sparks, creeping throughout the big room, and Faith had to force herself not to close her eyes. She had to see...there was almost something hypnotic in Buffy and Giles’ bodies, in their posture.

“Is it worth it?” Buffy repeated.

Faith could hear the rain furiously tickling against the black panel of the window and her heart, frantically beating in her chest.

<Is she worth it? >

Wesley’s voice, as she had heard it in her dream – or whatever what she had experienced was – came up in her mind.

It had been the only question she had been asked.

Now Buffy was asking something very similar. Did she know? Or was she using her instincts? She didn’t know.

Giles’ hand was still on Buffy’s belly and the blonde Slayer was looking at him and Faith doubted that she was aware of the other people in the room. Her whole world now was in Giles’ eyes. Her whole life was into his hands, yet she didn’t look scared. She was looking at him, waiting for his reaction.

She was trying to reach to him, to break the brainwashing. Her previous silence, which she had thought it to be a sign of defeat, of sorrow, had been her only weapon. She had needed it, Faith realized.

She heard Spike getting on his feet and taking a step forward, the vampire was behind her. She felt he was ready to intervene. He was ready to step up whether Buffy had failed.

She could smell something in the air, it was a bittersweet smell, like cotton sugar and coffee, it was getting stronger with any passing second.

Long seconds passed before either Buffy or Giles moved and then, suddenly, Giles tilted his free hand up, stretching it toward Buffy’s face. She felt Spike’s hand on her shoulder, before she even had the time to think about moving.

“I hurt you” Giles whispered.

Buffy’s eyes welled up with tears, she shook her head and in a voice that was barely more than a whisper said, “Me too...”

She saw Giles shaking his head at her words and felt Spike’s hand leaving her shoulder. She took a step forward, the smell was more intense now, and it was making her eyes sting.

“Ask your question again” Giles said, and Faith could hear how much he was fighting not to let the tears to be heard in his voice.

“Is it worth it?” Buffy complied. Tears were rolling down her cheeks now.

Giles’ initial reply was to envelope the Slayer in his arms. The orange sparks grew with intensity; they were almost like tiny flames now, as he said, “Yes...always!”

Faith took a shaky breath...followed by another. Since when had she been holding her breath?

And what the hell had just happened? She didn't understand...and it looked like she wasn't the only one, because she clearly heard Buffy's muffled voice asking, "Explanation? And...Rupert? Oxygen becoming an issue!"

She broke away from their embrace, her eyes red and puffy with tears, she took a moment to look at Giles, before stretching her hands to touch his face...almost as if she was trying to make sure it was really him.

"I will tell you everything, luv..."

"You'd better!" Faith exclaimed interrupting him.

Giles turned toward her, Faith could see how his face had changed, how the green of his eyes was now softer. The Watcher nodded at her, then returned his attention to Buffy, he grazed her cheeks with his fingers and then stepped back.

She saw him taking a look around, stopping to take a long look at Xander, who didn't show any sign of improvement...he was still silent, still lost.

The man sighed, before going to the center of the room. "Your procedure-" He said aloud, "has failed. Release us, at once!"

Faith looked at Giles...she had thought she had seen him angry; she had thought she had seen hatred in his eyes. Boy, had she been wrong!

His body was exuding a cold, deadly fury. She could see his face, it was a mask of cold resolve, cold loathing.

The white light was starting to fade, to lose intensity. Faith looked around as the process became quicker and quicker, and she let out a sigh of relief, smiling when Buffy did the same thing.

She crossed her arms over her chest, and took a step toward Buffy. Granted, Giles seemed to have come to his senses, but they were still stuck inside that room...with a vampire who couldn't do squat to protect her from humans...and with a watcher who had been acting like the poster boy for schizophrenia ever since he had opened his eyes.

And Buffy was pregnant.

<God...the hellmouth is the strangest place! >

"Well..." Spike said, "Didn't go that bad, did it?"

"You had to say that, didn't you?" Buffy wryly asked.

"You know me, pet..." Spike replied.

Yet, despite their light tone, she could hear tension in their voices, she could see it, in their bodies, as the room in the light almost disappeared.

They were waiting for the inevitable outcome. The people from the Council were coming to them...and a last look to all of them before all the lights went down told her the same thing.

It was payback time.

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

Giles was grateful for the sudden darkness that descended over the room. He closed his eyes, letting his mask fall, for a few seconds. He couldn't afford the luxury of thinking about his actions. He couldn't afford the luxury of crumbling down under the weight of what he had done, what he had said.

Not in that room, not when the energies were still too strong, and he hadn't settled the score with the Council...once and for all.

He was waiting for them; he wanted to see the faces of the men who had willingly chosen that harsh, cruel ritual to kill the Slayer...through him.

He could feel both Spike and Faith's eyes on him. He knew Spike had understood what he had done ever since the beginning; he knew he had played along...helping him giving Buffy the strength to break the cycle. Spike had helped him saving Buffy and their baby.

Faith was still close to him, still ready to step up and block him, should something happen. He hadn't missed the way she had looked at him, she didn't understand what had happened, he just hoped everything would be clear for her when the people from the Council arrived.

Buffy had gotten close to him. He could feel her, her warmth, her powers. She was confused, and glad, so very glad to have him back.

She didn't know. She didn't even suspect. She thought it had been the brainwashing talking, hitting her.

She was wrong.

It had been him. That had been the only way to invalidate the procedure, to make it fail.

The darkness was part...a fundamental part of any Slayer. What didn't make Slayers monsters was control, was love.

A bullet through the eyes or a cruel ritual were just the easy ways out to deal with a pregnant Slayer. Forcing the Slayer to be a soldier, alone, removed from life...had always been the easy way for the Watchers to control the darkness within the Slayer. So many things had finally made sense for Giles, that night...thanks to Buffy and Faith.

Thanks to the Slayers and their powers.

"Are they gonna leave us here?" Buffy asked in a low voice.

"No," Giles said. "They are coming...for us..."

"Don't know about you guys..." Faith said, "but I'm kinda looking forward to it..."

Giles lightly smiled at Faith's words. "Indeed" He whispered.

The lights in the room returned, not as bright as they had previously been when the door opened. Giles looked at the men who entered the room, part of him, a naïve part, perhaps, had half-hoped that they would be monsters, demons...it would have made it more acceptable. He cast a quick glance at Spike, though, shaking his head.

He was in the room with a monster, a vampire...albeit a souled one...who had done everything in his power to help them that night.

Being a human didn't mean anything.

Buffy made a step forward, she was next to him, now. She sought his hand, and gave a light squeeze to it.

Giles squeezed her hand back. He knew she was going to hate him once she would hear the truth, but for now, he was grateful for her presence...and proud, so very proud of her.

He looked at the men, except for a middle-aged, short height man who was leading the other Watchers, he didn't know them.

"Congratulations" The man said, his voice soft, polite, "The procedure has failed. I'm afraid, however..."

"Shut up" Giles said, and looked at the man, daring him to open his mouth with his eyes. "Listen to me now, Daniel...is that your name?"

The man in front of him, nodded. "Mr. Giles..." He started.

"Are you deaf?" Faith asked. Giles heard her moving, she was on his right, now. "He asked you to shut up...and was way more polite than I'd be..."

Giles turned to look at Faith, she shrugged and said, "Go on Giles..."

"The procedure has failed..." Giles said. "You will release us and do it now. You will leave, at once...never to come back. We are not part of the Council any more."

"I'm afraid this is not possible..." Daniel replied. "The procedure may have failed, but the Slayer is still to be dealt with. She is still approaching Obscuritas. This hasn't changed."

Giles smiled at the man's words, he took a step forward, toward him. "Wrong." He said. "I've tested the Slayer. I tested her powers. She can control the Obscuritas. She has showed it tonight."

"What are you talking about?" The man asked. He looked perplexed.

Giles looked at Buffy, who was staring ahead of her, her eyes wide with disbelief. "I used your very procedure to test her." He said.

One of the men, a young blonde, who looked very pale and tired, said: "You are lying. I checked your energies..."

Giles shook his head. "Metaphysics' realm can be confusing."

"Amen to that" He heard Buffy mumbling.

Daniel Laughton, who, Giles knew, was one of Quentin Travers' men, shook his head no. "Are we supposed to trust your word, Mr. Giles? You are the Slayer's lover..."

"Indeed. But I'm first and foremost her watcher, I will always be. The Council cannot change this." Giles said.

Funny how all of his previous doubts, his insecurities had been broken by what he had experienced. He was Buffy's watcher. As much as he was grateful to Spike, as much as he had felt left out ever since the vampire had been forced to reveal his identity, that night had proven him he was Buffy's watcher. That night had proved the strength of the bond between Slayer and Watcher. Her soul, the soul of the Slayer had told him what to do the moment it had touched his.

"The Slayer is able to control her darkness..." Giles finished.

"For now, maybe...but are you willing to take such a risk?" The man asked.

Buffy was still holding his hand, although Giles had noticed her hand had gotten cold, he squeezed it and said, "Yes, I am. I've been asked over and over whether she was worth it...and the answer is yes, Mr. Laughton"

"I am sure you believe in this. Unfortunately this is not a decision you can make. We don't want to hurt you, but we will if it comes down it"

"You don't get it, do you?" Faith asked, stepping up, her hands on her hips, she was smiling: "You lost, England...you had your chance, you blew it. Now get the hell out of here...unless" Her smile grew wider, "you want to get testy with a Slayer..."

"And a witch..."

It was Willow's voice.

None of them had heard her entering the room. Giles looked at her, she looked like she almost couldn't stand on her own feet, yet when one of the men tried to get close to her, it took her only a waving of her hand to send him flying.

"A very, very pissed off witch" She continued.

Somehow, Giles...didn't doubt it.

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Spike couldn't stop looking at Willow. Something had happened to her. She looked like she had aged since he had last seen her, a few hours before. She looked different.

She was different.

He could hear both hers and their baby's heartbeat. He realized that he had missed that tiny sound. He had heard it just once, before leaving Giles' apartment, yet, he had missed it.

How stupid he had been...how selfish, thinking about when the baby had been conceived and how. Yes, it had been an act of desperation on his part...but Willow, his Willow had loved him...she had given him strength, that afternoon...she had given him faith to face his death. That baby, conceived on his last day as human...was a miracle. A miracle he wanted to preserve and cherish...just like he cherished the young redhead in front of him.

But first, they had to leave that sodding place. He inwardly shook his head, trying to focus on what was taking place before his very eyes. Willow...his Willow was defiantly looking at the man who had supervised that bloody nightmare.

“How did you enter the lighthouse?” The man Giles had addressed as Daniel asked.

“Which part of pissed off witch you didn’t get?” Willow said.

“As much as...” The man started, but Willow shut him up, by sending him flying against a wall.

“Now you guys will listen to me. We are going out, and you are leaving...forever. You come here again, you get close to us, you die. Understood?”

“The Slayer...” Daniel started as he got up.

“Is pregnant, big deal!” Willow said. “She risks to get all psycho, we know that. We can take care of her...”

“You don’t know what you are dealing with...” A blonde man said. “You have no idea...”

Spike snorted. He knew what a pregnant Slayer could become and for a moment he was tempted to tell in glorious Technicolor all the gory details of the night he had fought the Chinese Slayer...just to see whether they would get one little detail they were purposely overlooking: Giles had tested Buffy...and she had passed the test.

He had gotten it the moment the Watcher had opened his eyes. He had to admit he had been good...very convincing...he had even fooled Buffy and Faith...but not him. What had betrayed Giles had been his heart...and its frantic beating. He had been betrayed by his smell; he had been betrayed by a light, almost imperceptible trembling of his hands

He had spied on monsters for too long, he had been a deceiver for most of his life not to be able to recognize one, although he had to admit he now understood what the Eletti had seen in the Watcher, when they had proposed him to join them. He’d rather avoided having his head banged against the floor...but it had served their goal. It had helped testing Buffy.

Granted, the danger was far from being over as far as Buffy was concerned, but they knew how much control she had over her powers. That was enough for now.

“No” Willow said. “*You* have no idea of what’s been taking place here, for the past five years. You have no idea of how much they’ve gone through.”

“Nice words, young lady...” Daniel said, “but the truth is...none of you could stop her if she reached Obscuritas. You don’t have the knowledge, you don’t have the means and you lack the power.”

Willow had looked at him while the man had spoken, and Spike was sure she had half expected him to say something, anything to help them. He couldn't though. Not that time.

For the past three months he had almost forgotten how an Eletti was supposed to behave, to live. Living with Drusilla had never really interfered with his calling...it hadn't made him forget whom he really was. It was funny how fast he had gotten used to a life without secrets, without lies, without deceptions. Three months had almost made him forget he was an Eletti...not a Watcher who happened to be a vampire. He had forgotten how harsh, how cruel his calling really was.

That long night had reminded him of the true nature of his calling. An Eletti was a killer, a spy, a liar and a savior. The Watchers couldn't know about the Eletti...the secrecy had to be preserved, at any cost.

So he leant against the nearest wall, stifling his hands in his duster's pockets, forcing a bored expression on his face.

He hoped Willow would understand, he hoped she would accept his silence. The redhead though wasn't even looking at him any more.

"Sure about that?" She asked, looking at the man. She turned toward them, stretching a hand, a second later, Buffy began floating in the air, green and blue beams of light were tying her arms and legs.

Spike could smell the magic...it was much more intense than the usual. Willow had always been a natural with magic, but her spells had always had the tendency to fail. What the hell was going on? Her powers were different now, stronger...and yet, oddly familiar.

He blocked that thought and its implications out of his mind, making a mental note to himself to talk to Eric once they exited the lighthouse.

After a few seconds spent floating in the air, Buffy gracefully landed on the floor, she looked stunned, but grinned at her friend saying, "Hey Will..."

Willow grinned back at her friend, but her smile quickly faded when looking at the man she said, "You were saying? We'll take care of her, as we've always done..."

"The Council can't allow this" Daniel said. He gestured with his eyes at two of the men who were next to him, the men nodded before moving, only to be stopped by Willow. She stretched her hands, and they collapsed on the floor, crying out in pain.

"Let's talk about the Council, shall we?" Willow said and Spike couldn't help noticing how pale she looked, and how the green of her eyes was unnaturally glowing.

"What are you doing to my people?" Daniel asked. The men on the floor were writhing in pain.

"I'm killing them." Willow coldly replied. "And I will tear apart the Council if I have to...although, I don't think you will need me...or any of us for that matter! You guys are doing stellar job all by yourselves. That's why you've set up this show...not to kill Buffy...you'd be already in England if that's what you wanted. This procedure served another purpose..."

"What are you ..." Daniel weakly started to say

“Please!” Willow said. “Don’t even try!”

A tall, dark-haired man stepped up. Spike had noticed him when he had entered the room; he hadn’t missed the look on his face. The relief on his strong features had almost been tangible.

“Is that true?” The man asked.

“Mr. Dutton...Charles...” Daniel said, and Spike could clearly hear the desperate edge in his voice. “I really don’t think...”

“I asked you a question, Mr. Laughton...and I want an answer!” The younger man said.

“Join the club, sweetheart” Faith chimed in.

“Bloody hell, Mr. Dutton, what are you doing?” Daniel asked.

“Until tonight I thought I was trying to avoid unleashing hell on earth. I thought I was doing my job: protecting the world! I didn’t know I was protecting the Council! Look around! Look! We have almost killed them. We were forcing a man to kill the woman he loves...and their unborn baby...and for what, exactly?”

“You are out of line, Mr. Dutton...” Daniel said. Yet, it was clear from the tone of his voice that he had lost most of his confidence.

“No, sir. The Council has been out of line, ever since -”

“Ever?” Buffy said. Spike looked at the blonde Slayer, she was watching the scene in front of her with a frown...identical to the one Giles had.

Incredibly enough, the man smiled at her. “You are probably right, Miss. Summers...” He took a deep breath and said, “The procedure has been conducted. The Slayer has shown control over her powers. Her friends are aware of her condition and are powerful enough to take care of her. You have lost. Mr. Travers has lost...”

“Now, why am I not surprised?” Giles said. “Did Quentin choose this procedure?”

“I’m so gonna kick his ass...” Buffy mumbled.

Charles slowly nodded at their words. “When The Council found out about your pregnancy, Miss. Summers...not all of us agreed on the standard procedure. A long time has passed since a Slayer has gotten pregnant, we have more means to control the Obscuritas.”

“Foolish...” Daniel hissed. “How can you control hell?”

“We’re standing on a hellmouth here, in case you didn’t notice! Take a look around...” Willow said. “That’s what we do!”

Charles gestured with his eyes at a young, blonde man, who had been lightly apart from them, and the man took a step forward. He produced from the pockets of his jacket four crystals of different colors. Spike couldn’t help the little shiver that ran up his spine, feeling the energies in the crystals.

“What are you doing?” Daniel asked.

“I’m freeing them. And I will report your actions to the Council’s committee as soon as we go back.” Charles said. He turned toward Buffy saying, “We will let you go, Miss. Summers, but you have to understand that we will keep an eye on you. We will have to, until your baby is borne. You have showed a remarkable willpower...but it might not be enough.” He looked at Willow before adding, “Not even your powers might...there are tales about the last Slayer who reached Obscuritas...and they are unsettling, to say the least.”

Spike shook his head. That boy didn’t know the half of it...but it looked like his heart was in the right place. He didn’t talk but couldn’t help snorting at his words

The man looked at him and said, “I still don’t understand what you are doing here...”

Spike looked for a second at Willow. He didn’t know whether the Council knew about them...but with her pregnancy and the questions it would arise, especially with the Eletti, he couldn’t take risks, so he shrugged and gave him the fingers, before saying, “I wanted to see the Slayer die...wanted to ever since I heard the spawn’s heartbeat...”

“Gee...thanks a lot, Spike...” Buffy replied. Her tone had been sharp, disgusted, just like Spike had hoped it would be.

“Anytime, Slayer...” He replied, smirking.

Buffy turned toward Giles saying, “Remind me again: why didn’t I stake him?”

Charles followed that exchange, and Spike hoped it would satisfy him, judging by the looks he kept casting his way before talking, it looked like he had bought it.

“As I was saying,” Charles said, “We will keep an eye on you. We will not interfere, but we will act should something happen...”

Buffy took a deep breath before nodding at the man’s words, she smiled, however when Charles said, “For what is worth, I don’t think it will come down to that.” The man looked at Willow and asked, “Could you now release my peers?”

Willow tiredly nodded at him. She didn’t even look at them as she waved a hand, and the men stopped writhing. It took them a moment to get up, and when they did, they looked at Willow, and Spike had to stifle a smile. They were scared...terrified of her.

Spike noticed how the man looked for a moment at Xander, who was still sitting on the floor, his conditions hadn’t changed until that moment, he then looked at the blonde man, who said a few words in Latin and a second later the crystals evaporated in his hands.

Spike felt his head spinning when the room around him started to shake, he could feel, hear it shrinking, returning to its original size.

The men from the Council left, and none of them tried to stop them from going away. They were all looking around, noticing the white of the walls getting darker and darker while a shrill noise seemed to fill the air.

He went to Willow, not caring about the noise, which was becoming unbearable, and hugged her, noticing Giles had done the same to Buffy. The Blonde Slayer had stretched a hand, toward Faith,

but the brunette Slayer shook her head, she had knelt next to Xander and was now holding his hand in hers.

Spike closed his eyes, when the shrill became so loud that the black panel, which had covered the window, shattered.

Just when he was sure, his ears would start bleeding, the sound abruptly stopped. He sighed in relief and opened his eyes.

It was raining. The sky outside was covered with black, leaden clouds. The room was scarcely lit, now...yet he could see them all.

He kissed Willow's forehead, and couldn't help placing a hand over her belly.

Willow looked up at him, her eyes had stopped glowing, she looked very, very tired. And relieved. She was relieved they were still alive.

"Quite a show you set up, Red..." He mumbled.

Willow closed her eyes, "You don't know the half of it..." She nibbled at her lower lip and said, "We have to talk"

"Later..." Spike said

Willow nodded at him, and closed her eyes, snuggling against his chest. He turned toward Buffy and Giles who were looking at each other, their faces serious and asked, "How are you feeling?"

They both nodded at his words but didn't talk. He looked at Faith, who was still holding Xander's hand. The brunette Slayer looked at him and Spike instinctively knew there was something wrong. Something very wrong. He knew it, even before Faith said, "Guys, we have to get out of here...and take Xander to the hospital. He isn't waking up!"

EPILOGUE

She felt numb.

Buffy didn't think she had ever felt that numb in her life. Everything since Giles had talked to the guys of the Council was a blur to her. She recalled talking, she recalled Willow making her floating in the air, she recalled the Council guys freeing them...and then Faith telling them that Xander wasn't waking up.

The rush to the ER was even blurrier. She didn't remember what Giles and Willow had said to the doctors. She vaguely recalled hearing Anya crying and Willow and Giles trying to comfort her. She recalled seeing Faith vanish under her very eyes. She recalled thinking they hadn't had time to talk. She hadn't had time to tell her what had happened and that she didn't have to tell anything about Spike to Angel.

It had been like watching everything from the outside. She had watched her body moving, she remembered her body moving...but she didn't feel a thing.

Even now, she could see Giles and herself entering their house, she could see the empty coffee mugs, Willow's laptop, tomes sprawled on the coffee table and the floor. The only thing she could clearly smell, see was the blood's stain on the floor.

Spike's blood.

She still hadn't regained her whole strength. Both Eric and Spike had told her it would take a while, but her senses had returned...to full force. She ignored the low growling of her stomach at the sight, but was surprised when she realized it wasn't hunger...it was nausea.

She shook her head, and looked at Giles. He had barely talked as well since they had exited the lighthouse. On the outside nothing had changed. She had sought his hand...or, at least, she recalled her body doing that. He had taken it...had squeezed it.

Yet, she didn't remember feeling anything. She wondered, for a second, whether Giles was feeling the same.

Giles took the empty mugs and went to the kitchenette.

"Would you like some tea?" She heard him asking.

His voice was wary, tentative. She nodded her head and let herself sit on the couch, covering her eyes with her hands.

She had been released from the hospital, Anya and Willow had insisted on them returning home. She hadn't said a word, had barely shaken her head.

Xander...was in a coma.

He was in a coma...because of her. Because she was a pregnant Slayer. Because he had tried to resist the brainwash.

She saw Giles, even before hearing him sitting next to her.

"How are you feeling?" Giles asked.

She saw herself swallowing before saying, "Fine..."

She felt his hands grazing her hair, and heard him sighing.

"Buffy..." He started.

She saw herself looking at him, her sight blurred for the tears that were filling her eyes.

"Don't..." She said.

Giles tilted his head down. "I'm sure Xander's conditions will improve. The doctors are optimistic. He's young and very strong." He said.

Her heart. Buffy could hear her heart beating...and something squeezing it. She hadn't felt it, until that moment. She could hear her labored breath, she could taste tears in her throat now.

“I...” Buffy started in a nasal voice. “I put my best friend in a coma...” She eventually said.

She felt her head furiously spinning, the colors which, until that moment had lost of intensity becoming harsher, brighter. She closed her eyes, gripping the edge of the couch. She felt her body, now. She could feel it, for the first time in two days.

She didn’t know if that was a good thing...but at least her head had stopped spinning.

“You did not do such a thing!” Giles replied.

Buffy opened her eyes. “I did, Rupert! Or, if you wish, the Council did...but they used me! And that’s a fact, it’s not the little obnoxious bitch talking!” She said, almost spitting her last words.

Giles didn’t talk. Buffy saw him closing his eyes.

“I’m sorry” Giles said. He opened his eyes and continued, “I’m so sorry.”

Giles seemed even more tired than she was, and was still too pale.

Part of her was happy to see him ashamed by his previous words. Part of her wanted to hurt him... as much as he had hurt her in that lighthouse, she wasn’t surprised, though, when she realized it was a small part of herself.

She had vowed never to hurt him again...but that wasn’t the only reason she couldn’t bear to see him ashamed and full of remorse like that.

She loved him. She loved him too damn much to even thinking about hurting him. She loved him too damn much to listen to her wounded pride.

She loved him and despite what had happened for the past days, what she felt for Giles, was the purest, deepest love she had ever felt.

She told him how much she loved him as much as she could...but in that moment, that feeling inside of her was so strong...so powerful that it took her breath away.

She loved the man in front of her, with everything she was. She stretched a hand to caress his face and said, “We haven’t really talked about stuff...ever...”

Giles took her hand in his and nodded, “I...couldn’t. It was almost...”

“Like tempting fate?” She said. “Like...the powers that be, could look at us and say, ‘Hey, guys... thought that was pain? Here it is some’?”

Giles almost smiled at her words and said, “Yes. It might not have been wise of me...but...I was so happy...I didn’t want to jeopardize what we had...”

“Have” Buffy, corrected him. “Have...and will. Look, what you said? It was like being gutted...it was worst than with Angel...because it was coming from you and because everything you said is true...”

Giles shook his head; he kissed Buffy’s fingers and whispered, “No, luv...it wasn’t. I used the...”

“It was the truth, Rupert...” Buffy said. She took a deep breath, and turned to better look at him. “What was worst? Part of me...I don’t know which, felt that it wasn’t really true...your

brainwashing, I mean. Call it denial...but part of me felt it...and it all made it worse. Because you were saying the truth...and there wasn't a demon to blame this time."

She saw him looking at her surprised, "You knew? How?"

She shrugged, "I told you...I refused to accept it...I couldn't. That's me, Buffy...princess of denial. But that's not the point...I wanted to kill you...but I couldn't...I kinda love you, you know?" She tilted her hand up, interrupting him before he could speak and said, "But...everything you said in the Lighthouse is true. I'm princess of denial, but not that much...I lied to you guys, I hurt you...I can be the uber bitca when I want to...and even when I don't want to..."

Giles brushed her cheeks with his fingers and for a second Buffy didn't talk. It would have been so simple to just pretend it hadn't happened. But they couldn't ...not with the Obscuritas hanging over them. Not if they wanted to get over what had happened.

"Buffy..." Giles said. "What I said..."

"Was a test...I know now. But you know what I was thinking while you told me those things?"

Giles shook his head no.

"That we didn't talk about stuff even before we got together. You never told me about Jenny. I know you loved her...but you didn't tell me what happened that night...we never talked about it. You told me I'd have your support after I freed Angelus...and you showed it...but we never talked. And later...when I was in the midst of my angst fest with Angel...we never talked about it, I never apologized to you..."

"For what?" Giles asked, and he really seemed surprised by her words.

She let out a laughter and said, "Where do you want me to begin? For not telling you about Angel... for making you stay in the Mansion when Faith poisoned him? My God...for saying that you were old and gross?" She swallowed, steeling herself for what was about to say, "For Jenny?"

Giles shook his head. "There is no need..."

"The hell there isn't...Giles...we're good at repressing bad things...we've always been...did you know that Willow called you once the emotional marathon man?"

Giles weakly chuckled at her words...it was a watery sound, and Buffy knew he was on the verge of tears, just like her.

"I wasn't aware of that..." Giles said.

"Well...I do the same. I can be a drama queen at times, but the important stuff? I've always kept it inside of me...but now? I think we need to talk all of this out..."

"There is one thing you forgot to mention, Buffy..." Giles said.

"That would be?" She asked.

“I am your watcher” He shook his head and added, “I love you. I always have in a way and mostly... I know you...I’ve always known you. And there is something about Jenny...about Angelus that I can tell you now: you...gave me the strength to go on. You have always given it to me...”

“Always?” She asked.

Giles smiled at her, “Always...since the very beginning. But I believe you are right...I think we will have to talk...but not tonight.”

“Why not?” She asked.

“Because we will have time, luv...all the time in the world.” He softly said.

Buffy couldn’t help blinking when Giles got up from the couch and then knelt in front of her, she took her left hand in his and said, “Buffy Anne Summers...will you marry me?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it when Giles showed her his onyx ring, the one he always wore on his pinky finger.

“This ring has been in my family for generations...” He smiled as he softly said, “I’d be honored if you chose to accept it...”

Buffy swallowed, unable to utter a sound. She took the ring in her hands and looked at him for a second before saying, “I didn’t see this one coming” She took a deep breath before saying, “I can’t...” Seeing his face fall, she hastened to add, “I will marry you...in my heart we already are... but this ring?” She smiled at him and giving it back to him added, “You’ll give it to our child...”

Giles smiled and rested his head against a belly whispering, “I love you...both of you...”

“We love you too, Rupert...” She whispered back, closing her eyes, a hand brushing Giles’ hair. “We love you too...”

~~*~*~*~*~*

She walked slowly toward the phone.

Faith needed time to think. Hell...she needed a drink...and a handbook to understand what the hell had happened two nights before.

It had been cool. She had come to an understanding about her powers, which was of the good...even better, when she thought of how Buffy had looked at her before she had vanished. She had looked at her with...acceptance, forgiveness.

She wanted to know if Xander was all right...but she could only make a phone call.

<Sucks to be you...>

She thought. She had felt herself vanishing, had seen her surroundings changing. They had been outside the hospital, the rain pouring down over them; they had been still stunned by what had happened. Faith had seen Anya paling when she had seen Xander, and a dark haired guy talking to Spike for a second, and had had the second surprise of her life when she had seen Spike kissing

Willow's lips before going away with him...the first had been when she had seen Willow snuggling with him after the Council's guys had left.

So, one thing was clear: Spike was being a good guy because of Willow...although that didn't explain all the stuff he had known when they had been in that room.

She had wanted to ask Buffy, but then had felt her body starting to vanish. She had felt her head spinning and her skin itching.

Part of her had wanted to stay with them...but she had known she had to come back to prison. That night had helped her to understand how much the changes she had felt in her heart had been for real... but she knew she couldn't take risks, not yet. It was still too soon.

She had seen the blonde chick, who still looked like her, in the isolation cell.

"You've been waiting for me?" She had asked.

The chick had smiled, returning to her true face, and had said, "I always keep my promises"

Faith had nodded. The blonde chick had looked at her before saying, "You have done a good job, Faith...you ought to be proud of yourself..."

"I wish you had told me a few things before I got there...but, hey, it was cool..."

The blondie had smiled but hadn't talked.

She had waved her hand and had slowly started to vanish...it was then Faith had smelled it...the same smell of her dream.

Sweet, inviting...and dangerous.

She had wondered, in her dream, whether sin smelled like that...a flicker of amber in the chick's eyes as she vanished had answered her question.

Sin...smelled like that...it smelled like the blonde, angel-like chick. Only...it hadn't been an angel, she was sure of that, now. She had heard that one of the guards of her block had been killed two nights before. She had been killed shortly before the blonde chick had appeared in her isolation cell.

She had been able to discover the cause of death: a massive loss of blood. She hadn't been surprised by some of the rumors...if the woman had lost so much blood that it had killed her, where was that blood? There hadn't been traces on the pavement, next to her car, not where they had found her.

She had been screwed.

Would she ever learn not to trust chicks who pretended to be good? Granted, Gwendolyn what-was-her-face hadn't pretended to be an angel...but the substance was the same. She had been used, again.

Yet, something didn't ring a bell. Why had she sent her to Buffy to help her? If she was bad, and in her heart Faith didn't have doubts about that, why had she sent her to help Buffy?

Faith shook her head, as she tried to make sense of what had happened. She took the receiver in her hand and looked at it. She had to make that phone call.

Lots of things weren't making sense...and she needed help.

She dialed the number while still thinking about Buffy's pregnancy, Willow's powers, Spike's behavior and the blonde angel-like chick, who smelled like sin...and had probably sucked dry one of the guards to enter the prison...and pull that show with her.

She **so** needed help

"Angel investigations," Wesley Windham Pryce said on the other side of the line, "We help the helpless"

The Watcher. Her watcher. She had tortured him, once. She had told him terrible things. Yet, as soon as he talked, she recognized in his voice, the one which had guided her throughout her dream; the one which had kept whispering: "the light within the darkness"

Her guide, her watcher, part of her soul.

She took a deep breath before saying, "Wes? It's Faith."

A pause, and then his gentle voice, now wary asking, "Faith...is something wrong?"

"Yes...a couple of things are so not five by five here..." She said.

"I'll call Angel..." Wesley tersely said.

"No..." Faith exclaimed. She nibbled at her lower lip and added, "I mean, not right now. I..." She paused. Damn why was it so difficult to talk now?

"Faith? Are you still there?" Wesley asked.

"Yes...it's just...how are you Wesley, really?" She said.

It was Wesley's turn not to talk and Faith was afraid he would hang up on her. She needed to talk to Angel...but, and that was something she hadn't expected, she needed to talk to her Watcher as well. They both did.

"Wes?" She said.

"I am...fine, all things considered." He said after a short silence.

"Cool...I mean...I'm happy to hear that" She softly said, meaning it

She heard Wesley sighing, and was surprised when he asked, "And you? How are you, Faith?"

She smiled at his words and said, "Not so bad...considered what happened for the past two days..."

"Is everything all right?" He asked.

“It’s a long story...and...” She paused. Wesley could tell Angel...and maybe, just maybe, they could come seeing her. She took a seat, ignoring the glares she was getting and said, “It all begun two days ago, there was this blonde chick who got into my cell pulling a Touched by an Angel...”

“A what?” Wesley asked.

“Way too much TV here, Wes...” Was Faith’s only reply.

She closed her eyes for a second and was surprised when she could see him, almost as if they were in the same room. He was sitting on a chair, she could see he was wearing a white shirt, and wasn’t wearing his glasses. He looked older...and she knew she was partially responsible for the haunted look in his blue eyes.

She kept telling him what had happened, while she still had her eyes closed, and when she heard the voice of one of the guards telling her the time was up, she couldn’t help touching the image she could see with her mind’s eyes.

She heard Wesley’s sharp intake of breath when the jolt of energy filled both of them whole. And then...he stretched a hand to brush her face with his fingers.

The essence of the Slayer and the Watcher...their bond, was now finally starting to mend. She had touched his soul, and hers had whispered how sorry she was for what she had done to him that night.

His soul...his beautiful, pure soul had forgiven her, and Faith felt tears stinging her eyes.

A short silence, and then Wesley’s weak voice said, “I will inform Angel. We will visit you...”

“I’m counting on it...” She said. She didn’t leave him time to reply and hang up the phone.

It took her a moment to realize that she hadn’t mentioned her suspicions about Spike, to her Watcher. Somehow, her instincts had told her not to. She recalled the way he had acted in the lighthouse, the words he had said before and after the Council guys entered the room...and then, she recalled the way he had tenderly kissed Willow’s lips.

Images of her dream...sprung to her mind. She would wait...she had to. Somehow, she was sure that she would know, should something happen...that was the Slayer’s job.

<That’s what I am, the Slayer!>

She heard Buffy’s voice saying those words...and with her, all the Slayers who had lived in her skin for those brief, precious moments. She was the Slayer.

She could feel her heart beating, so fast that it almost hurt. She knew she still had a long way to go, as far as redemption was concerned. She still feared the little, gnawing creature inside of her, yet, for the first time in months she couldn’t hear it whispering.

All she could hear was Wesley’s voice...in her heart, in her soul. It was telling her not to fear anything, not any more. It was telling her she was finally home. She was whole.

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“What do you mean...a sponge?” Spike asked.

Eric looked at his Eletti, barely resisting the urge to sigh. They were in his house; they were sitting Indian style on the floor of his living room, practicing meditation. He hadn't been surprised when, shortly after having left the lighthouse, the younger vampire had asked him to practice meditation, just like old times.

He had known William needed to focus, to clear his mind, especially now, with both the Slayer and Willow pregnant. What had happened two nights before had both scared and thrilled William. He had waited for the younger vampire to ask his questions. He had seen him struggling with himself before approaching the subjects both of Willow's pregnancy and of what had happened in the lighthouse.

“I admit the term is incorrect and...” Eric started.

“Rude?” Spike finished for him. “You have just called my baby a sponge, you tosser!”

Eric looked at the blonde vampire: he still looked stunned by the news. An Eletti was going to be a father. William was going to have a baby...conceived on his last day as a human. He was going to have a baby from the woman Eric loved. The woman he had silently loved for...a month? A century? Eric inwardly shook his head at that thought. He looked at William; he didn't think he had ever seen him that happy.

“I didn't mean that as an offence, William” Eric said.

“I know” Spike said in a low voice. Eric looked at Spike as he took an unnecessary deep breath before asking, “Will you tell the Eletti?”

Eric cocked an eyebrow at him. Once he would have called the Eletti right away...he wouldn't have saved William, he wouldn't have allowed an Eletti to have a life, to know love and happiness. He forced a smile on his lips saying, “Are you kidding me?” His smile faded though when looking at Spike he said, “I can't.”

What could he tell the Eletti? That he had let his Eletti break every single rule they had? That he had defied their direct orders when he had allowed Willow to go back in time? His contact had told him something was going to happen...soon, very soon. The only thing that mattered to him now, was trying to protect both William and Willow.

“They would...” He said in a low voice.

“Stake us?” Spike finished for him.

Eric shook his head. “No...” He slowly said. “They wouldn't. William...staking any of us would be far from their thoughts”

Spike looked at him for a second, without talking, when he did his tone of voice was casual, yet it couldn't quite hide the fear he was feeling. “Would they kill Red and the baby?”

Eric had made a mistake, he realized: he had always protected William from the Eletti. He had done so since the very beginning, building layers and layers of lies to prevent them from discovering his Eletti's unorthodox methods and William from their wrath, their cruelty.

The only way he had to protect William, now, was telling the truth, without layers. “They would kill Willow...but they wouldn’t harm the baby, not this baby.” He said, realizing he hadn’t been able to hide the bitterness in his voice.

“You won’t tell them...” Spike said and his words came out as a statement, a question...and a plea.

Eric shook his head. He knew the Eletti were aware of many of the things that had happened there for the past months. He knew they were planning something. He just hoped they could find a way to protect Willow from them.

“I won’t...but William?” He said. “We will have to be more careful than ever...”

Spike just nodded at his words, he lightly shook his head and changing subject asked, “What in the bloody hell really happened in the lighthouse? Since when Red is so powerful?”

He had expected that question. He knew it would come. “Since the Philomela spell.” He said.

“The spell not to let her talk?” Spike asked. “Anya told me about it...”

<He can’t protect her if he doesn’t know the truth>

He thought. It had taken him decades to find a counter spell for the Philomela, but oddly enough, only two days to find out what was really happening to Willow and her powers.

“The spell” He said, “was more powerful than that. Much more powerful”

“What...” Spike started.

“You have to understand...” Eric coldly said, “There was too much at stake, too damn much...”

“I know that...” Spike said. “I understand that and so did Willow...but you are not answering my question”

“I used it as a security net...” Eric said.

“What do you mean?” Spike asked.

“You forgot about the Witch didn’t you?” Eric asked. “Until you were assigned to Sunnydale, you forgot about her...”

“I recalled her face...” Spike said, he tilted his head down and Eric saw how he almost looked ashamed by his words when he said, “I had flashes, but mostly it was like trying to remember images for a dream.” He looked up and shrugging said, “It’s all foggy...I remember of having forgotten about her, yet I remember everything that happened.” He shook his head and then mumbled, “I hate magic...”

Eric almost smiled at the younger vampire’s words. “It was the spell...” He eventually said, “it amplified all the other spells we put on her when we sent her back in time...all the spells I did after you were activated...”

“Speaking of which...” Spike said, “You will have to tell me one of these days what happened when I went away...” He shook his head and continued, “but not now...”

“Problem is I didn’t know, I couldn’t know she would get pregnant...” Eric said. He still recalled that day...he recalled Willow’s face, her eyes after William left his house. He hoped William couldn’t sense what he was feeling...of how, part of him, almost hated him because of Willow.

It took him a glance at the younger vampire to know he didn’t know...he didn’t even suspect.

“Of course you couldn’t...” Spike said.

Eric inwardly shook his head before saying, “It looks like the spell is still working...on your baby... only...” He paused. “Your baby is like a sponge... from what I’ve been able to gather...”

Spike shook his head and blankly asked, “Why?”

“It looks like it absorbs the magic around it, but...as you have probably noticed the magic is stronger...it’s magnified...and that’s Willow. She is a witch, she has powers. The baby absorbs the magic. That’s why we couldn’t hear its heartbeat...and that’s why Willow was feeling so weak...”

Eric saw Spike running a hand through his hair, processing what he had just told him. He could see, from the look in his eyes, he was already considering the options; he was already forming a plan.

“Will it be dangerous?” He asked. “For Willow...and the baby?”

“I wish I knew, William...” Eric said. It was the truth...he didn’t know what would happen to Willow in the long run. He didn’t know whether there was something that was going to fade as the pregnancy progressed or if it was something permanent.

“What I suggest, however,” He said after a second, “is to keep her as far away from magic as we can for the next weeks. The magic the baby has absorbed so far, although powerful wasn’t really dangerous. It was dark...but it came from the Slayers...which have learnt to control their darkness...and from me...and I think you know ...”

“How tightly you control your own powers...” Spike finished for him.

Eric nodded and continued, “We don’t know what would happen if the baby absorbed pure, uncontrolled dark magic”

“So” Spike said in a low voice, without looking at him, “Let me see if I get this...the Slayer is risking Obscuritas and Willow risks absorbing dark magic ”

“As I said it’s not just a matter of absorbing it...she magnifies it. She used my powers to pass through the shield on that beach and from what you have told me, she used the magic in the lighthouse to help you free the Slayer.”

“Oh, joy...” Spike said under his breath. “She is still so bloody weak...and hasn’t left the whelp’s side for two days...”

Eric pursed his lips. He knew William wasn’t going to like what he wanted to tell him, but he had to. Something he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about ever since he had seen Willow entering the Lighthouse. “There is something to be considered, though...” He said.

Spike tilted his head up, he had probably seen something in his face, or heard it in his voice, because he was intently looking at him, waiting for him to drop the bomb.

“Whatever it is...” Spike started.

“Electra...” Eric just said.

“What about her?” Spike asked. It took him a second to get the meaning behind his words and when he did he empathically shook his head no and said, “Don’t. Bloody. Think. About. It! Willow isn’t going anywhere near that cow! Am I clear on this, Eric?”

“I understand what...” Eric started. And it was true. He understood what he was feeling and part of him had been rebelling against that idea...but the other part...wondered what it would take for Willow to defeat the rogue Eletti, with her own powers.

“You really don’t!” Spike replied. He wasn’t raising his voice, he didn’t need to. Eric didn’t remember having ever seen him so furious about something he had told him.

He chose to ignore, though, how William’s words had cut deeply into him.

“She might be of invaluable help, William. Think about it...she could...” He said, instead. He stopped talking, though, when he heard a noise coming from outside the apartment.

He didn’t hear what William was saying, his senses were totally focused on the noises he could hear from outside.

He had been told the Eletti would do something. Even William had felt something was brewing. When he heard the knock on the door he instinctively knew it was someone from the Eletti. He shot a glance at the clock on the wall before getting up.

He looked at Spike, the blonde vampire was looking at him, and Eric thought he had probably felt something was wrong as well...or maybe he had just been able to read it on his face. William had always been pretty good at reading him.

“I’ll get the door...” He said, sounding calm, collected. “William...I want you to consider what I said.”

He left the room, ignoring William’s puzzled expression. He went to the door and waited for a second before opening it. He wasn’t nervous...or afraid. He had known, deep within that something like that could happen. He had known the Eletti would find out sooner or later. He had made a choice...and he didn’t regret it.

Yet, he couldn’t help blinking in surprise when he saw the man standing on the door. He was tall, about William’s height, with short blonde hair and piercing blue-green eyes. Although he didn’t look older than the average Eletti – because he had no doubts he was one -, he knew he had been at least in his forties when he had become an Eletti.

He had seen that man, once...when the man had been alive. He had seen him in a London graveyard, on a gloomy, rainy morning, dressed in black, his pale face haunted, his soul and heart annihilated, shattered.

Even now he was dressed in black, and part of that haunted look had remained, but it was only a fragment of what it had been that far-away morning. The look in his eyes was cold, and from his posture he could say he was there to do business.

He thought about William, for a moment. He knew what his reaction was going to be. He knew he was probably going to smell rain and tears, just like that morning. He knew that for William, looking at that man's eyes was probably going to bring back floods of memories he had fought hard to suppress.

"Eric" The man...the Eletti, said.

"Xavier..." Eric said.

"Can I come in?" The younger vampire asked.

Eric took a step back. "You don't need to be invited in, you know that..." He said.

Xavier nodded before entering the house. "Is your Eletti here?" He asked.

Eric noticed the way the younger's vampire eyes wandered the whole room in a second, he saw how he lightly flared his nostrils before saying, "He is here...good! It will make things easier..."

"Leave him out..."

Xavier raised his hand to stop him, "I'm afraid I can't do that." He looked at Eric, and said, "The Eletti sent me here for both of you."

"You're an Umbra?" Eric asked.

Xavier shrugged, "Call me whatever you want, Gheraios. There are rules and they are to be followed, always. I make sure of that. And I got to say...you guys are in trouble..."

"Eric what in the bloody hell..." Spike's voice stopped when, entering the room, he saw the man.

He saw recognition in William's eyes as he looked at the man, and what was left of his blood draining from his face.

"Xavier?" Spike said in a low voice. He was incredulous.

"Since we all know each other I think we may skip the formalities. Gentlemen..." He said gesturing with his eyes to the other room, "If you may follow me...we need to talk."

~~*~*~*~*~*

Once, when she was a demon, Anya had forced a man to cry all of his tears. It had been a routine assignment, but what had happened when the man's fluids had ended and his eyes had popped out of his skull had surprised the then demon.

The girl, who was sitting on the side of a bed in the ICU of Sunnydale hospital was afraid she would end up like that man. She had gotten past the point where she could produce actual tears and her eyes hurt.

Everything hurt.

She sniffled, and had to clear her throat before saying, "I think Willow wants to see you. The doctors say the swelling is diminishing...so, why don't you wake up? Please Xander?"

She had begged him to wake up...for her, for Willow, who was pregnant and looked like she was about to collapse when she wasn't crying. The doctors had said that hearing the voice of a loved one could maybe help him. She had bit her tongue from telling them it was useless. He was in mystical induced coma. She hadn't said that...she had just cried...and cried...and cried some more...like that man, so long ago. The man whose eyes had popped out of his skull and had fallen on a floor wet with his fluids.

She hated what was happening. She hated that he had been so foolish that he had resisted the brainwashing. There were other people in the room! They would have stopped him! And if Buffy had gotten angry at him, she would have reminded her that it was her fault...that it had been her powers to do that to him.

She sighed. There were moments she felt she had gone crazy...moments where she hated everyone in that town, including Xander for making her cry, for making her **feel**. She had chosen to become a demon because she didn't want to feel pain any more. The hatred didn't last though, probably because she was too tired to hate. She was tired, but she didn't want to rest. She couldn't rest. What if something happened while she was asleep? What if Xander...

What if he died while she was sleeping?

So she wasn't sleeping. She hadn't slept since the day before Buffy had been kidnapped. She shivered and took Xander's hand in hers, his left arm was all covered with stuff...wires, and IV needles, but his right arm was free and so was his hand, and she had become acquainted with that hand for the past two days.

She had spent hours just looking at his hand, memorizing each detail...the form of his nails and fingers for example...she hadn't ever noticed them...but now she could have described them in a heartbeat, or the little scar he had on his forearm. She didn't know how he had done that. For hours, that afternoon, that little scar had been the most important thing in her life...she had obsessed over it, wondering how he had done that to himself. Had it been a demon? A mugging?

She still didn't know...and she wanted to ask Xander. She wanted to ask him so many things. She wanted to tell him so many things. She sniffled, again, and stretched a hand to caress his hair, it was gray on his temples. What had he seen? Giles had told her what had happened...yet, he was still there, he wasn't in a coma. His hair wasn't more gray than when he had gone away from his apartment.

Anyanka...

She jumped on her seat, turning around to look behind her shoulders. Who had called her name? She shook her head. That was it...she was losing it. Lack of sleep was finally frying her brain.

Make a wish...

She let go of Xander's hand and got up from her chair and looked around in the room. She knew that voice. It had been her guide for over a millennia. It had refused her to give her powers back... when she still wanted them, when she didn't know Xander. When she wasn't in love...when she didn't remember what love was like, how it ripped the heart out of a chest...and how it kept beating to hurt the person more.

She swallowed and began nervously twisting her fingers. A wish...hadn't all that mess, also known as her current life as Anya Emerson begun with a wish?

A wish...just one wish.

She looked at Xander: he was so pale, he didn't look like the man she had fallen in love with. She looked like a boy, a frail, broken boy.

A wish...it had to blossom in her heart, before passing through her lips. She knew how it worked... but she knew it had a price. Like everything else...like love.

She closed her eyes. Ignoring her heart. Ignoring her feelings.

Just one wish, Anyanka...but choose wisely

Why now? Why now that she was so...desperate? Why hadn't she heard that voice sooner? Why hadn't he come to her sooner?

Because you weren't ripe...

D'Hoffryn answered to her silent question. What the hell did that mean? Ripe? She was 1200 years old, for god's sake! She was beyond ripe!

You were a child then...

D'Hoffryn said. Anya took a deep breath. She had to. She was sure she was going crazy. Because there was no way D'Hoffryn was telepathically talking to her.

She had lost it. Soon she would drop on the floor...like that man's eyes, she would make a sound like the plop those eyes had made...and that would be the end.

My dear...since when are you so morbid?

"Since my boyfriend is in a coma!" She exclaimed to the empty room.

He wasn't there. He wasn't talking to her. She didn't believe it. She couldn't. Not in that moment. Not when Xander was in a coma, and her eyes hurt, from within.

Do you need proofs? D'Hoffryn asked. His voice couldn't hide amusement.

She couldn't help nodding her head and then shook it. She didn't want proofs. She wanted...the only thing she wanted was...

The machines linked to Xander's body started beeping. She let out a yelp, turning toward them. She had seen enough movies to know that there was something wrong. A second later, two nurses and a

doctor entered the room, and the doctor started shouting orders while he practiced a cardiac massage to Xander.

Is it enough as a proof, my dear? D'Hoffryn's voice politely asked.

<Stop it...not his heart! Don't stop his heart! Stop hurting him.>

Anya thought. She took a step toward Xander's bed, but a nurse pushed her away, telling her she had to wait outside.

"We're losing him!" A nurse shouted.

The doctor took one of those things she had seen on tv to revive his heart with electricity. She couldn't even remember what they were called. She shook her head.

Come to me...make a wish, and I will. D'Hoffryn said.

Anya closed her eyes. Since when D'Hoffryn was so powerful? She felt tears...actual tears stinging her eyes. She had been wrong, she still had tears to shed. Although she wouldn't have been surprised if the moisture she was feeling was actually blood.

She opened her eyes, letting the tears fall, without bothering to wipe them away. She turned her head and saw Willow watching the scene in the room, her hands on the window. She was crying.

She looked at Xander, he was paler now. A sob escaped from her lips and she covered her mouth with a hand, when she saw his body being revived by those...what was their name again?

Anyanka? There was curiosity now, in D'Hoffryn's voice.

Anya pursed her lips, and slowly headed out of the room, unnoticed. She walked slowly through the hallway, and didn't stop, not even when she felt a burning feeling on her chest, and a moment later she felt the familiar weight of a medallion pressed against her chest.

It's yours...just wish it. D'hoffryn said.

She exited the ICU and went to the elevator.

"Will he be safe?" She asked in a cracked voice when the elevator's door closed.

Of course. D'Hoffryn said. *He will the moment you make your wish.*

New tears added to the ones she had just shed, the salt of them was burning her skin, yet she did nothing to stop the tears from falling. She wasn't surprised when the doors opened and she looked at the street. It was Sunnydale's Main street, and it was deserted.

Make your wish, Anyanka and come to me. D'Hoffryn said.

She took a deep breath. She was feeling the medallion weighing against her chest. She didn't remember it to be that heavy. She looked down, only to find she wasn't wearing her sweater and jeans any more.

She was wearing a tunic, a black tunic.

“I wish” She said aloud, trying to clear her throat, without succeeding.

Come to me, Anyanka

She started walking, oblivious of her tears, her eyes fixed on the deserted, spooky street. “I wish to...” She said.

She could already feel it. She could feel her face slowly morphing and it hurt. Never had it hurt before.

Make your wish, my dear.

“I wish to become...” She said.

Yes, dear...you are ready now. From your heart to your lips.

Anya stopped. “Promise me he will be safe. Whatever happens...he will be safe” She hesitated for a second before whispering, “From me...”

You have my word, Anyanka

She stopped. She could see him now, waiting for her at the end of Main street, he was looking at her, waiting. Waiting for her wish.

“I wish to become Anyanka again...” She said, and in her last moments as human, as the human woman she had become she hoped Xander would forgive her. She hoped he would wake up. She hoped he would recall how much she had loved him.

She collapsed on the pavement of Main street, as she heard D’Hoffryn’s voice saying: “Done! Welcome back Anyanka!”

~~*~*~*~*~*

He was looking at her. Willow didn’t know he was there, she hadn’t heard him coming. She didn’t know he was looking at her, observing her. He was allowed a few more seconds. Spike didn’t move.

Just a few more seconds...to be a friend, a lover...a father.

He had walked to the hospital, totally oblivious of his surroundings. If Electra had showed behind his shoulders and had staked him, he wouldn’t have noticed. He wouldn’t have cared.

The Eletti had talked. The Eletti had given their orders, and that time he had no choice but to follow them.

~ “The only reason they are allowing you to stay here, is because of the peculiarity of the Slayer’s condition.” ~

Xavier’s voice had been soft while he talked, but his eyes, his face had been a cold mask of professionalism, so different from the face of the man he had seen once in a graveyard. Spike had had troubles looking at him.

He had always known the Eletti were sick bastards, he just had no idea they could play so dirty. Eric, on the other hand, hadn't looked surprised. Had he really thought that they had forgiven him even his slightest mistake? Had he? It had taken him more than a century...but he knew now.

The Eletti didn't know what forgiveness was, that's why they had sent Xavier to him; there was no other explanation.

He shook his head. Willow was in Xander's room, at his bedside, she had the boy's hand in hers, and was listening to what a doctor was telling her. She looked tired and afraid. Spike clenched his jaws, steeling himself.

He was about to set up his best show...ever. It had to be convincing. It had to be his masterpiece.

~ "Things will have to change, though." Xavier had said "We have rules, Spike...whether you like it or not. You can't choose which rules you may follow and which ones you can ignore when it suits you."~

The Eletti had chosen the perfect person for that assignment. Xavier wasn't going to listen to him, to his reasons...and not because of the rules, not because of their calling. He wasn't going to listen to him because of a choice he had made, once. A choice that had almost killed him.

Besides, although he hated to admit it, the Eletti were right. It didn't matter that he had defied their orders out of love, out of desperation. He had.

His methods had always been unorthodox but he had never really defied the Eletti's orders. Never had he really gone against the orders to save someone. Even when he had exchanged Drusilla's safety for Giles', three years before, he had done so keeping in mind his assignment. He had always preserved the secrecy of his calling. Things had changed when Willow had been kidnapped.

~ "They know about you...about the Eletti. We can't change that" Xavier had said. "And your Gheraios will face the consequences for allowing you to do that, for lending a hand in that. As for you, Spike. You have to find a way to fix what you have done"~

What he had done.

He had fallen in love, he had made friends, he...belonged. For the first time in his life he knew what belonging really was. That was going to change, now.

~ "I won't" He had said.

Xavier's face hadn't betrayed any feelings.

He had looked around in the living room of Eric's house, his lips had lightly twitched before he had said, "Oh, you will!" He had said, "Because this isn't a choice you can make. These are the options you have: you can stay here and find a way to fix the mess you did, or...you can go away and let us take care of it. These are the only choices we are giving you!"~

Spike tilted his head on a side; in the end he had made a choice. The only choice he had. He had chosen to do what the Eletti expected him to do.

He had watched as Eric prepared the relocation spell, which would bring him to England. He had been sent away...because of what he had done.

The doctor who had been with Willow left the room, and Spike swallowed, taking a step forward and he lightly knocked against the window. Willow tilted her head up and smiled at him and he couldn't help recalling the first time he had seen her smiling at him like that.

~After Eric had left the house he had asked to Xavier: "What's going to happen to him?"

"I have no idea." Xavier had said, "A Gheraios can't start making his own rules, and yours did."

"He did it for me!"

"He shouldn't have, that's the point."

"History hasn't changed!" Spike had exclaimed.

"Are you sure about that?" Xavier had asked. "You are an Eletti, that much is true. You have done everything you were supposed to. Everything. But she brought back something with her from the past. Something which doesn't belong here."

"It wasn't his fault." He had hissed.

Xavier had looked at him for a moment before saying: "You are right. It wasn't. It's your fault, and you alone, will face the consequences."~

Willow left Xander's bedside and slowly headed out of the room.

It was time to begin.

No one set up a show better than an Eletti, Spike thought as Willow slowly headed out of the room.

Yet, for a moment, when she exited the room, he forgot about everything, about his orders, about his calling. He was deafened by the baby's heartbeat and Willow's. He resisted the urge to swallow and stifled his hands in the pockets of his duster.

He had been wrong two days before: he had really forgotten what it really meant to be an Eletti. He had forgotten what lies and deceits were...it was time to remember. He took a step toward her asking, "How is the whelp?"

Willow turned her head toward the window and said, "He had a cardiac arrest half an hour ago, he's still weak...but he's better now..." She looked at him and frowning continued, "Did you see Anya?"

Spike shook his head. "Didn't see her" He said.

Willow shook her head whispering, "It doesn't matter. She is probably just taking some air. She hasn't left Xander's side ever since he was brought here."

"Maybe she is with the Slayer" He said, trying to sound...what...confident? Casual? Normal? He didn't know.

"No, they released Buffy. We had to force her to go home...she didn't want to. She wanted to stay with Xander, she feels responsible. But she needs to rest"

“Yeah, well....she’s strong headed that way” Spike said, “and so are you. You should go home, Red. You shouldn’t be here.”

“I know, I know. I need my rest. It’s just...” Willow sighed, she looked at him saying, “I’m afraid.”

Spike didn’t talk. Willow seemed to notice, but she didn’t comment, she just took a deep breath before adding, “The only time I tried to close my eyes since we came here, I had nightmares...” She tilted her head down and said, “I know I need to rest for the baby...”

“Yeah,” Spike said in a low voice, “the baby...”

~ *“That’s the only way” Xavier had said.*

“What happens if I refuse?” He had asked.

“Do I have to tell you?”

Neither of them had said a word for a second, eventually Xavier had said, “When the Slayer’s baby is borne, you will leave Sunnydale. These are the orders. In the meantime you have to fix the mess you did. And that’s the only way you can really do that.”

“So that the Eletti will kill two birds with a stone” Spike had said.

Xavier hadn’t answered to his question. He had just looked at him and had said, “These are the orders. As Eletti you have to do what you are told.”

“What if I decided to sod it all off? What if I decided to quit?”

Xavier had cocked an eyebrow at him before saying, “You can’t. Didn’t your Gheraios tell you that? An Eletti can’t quit.” He had smiled looking at him, “they let you live the vampire’s high life after China but don’t think, not even for a second, that they had forgotten about you, that they weren’t looking out for you. They always had. You are an Eletti, Spike. Did you think that dying for the cause, accepting a demon inside of you would be the last of it? It was just the beginning.”~

Willow was looking at him concerned, now. She was probably feeling that something wasn’t right. “Are you alright?” She asked.

“No” Spike said, thinking that was probably the only truth he was going to tell her that night.

“What happened?” Willow asked and Spike noticed how she looked on the verge of tears.

He couldn’t do that to her. He couldn’t break her heart. She had already been through so much for the past months.

Yet he knew he had to. He had to save her.

“Look, Red...I don’t think we have to talk about this now...”

“Talk about what?” Willow asked. “Is everything alright? Spike ...” She trailed.

“We’ll talk about it when Xander is feeling better. You have already too much going in your mind now..”

“Spike, please...talk to me” Willow said.

He knew. He knew she would push the subject. He wasn’t surprised he knew her so well. Funny, they had been together for three months, yet part of her had always been inside of him, ever since he had seen her for the first time.

Whether the first time was in a London’s Graveyard, or the Bronze.

“If there’s something you need to talk about...I’m here...” Willow said. She looked almost scared now.

Spike nodded.

~ *“Once you do that” Xavier had said, “we will talk about the rest. But for now, this is your assignment”~*

“I have thought about it a lot” He started, “actually I haven’t stopped thinking about it for two days. Even in the sodding lighthouse...that was the only thing I could think about.”

“Think about what?” Willow asked, she got close, to touch him, but he took a step back. He ignored her hurt look and said, “I don’t think I can... go on. I don’t think this is going to work”

“What...?” Willow asked, “I don’t understand...”

Spike looked at the red-head. He had said so many lies in his unlife. His whole life had been built on lies, but never had it been so hard for him to lie as in that moment.

“You” He said, “the baby. I don’t see how can we work this out. It wasn’t supposed to happen.” She was shaking her head in disbelief as he continued, “It was my fault, though. I was a selfish git when I was alive and I still am”

“Stop it!” Willow hissed. “Just...stop it! I don’t believe it! I can’t...”

Spike shrugged his shoulders. Part of him was almost happy she wasn’t buying it. She had to believe, though. Those were the orders. That was the only chance he had to save her and their baby. “I don’t care” He said, “it’s not my problem, Red. Look...”

“No, you look!” She exclaimed, she was raising her voice, and Spike knew that soon someone would tell them to be quiet. Yet he didn’t stop her. “Look at me...look at me and tell me you don’t want me...and you don’t want our baby!”

“It’s not my baby” Spike hissed. Willow took a step back, and looked at him, wide eyed, almost as if he had physically hit her.

“What are you talking about?” Willow asked in a nasal voice.

“You heard me, Red. It’s not my baby. It’s a mistake. An Eletti can’t have children. An Eletti can’t have a relationship with a human. What happened in the lighthouse served as a wake up call.” He turned his head for a second, but he returned to look at her. He hadn’t stopped looking at her ever

since they had started talking. He owed her that much. It took all of his willpower however to keep looking at her while he said, "I was sent here to protect the Slayer, not to shag her best friend!"

For a moment the sounds around them faded, and the green of Willow's eyes unnaturally glowed, it only lasted a moment then she whispered, "You are lying." She swallowed and took a step toward him continuing, "You are a spy. You are supposed to lie"

Spike chuckled. He couldn't help it and he didn't care whether he sounded like Giles had two days before. He understood now what he had felt...more than he thought he ever could.

"I am..." Spike said. "and a spy with a kid...a girlfriend? It isn't going to work, Red. It isn't worth it." He tilted his head on a side and shot an almost disgusted look saying, "Besides this isn't even my kid. It's William's and he died a very long time ago"

"I know" She said, "I was there! I watched you die."

Spike resisted the urge to blink at her words. The images he had seen in the lighthouse were finally making sense now and Spike for a moment, was tempted to tell her the truth but he didn't...he couldn't do that to her.

He wasn't going to condemn her to die.

"I was there" She continued, "I saw Drusilla sinking her fangs into your neck, I heard her sucking you dry. I know William died...just like I know this child is yours. "

"Yeah..." Spike tilted his head on a side, "well...you saw me dying. You knew what you had gotten into so...don't play the guilt card with me. I'm sorry, Red. I can't..."

"So," Willow said, her voice cracked, "this is it? You're breaking up with me? You thought about it for a while and decided to screw what we shared, what we have?"

He was drawing blood. He hadn't even realized he had dug his nails in the palms of his hands until he smelled the blood and felt it dampening his skin, yet his voice was calm when he said, "Have? What do we have Red? We've been together for three months...not a lifetime. Trust me, I know what a lifetime with someone is..."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Willow asked.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks now, and she was swallowing hard, and Spike thought it had to hurt her throat.

He didn't answer her. He couldn't talk now. He couldn't afford to say a word, or he would screw everything up.

"Aren't you even going to answer me?" Willow asked.

Spike shrugged his shoulders. He was surprised when his voice didn't come out cracked when he said, "I don't see the point..."

Willow nodded at his words. "You didn't do what I asked you..."

Spike cocked an eyebrow at her, she wiped away tears from her face and said, “Look at me...in the eyes and tell me that again, tell me you don’t want me and you don’t want our baby! Because it’s yours, Spike! It’s your baby! You are William!”

He had been taught to tell blatant lies looking a person in the eyes. He had been taught how to control his posture, the muscles of his face while telling lies. He had lied to Willow ever since she had exited Xander’s room and had done so looking at her, for most of the time. Now she was asking him to look at her...and tell her the biggest lie of all.

He looked at Willow, his eyes bore into hers and he was dimly aware of the fact that she was taking a step back. He could hear her breath, her heart frantically beating in her chest. He could hear his baby’s heartbeat, a tiny sound he already loved with everything he was.

One, last second to be a friend, a lover, a father.

“I don’t want this baby” He eventually said. “And I don’t want you. From now on, I’m back to be what I’m supposed to be, the Eletti in charge of Sunnydale’s hellmouth and the Slayer.”

He had half-expected Willow to slap him at those words...but she didn’t. The redhead shook her head and hissed, “Get out of here...”

He nodded at her words and turned, he had made just a few steps when he heard Willow saying in a voice that was barely more than a whisper, “I don’t believe a word you’re saying, Spike. I don’t know what happened to you tonight...but congratulations daddy, you have just broken my heart!”

Spike didn’t talk. He didn’t even turn to look at her, he resumed walking, feeling Willow’s eyes on him, until he entered the elevator. Even then he didn’t let his mask fall, he kept looking ahead of him.

Willow had told him once about the nightmare she had been forced to live over and over. She had told him that in that nightmare half of his heart had been ripped out of his chest, he wondered if it hurt more than what he was feeling in that moment.

He had thought about telling her everything but if he had, he’d have condemned all of them to death. Xavier had been very clear on that. If he hadn’t done what he had been ordered to do, if he hadn’t left Willow they would have sent him away...and they would have killed them all.

When the Eletti wanted a slaughter, they got it. If the Eletti decided to kill the people who knew about him and his calling, they wouldn’t set up an old ritual...they wouldn’t take such a risk. He knew that.

The elevator’s doors opened and the only thing Spike wanted was to get the hell out of there and come back to his crypt, but first he had to patrol. That night he needed the fight...he needed to kill as many demons as possible. Later...he was going to crumble down upon the weight of what he had done...what he had been forced to do.

He had just exited the hospital when he saw Xavier, sitting on a bench, his face serious, the blue-green of his eyes cold. When he had first seen him that night he had been surprised. Last time he had seen him it had been over a century before, on a rainy morning, in a graveyard he had spied from afar with Eric, protected by shadows and stones.

He had asked his Gheraios to be with him, while he had spied on that funeral. He had had Angelus' trust, but he hadn't cared about that. He had wanted to see, to mourn.

The first thing he had noticed about him that night was the smell. It had filled the air around him; he hadn't smelled it for over a century, yet he hadn't problems in recognizing it.

The air had smelled of rain and tears. Part of him had known the smell wasn't really there, that it had been his mind producing it, together with images of that graveyard, where that blonde man had looked at a grave, his heart, his very soul shattered.

Because of him.

Spike shook his head, getting close to the bench: "Are you going to spy on me forever?" He asked.

Xavier tilted his head up to look at him, he managed a weak smile before saying, "Even the Eletti are not that sadist"

"I beg to differ" Spike said. He was surprised he could talk to that man, let alone having a conversation.

Xavier shrugged, "Only until the Slayer's baby is borne, then you will have a new assignment..."

"Are you staying here?" Spike asked.

"Precisely. As your Gheraios *ad interim*" Xavier said.

"Eric is my gheraios" Spike said. The dark-haired vampire had chosen him, trained him. He had been his guide, his mentor for over a century. "What have they done to him?"

"Nothing." Xavier said. "As a general rule, we don't kill each other, you know that."

"I'm not sure I know the Eletti. I'm not sure I've ever known them!"

Xavier got up from the bench saying, "Well, welcome to the fold, then..." He looked at him for a second and said, "I don't know what they will do to your Gheraios and I don't care...I'm here to do a job, that's all. Speaking of which..."

"I broke up with her. I did what I was asked to do..." Spike said through gritted teeth. "Are you bloody happy now? Are you satisfied?"

"The answer is no, to both of your questions. I'm not satisfied. I'm not here to seek vengeance, Spike. I didn't choose to be here, I've been sent here."

"Please..." Spike started.

He was surprised when Xavier quickly moved and grabbed his neck interrupting him. He didn't squeeze it, he immediately let him go and said, "As for being happy...you, better than anyone, should know why I don't even remember how it's like...to feel happiness"

He took a step back and said, "Report tomorrow to Eric's house. We will talk about the Slayer's pregnancy."

Spike nodded at the other vampire's words. He saw him leaving, his tall figure disappeared among the shadows of the night. If he had staked him, a moment before, he would have accepted it.

When he had heard that he had died, he had mourned his death. He had felt responsible for it.

If he had staked him, he would have understood. After all he had killed his daughter, and it didn't matter that he had done so upon her request, to spare her from a fate worse than death. It didn't matter that he had seen thankfulness in her eyes as he had snapped her neck.

It didn't matter that he had been haunted by what he had done. Killing Emilie had made part of himself implode ...he hadn't been the same after that. Yet he knew that it didn't matter to Xavier, his father.

He had said he wasn't looking for vengeance. Spike hoped he hadn't lied. Because the father of the first slayer he had killed had now Willow's life, his baby's life in his hands.

~~*~*~*~*~*

She could see Spike slowly walking down the streets, his face an unreadable mask which couldn't hide though, his pain. She saw him fighting demons, his eyes dry, while his soul screamed all the grief, all the remorse he was feeling. It was delicious.

A few words and the image before her disappeared, replaced by that of a young redhead crying in a corner of a hospital room, with silent sobs which rocked her body. She could see green sparks around her growing with intensity, unnoticed by her. She was too heartbroken to notice how her baby was absorbing the dark, powerful magic still hanging in the room.

Electra licked her lips before whispering other words and the image of the redhead faded, replaced by the Slayer and her watcher making love in their bedroom, lost in each other's eyes and kisses, they were totally oblivious of what had happened to their friends, their loved ones.

She smiled and once again whispered a few words, letting out a laughter when the image of Anyanka, dressed in a black tunic, being hugged by D'Hoffryn, filled the Solomon's mirror.

She whispered a few words and other faces alternated on the mirror: the other slayer and her watcher dreaming of each other in their respective beds, matching smiles on their lips, the dark-haired boy in a coma as the brainwash consumed his will, the Gheraious waiting to be heard, the blonde Umbra with a hole in his heart, sitting in the dark of a living room, crying, the cursed vampire dreaming of his sire.

Electra whispered a few more words, and the image in the mirror changed, once again, showing a dorm room, the image was blurry, but the vampire already knew that. She saw the blonde witch turning and tossing in her sleep before letting out a weak cry. She was having bad dreams, she always had. The others didn't know her yet...but they were going to, very soon.

"So it is written" Electra said, "So shall it be done."

She covered the mirror with a blue velvet sheet and said smiling, "Sweet dreams, Tara"

Humans and demons, were all where they were supposed to be.

It had been worth spending a night in an isolation cell...to help the two Slayers. It had been worth setting up her little shows for the past months.

“Now” She whispered, “The players, my players are all here.”

She closed her eyes and tilted her head up, smiling. If she concentrated enough she could feel the energies in the air. It wasn't time, yet. Things had to happen for the next months, but it had finally started.

The end of the world had started.

The End.