

Title: Bring It On Home

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Length: ~8.000

Setting: Comics canon, post-After The Fall

Rating: R for violence and language, eventually NC17

Summary: A few months after the whole LA-in-hell thing is done, Spike and his friend the telepathic fish have some drinks. The fish convinces the vampire to take a trip to Scotland. This story is about what happens when said vampire finally decides to face up to a certain blonde over there.

Author's Notes: This is my first Spuffy story, so I'm a bit nervous. Also, I think it's fair to say that I'm not an expert writer, which will probably result in a story that is too long, too wordy, and not that much polished. Still, Seasonal Spuffy has been inspiring me for a long while with this idea, so I wanted to finally give it an honest try and put something out there during one of the free-for-all days.

My outline puts it at ten chapters, and I've written a little over half of it already; I will eventually publish it on EF (where I'm MaggieLaFey) and AO3, as soon as I finish it. For now, if you want to give the first two chapters a try, I hope they make you smile at least half as much as they do me. :) PS: I LOVE critiques and feedback. Especially considering that this isn't my first language, feel free to point out anything that sounds wrong, I'll be thankful!

[CHAPTER 1](#)

CHAPTER 2

A few weeks earlier

Spike drank his beer in silence, looking at the mix-matched crowd that filled the little pub around him. The place was right peculiar, with its thirteen wooden pillars, thirteen wooden tables scattered around the place in a random pattern, and low ceiling with some slowly-spinning fans. And that was without even considering the presence of the odd demon here and there.

He took another long drag of his beer, deeply enjoying it. Apparently, the pub was an homage to another one in Chicago, and the beer came from there. The jukebox in the corner, with its old-fashioned music playing softly in the background, while not exactly complementing the Irish look of the place, was excellent for his current bad mood.

"Thank Christ for Chicago beer," he muttered, his gaze returning to the glass of excellent brew in his hand, trying to ignore his sense of self-pity for his attitude.

"Well aren't you having the time of your unlife. Look out, you might give me a headache with all the cheer in your head!"

Spike sighed, sending a long-suffering look to the violet-coloured fish floating right above a nearby chair.

"Didn't ask you to come by, fish."

"Well, not in so many words you didn't. But your constant moping is like a cry for help -"

"Go away."

"- and seriously, what kinda friend would I be if I didn't stick around in the moment of -"

"Go. Away."

"- need."

Betta George, telepathic fish extraordinaire, moved to float above the chair opposite him at his table. Spike made a brief effort to glare him away, but after a few seconds he just shook his head and went back to scowling at the pub in general.

"So," the fish started, sounding hesitant in his thoughts. *"It's Buffy again."*

"Don't really like minding your own business, do you?"

"Nah, not really. You know me, always in the thick of things, always proactive and ready for action - when it comes to non-dangerous action, of course."

Spike glared at him some more from above the rim of his glass.

"You've forgotten what I'm capable of? Think I'm not the dangerous type?"

Somehow, even though he had no shoulders to speak of, Spike got the impression that Betta George was shrugging.

"Very dangerous, yes, just not for your mates."

Spike resolutely ignored the little spark of good feeling he got from knowing he did have a friend in the fish, and just drank some more.

"See, that's exactly what I mean. Now tell me about this blonde angel of yours."

"You ever gonna get out of my head, fish?"

"Of course not, I'm a telepath, not to mention a fish. This is the only way I can communicate with you, and pal, you are in dire need of communicating with someone. Now spill, I don't have all night."

Spike grumbled some more, but then he ended up discovering he actually didn't mind letting some of his thoughts off his chest. He hadn't really talked about this in such a long time, he didn't know where to start. So of course, he started by telling George about how Buffy and he had met, about his ridiculous threats and how she and Joyce had sent him scurrying away. And talking about her, he soon found out that saying her name caused a curious pang of pleasure-pain in his chest; he refrained from doing it for the rest of the night.

He went on to tell his friend the fish about random moments of interactions with her, mostly about those moments when she more or less spectacularly kicked his ass; he even briefly mentioned how she managed to thoroughly kick his ass even while she was sleeping with him. George soon stopped asking too many questions, and beer after beer, Spike found that talking about her made him feel alive like he hadn't for a long time... like he hadn't, in fact, since he'd been sure he'd meet her in Rome a few months earlier.

"So there I was, right, trying to ignore the Poof's presence and his stupid useless quest because *she was right there*, and what do we discover? She's goin' out with the bloody Immortal, is what! He and his sodding good looks and his sodding big house in his sodding Rome and -"

"Wait, wait, stop right there. Rome? She was with the Immortal in Rome?"

"Yeah, will you keep up? Peaches and I had to go there because of -"

"Yeah, you said that. I'd just assumed you'd started talking about another time when you two were in Scotland, where you thought you'd meet Buffy."

"Scotland?" Spike blinked at the fish floating in front of him, and got the weird feeling of missing out on something about his own memories. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Well..."

Spike narrowed his eyes at George, who was now decidedly squirming in the air above the chair opposite him.

"George... is there anything I should know?"

"Uhm, right, well..." George seemed to squirm even more, and his eyes kept shifting away from Spike. The vampire just leaned over the table, set his arms on it, and stared in silence at the fish, trying to convey just how close he was getting to being dangerous even with his friends. *"Yes. Uhm. I mentioned Scotland, because I know for a fact that Buffy and her slayer army moved there soon after the apocalypse you prevented - and hey, did I ever thank you for that? Because that definitely needs a thorough thanking -"* Spike growled, *" - but this isn't what we're talking about, you're right. So, uhm, I just know that Buffy's been staying in Scotland, and hasn't been in Rome, and certainly hasn't had any time to start a relationship there with anyone, mortal or immortal."*

Spike just blinked at him, uncomprehending. That hadn't been her?

"How'd you know that, then?"

"I know a guy who knows a guy."

Spike let his breath go slowly, between gritted teeth.

"Well, your guy was wrong. Or the other one. Whatever, I know that she was there. I could *feel* her."

"Really? Was that a creature-of-the-night-heightened-senses kind of feeling, or a more average I-want-to-see-her-so-much-I-convince-myself-she's-there kind of feeling?"

Spike just stared at him, perfectly still.

"Because the guy my guy knows, well, he's a bit of a fan of that slayer army she's got. His children were saved by them, all the way there in Edinburgh, and he's been keeping tabs on them ever since, so that he might someday repay the favour. So, you know... I trust the source, is what I'm saying."

Spike remained perfectly still some more. Then he took a slow, slow breath, and exhaled it between still-gritted teeth.

"Andrew, you little piece of crap..."

He shook his head slowly, his fists closing more strongly every second. He couldn't wrap his head around how much of an idiot he'd been, blindly believing the little nerd like a fool. And that line he'd given him and Angel about Buffy loving both of them... as if Buffy could really love him.

"Ok, Spike, come on, don't be like that. I actually think you and her might still be able to work it out, if one of you just dropped this stupid pride act and contacted the other."

"You clearly don't get it, you stupid grill-head. She's last seen me as a glorious, self-sacrificing hero, and what am I now? A pathetic excuse for a vamp, can't even move on with my non-existent life, couldn't offer her a thing."

"Well, yeah, the fact that you haven't made a single step in any direction either to move on or to go find her is a bit crazy."

Spike snorted. He didn't want to think about it, and so he mostly never did; but sometimes he couldn't ignore the thought that there he was, wasting his unlife without direction nor meaning, all because he felt lost without her.

"You know, you did have some meaning in a certain city sent to hell. And you did help save a certain fish's life, not to mention many other less resplendent beings along the way."

Spike just shook his head lightly, staring at the wall behind George; that might have been true, but it didn't change the way he *felt*, this lack of knowledge about his own purpose on this planet.

"Oh no, mister, let's not go from love crisis to existential crisis, I've told you I haven't got all night. And besides, all this still doesn't explain why you two couldn't just talk. You know. Like normal people do, instead of staying an ocean away from each other and pretending not to know about one another's existence."

"I can't just appear in her life out of nowhere!"

"First, there is such a thing as phones and phone calls. Even letters would be better than this radio silence. Weren't you two friends, by the end?"

"Well, yeah, maybe, but -"

"Second, why the hell not? Why the hell not just go there, and say one of your how-do-you-dos or whatever it is you Brits say to greet each other, and just see if you can be friends, or something else, or nothing at all?"

Spike just shook his head, exasperated.

"You just don't get it, you moron."

"No, I don't, but you're not exactly making it clear either. And I'm sure she expects you to pop up any time she's gonna be in really dire need, but I just don't understand why she wouldn't want to contact you before then, either. Maybe she's got even more damage than you, when it comes to personal relationships..."

Spike started scoffing at that, when a sudden thought struck him and made him go perfectly still, again. Because suddenly, he asked himself whether his friend was talking about her like that not out of ignorance, but out of knowledge.

"Wait a second. You keep saying that." He narrowed his eyes again, this time leaning in much closer to the Splenden Beast's eyes. "You keep saying you don't understand why she doesn't contact me, while it should be perfectly obvious." His voice got very low and very steady, and he let his body go completely immobile, except for his mouth. "And that should be obvious, because she thinks I'm still dead. Doesn't she?"

Betta George just stared back at him, his large, purple eyes wide and steady and just a tad scared.

"Doesn't she, Betta George?"

A beat.

"Uhm..."

Spike let go a low, low growl, and the fish jerked a few centimetres back away from him.

"Betta George?"

"Yes, uhm, well," George stuttered, and then visibly composed himself and started looking anywhere but at Spike. *"You see, man, I thought you already knew. I mean, I don't really go and poke all the way through your head to read all your thoughts, and I got distracted besides, so yeah, uhm."*

The two friends just stared at each other for a few long seconds, wide and scared violet into narrow, neutral blue.

"Sorry?"

Spike blinked, exactly once, unable to shake off his neutral expression. This couldn't be possible.

"That can't be possible. You're wrong."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm telling you, I'm not. I've asked around, and it turns out someone's been asking around about you, and that someone is her."

Spike just stared.

"And this didn't exactly happen yesterday, either. She's known for quite a while, which is why I'd just assumed you knew."

"You're wrong," Spike insisted, shaking his head, but he could hear the strain of uncertainty in his own voice. "You're wrong, because if she'd known all this time, why wouldn't she have contacted me?"

"Well..." started George cautiously, *"why haven't you contacted her?"*

Spike just stared at the fish, unseeing. Abruptly, he got up from the table and went to the bar counter; George called after him, but he just ignored the alien thoughts in his head. A few seconds later he was already sitting back down at the table, a shiny new bottle and glass in his hands. He filled the glass of the amber-coloured whisky, drank it down in one go, then filled another one. Only after the second glass was down did he manage to look back into his friend's huge eyes.

"I think I fucked up."

"No kidding."

"She must think I'm an idiot."

"No way."

"She must think I don't care enough to see her."

"I don't think she would have survived this far, if she were that stupid."

"Christ... what am I going to do?" He drank down another glass, the whiskey's flavour filling his nose and finally making his thoughts a slight bit less clear. He would certainly need more to get even remotely sloshed enough, but this was a good start. "If I go to her now, she'll hate me, because she knows I've ignored her for so long. If I don't, it'll just be worse when there's eventually gonna be a horrible apocalypse she'll need any help for, and I'll go to her anyway." He put his head in his hands, and closed his eyes. "What 'm I gonna do?"

"Spike, look... I'm sorry I've dumped this on you out of nowhere. But you know, you don't need to figure it all out now. And besides, it's not like you strictly owe her anything."

He raised his head and just looked at him incredulously.

"I mean, you were friends, so yeah, it would've been the decent thing to do to contact her when you came back among the living. Or unliving, anyway. Thing is, yes, you should have contacted her, but it's not like you actually owe it to her." Spike just kept staring at him like he was crazy, because he was clearly talking like it.

"The last thing she told me was that she loved me." He faintly noticed that his voice was dull, unfeeling. He was looking in the direction of George's eyes, but he hardly saw them widen; his mind was mostly elsewhere, right at that moment. "Of course, that wasn't true, and she just said it because I was dying, but... still." He shrugged lightly, the action itself dull as well. "She must hate me now."

"Well." He could feel George's uneasy stare on him, and he felt even more stupid, if possible. *"That makes it worse. Like, a ton worse. You're not coming off very well from this picture, you know."*

Spike snorted lightly, because really, that had to be the understatement of the year.

"But hey, if you think about it, this isn't much worse than what you thought before. If she didn't know now, she would still end up knowing someday. If you think about it, it's even better, because her rage must have simmered off in the meantime. Yay?"

Spike briefly thought about her rage, and a sigh escaped his lips. *Magnificent.*

"And besides, this doesn't change one important thing: you're your own man, Spike." At that, Spike's snort was very heartfelt and not at all dull-sounding. *"I'm serious. Look at what you managed in LA, all the grief you went through and got past. All the people you saved. I know we went back and erased all that happened, but people haven't forgotten you. So yeah, you get a crappy, faulty car, but the thought's what matters."* George leaned closer to Spike, and he could see himself reflected in one of the fish's big eyes. *"You're a hero, Buffy or no Buffy, Angel or no Angel. Stop thinking that you need her, or him, to define yourself."*

Spike didn't say anything to that, because what the hell could he have said? He was speechless, and he had no idea what to do next. George's words sounded soothing but didn't change the fact that Buffy Summers probably hated him by now. Or that he was, in fact, directionless.

"Stop thinking stuff like that, it won't get you anywhere. Just think about what your life is like now, and where you want to go next." George then made a sound quite close to a sniff. *"And next time we talk, at least offer me a drink. All this talk, and not even something to dull the edge... ungrateful vamp."*

Spike shook his head at him, but still couldn't find the words to answer him.

"I wasn't kidding when I said I didn't have all night, I gotta go now. Next time I psychoanalyse you, see that you have at least a drink to thank me for the effort."

Spike just stared at him dully while George floated past him towards the pub's door, but he felt one last thought of encouragement coming from the fish's mind to his before he left the place. He didn't stop staring at the place where George had been floating for a while; his brain seemed congealed, unable to think anything even remotely resembling sense. Slowly, a little part of him let him know that being psychoanalysed by a telepathic fish was, in fact, somewhat ridiculous; not only that, it was like a slap in the face. A wet, violet-coloured, fin-like slap in the face. Betta George was right: he was his own man, and it was damn right about time he started acting like it.

He snorted and shook his head at his own thoughts; he sipped slowly at his drink, letting it slosh in his mouth before gulping it down.

He wasn't really his own man and he knew it. He hadn't been for a long time... hell, make that more like, ever. First his mother, then Cecily, Drusilla, Buffy... and now, in a different way, Angel. He didn't even have the heart to scoff at the thought: it was true, pathetically true, and after George's little spiel he felt incapable of ignoring that reality anymore. Every time he tried to move out of someone else's shadow, he felt aimless and lost.

Kind of like right now.

There had been moments, years even, during his life with the Scourge and then later on while he travelled with Drusilla, when he'd felt gloriously independent from anything and anyone, even her. Those moments usually had to do with mayhem and violence: moments when he'd felt like he'd been on top of the bloody world, sod everyone else, and Dru's love had been the cherry to top it all off, because he'd deserved her and her wicked, insane love; because he'd deserved his place at the top of the world.

He thought of the thrill of his first dance with a slayer; the dangerous and delicious sense of dread and delight at fighting for his life, against a foe whose very purpose was to slay his kind. His victory had left him drunk with pleasure – much to Drusilla's delight – and feeling like he was ready to face off against the whole world, like he was finally where he belonged: victorious over the bloody remains of his enemy, his lady ready to worship him right there and then, with sex and blood and violence.

He wanted to feel nauseous at the thought, wanted to feel only regret at his horrible actions. But what he really felt was regret at not being able to be so certain of his place in the world anymore.

He shook his head and grimaced, disgusted with himself. What was wrong with him, wishing he was back to his soulless, pathetic self? The truth was that he'd been deluding himself if he'd thought he'd found his place, and would just not let go of his delusions. Not when Dru crawled back to Angelus like a bad, sick puppy, not when she left him for a sodding *chaos demon*, not when he couldn't stop himself from becoming the Slayer's (at times literal) whipping boy... he'd only been deluding himself, and he was deluding himself if he thought he could find a place in the world right now.

Like hell, I'm 'my own man'. Sodding doomed to be someone else's lapdog.

He downed the rest of his drink, disgust on his face, and rose from the table. He took the bottle with him, since that last turn down memory lane made it necessary to get properly and thoroughly sloshed later in the night; but for right now, he needed some violence. He left the pub in a hurry, slamming the door behind him, and started prowling the night for a good fight.

*

Now

The more they walked, the more uncomfortable Spike felt around her. He sighed wistfully, thinking back on a time when walking beside her during their patrols was as natural as drinking... and then shook his head slightly to himself, a bitter smile on his lips. Truth was, it had never actually been that much natural, if not for a few exceptions during their tryst and then, later, during the last months in Sunnyhell. Truth was, he was embellishing his own memories, cause life next to Buffy? Rarely could be described with the adjective 'natural'.

"So... having second thoughts already?"

He started a bit, surprised at finding her looking at him sideways.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at you, all with the head-shaking, and put-up sighing, and general not-talking. You having second thoughts about coming to say hi, already? Or did you just want a touch-and-go moment, and this call to duty is a bit too much?"

He could hear her aiming for a careless and light tone, but failing around a thousand miles from it.

"No, I... well, yes, I'm having second thoughts. More like hundredth thoughts, but not about coming here." To his utmost chagrin, his gaze had dropped to the ground while he answered her, and his feet were almost shuffling in his steps. *What a prick.*

"Whatever about, then?" she asked, while her gaze focused on their surroundings; they were reaching the edge of town by now, and he could see that their path led straight to the woods surrounding it.

"You know about what."

She sighed, exasperated, and he felt like he could punch himself for how much of a prick he was being.

"You know what, Spike, it's late. I haven't slept soundly in God knows how much, I've just had a long fight, and am probably gonna have another long fight in a few minutes too, so I'm just tired. You either talk to me, or you don't, just pick one thing and stick to it. But," she added right as he opened his mouth to answer, "I would appreciate it if you could avoid any dramatic exit before the very long battle." She looked at him then, without slowing her brisk pace, and her gaze was firm and closed. "I told Xander I had backup, so no one is coming along to lend a hand. Try not to disappear without a word when you're needed." The final 'this time' was left unsaid, but it was very obvious anyway.

And well, wasn't that a right punch in the gut.

He swallowed hard, nodded once, and looked down in shame. She didn't add a word, just walked a tad more quickly, and his gaze was drawn to her slight limp. She hadn't been exaggerating, from the look of things: her clothes were dirty, a bit ragged here and there, and if he inhaled deeply, he could smell a bit of dried blood on her.

"What are we fighting exactly, and how did they get *you* to be tired?"

She nodded curtly, her own way of accepting the subject change, and he felt a moment of relief.

Another delay for the ultimate breakdown. Bloody grand.

"It's a bunch of Grox'lar beasts, they seem to have formed a community in Scotland, and are meeting up before moving to Edinburgh. Well," she added with a satisfied smirk, "were planning to move to Edinburgh. I'm positive we'll find a way to change their minds."

Spike smirked as well, trying very hard not to turn into a puddle of goo at hearing her say 'we' like a twelve-year-old in love for the first time.

"Good news is that they aren't too smart, since they met up here, right next to Slayer-central. Bad news is that they have a taste for babies' heads and there's several of them; I had a bit of trouble fighting four of them and another demon before meeting with you. By the way," she looked at him with a very sarcastic expression, "thank you so much for leaving that demon to go around and kill again, last night. How very sweet of you to not do my job for me, I was touched."

"Oh, so that's how you didn't seem surprised to see me in the pub." She nodded at him, and he continued, a bit more sheepishly. "Dawn was coming. Not your sister, the slightly deadlier dawn... although, you know, I'm still a bit scared of your little sister too." She let out a soft laugh, and he thought he might burst with pride at the sound.

"I get the feel. Anyway, these baby-eating monsters aren't the greatest fighters, but it was a five-against-one affair, and I got a bad hit to the knee almost immediately." She grimaced, rolled her shoulders, and lowered her voice. "And we're almost there, so make with the vamp-stealth from here on."

He just raised his brows at that, and decided not to mention that her slight limp was much noisier than his boots on the forest leaves. He wasn't looking for a fight with her *that* much.

"There's gonna be a few of them, although I'm not sure on the number," she whispered. They were walking cautiously now, and Buffy had been using the light of her phone for the past few minutes, to find her way through the trees. She finally stopped, and he could see a cabin a few feet away, through the trees; the occupants didn't seem too concerned with secrecy, what with the light that could be seen through the windows. "So, here's the plan. I go from the front, and you bring up the rear; see if there's any other entrance in the back. If not, just burst through some window."

"Maximum property damage to the big, baby-eating demons, huh?"

She grimaced and shook her head. "More like, unexpected point of entry for their second enemy; might give you a slight advantage." He nodded, and she finally looked back at him, and in the dim light of the night and her phone and the faraway lights from the cabin, her eyes were dark and wide on his; his throat closed, and he had to crush the sudden urge to kiss her. "You have ten seconds, and then I'll enter from the front. Try not to wait more than a few seconds before entering after me." He nodded again, absently, and it seemed like not looking at her lips was the strongest feat he'd ever mastered. She almost seemed hesitant for a second, then smirked a bit. "Any time tonight would be good."

He nodded again, sheepish, and finally managed to turn from her; if his eyes had stopped for a second on her lips, he really couldn't blame himself so much.

(He did anyway. Didn't he come here so he could move the hell on? Fat chance of that.)

He shook his head while he silently ran through the trees and reached the back of the cabin. There, he found a door and stalked to it, listening for signs of the Slayer entering the cabin from the front; in

just a few seconds, the sounds of crashes and violent thumps from inside reached him, and he ripped the door from its hinges. He found himself inside a backroom, and the sudden olfactory onslaught made him stagger for a second: the small room was full of dead bodies, the scent of human blood a loving punch in the nose for his vampire senses. That moment of hesitation cost him, because another, much more substantial punch had him fly out the door the next second: there had been a Grox'lar in the backroom, and he'd been stupid enough to be completely blindsided by it. The beast roared and came after him, and Spike roared right back at it, and in his rage, his fist went right through the beast's chest, making it shudder and gurgle in the night. Spike shrugged it off of him, rushed back into the room, and suddenly felt like going back out there and tearing the beast to bloody pieces.

There were four bodies in the room: a man, a woman, and two headless babies. Tears threatened to fill his eyes, and a rush of hunger made his face vamp out. He roared, disgusted at the Grox'lars and at himself, and teared off the door that led to the rest of the cabin.

There had to be around ten demons in the spacious room, and at least three of them were already down. His roar had made the nearest two turn towards him, so he didn't waste time throwing himself at one of the two, rage and horror and hunger making his fists squelch in the monster's face. The other one yelled at him and kicked him off the demon, whose horned head thudded listlessly to the ground; before he could hit Spike, though, the vampire was already kicking him in the stomach with both legs, sending him away from himself.

He immediately went after him, and punched his face in as well. Two more hurtled against him from behind, but again, in a handful of seconds he found his fists going right through their thick hides, his throat emitting an almost uninterrupted roar at his foes. He shrugged their corpses off himself before launching himself against another one, and he just pummelled his chest and ugly mug with punches; he could feel the beast's blood spraying his face and torso, but he didn't care, his demon high on the violence and the smell of blood, his soul horrified and disgusted with his revolting reaction at seeing the headless babies.

"Spike!"

He stopped abruptly, trembling, and found himself on his knees with a Grox'lar corpse between his legs, its head a mess of dark green blood and broken, jagged bones. He could dimly feel that some of the blood on his hands was his own.

"Spike, that's enough."

The smell wouldn't leave his nostrils. He could still see those bodies, and that part of him wanted to go there and *suck* on those headless throats. He shuddered, and wished he had something to throw up.

"Right."

He stood, and carefully avoided Buffy's eyes, turning towards the backroom and placing himself between it and her.

"You don't wanna go there, Slayer. The cabin owners had two babies."

He didn't see her reaction, but could imagine it well enough.

"Oh, God... I hoped we could avoid this. I'll go inside and we'll -"

"No, I'll take care of it."

"Spike, you shouldn't -"

"I said no." He didn't have the strength to turn to her and look at her, not when he couldn't push back his vamp face, not when he felt like she could see the hunger in his eyes. "There's stairs there, you should check that there's no more beasties hiding upstairs. There's probably bedrooms, bring down some blankets, and I'll at least cover the bodies."

She didn't say anything, and he fought the urge to yell at her or do something else equally stupid. After a few seconds, he heard her walk up the stairs, and he entered the backroom.

The father had his eyes open, his face locked in a mask of horror. He bent down and closed them, refusing to breathe.

He looked at the two headless babies, who had been clearly thrown to the ground without care. His demon urged him to do things he wished he'd never been capable of, and he mentally stamped on it. He took the babies one after the other, and put them down behind the mother, so that Buffy wouldn't be able to see them from the room entrance.

She arrived a moment later, and he stood up and turned to her, finally managing to push back his vamp face. She had a look of worried horror in her eyes, and a pile of blankets in her arms, and he took them from her.

"All right. How's the police in this corner of the world? Savvy to this sort of thing? Can we just tell them what happened here, or should we bury the bodies ourselves and then make our traces disappear?"

"The police are... well, yeah, 'savvy' is a good enough word. I think it'd be better to just call them and see if they can find any family for them." She looked like she could throw up, and he thought that maybe the blood smell was strong enough for her human nose as well, in the room.

"All right. Get out of here, Slayer, and call the police; I'm just gonna cover the bodies with the blankets and then I'll come out too, we'll wait together."

She looked in his eyes and he couldn't tell what she was thinking; he looked down, but could still feel her eyes on his face. In that moment, he felt like any hope he'd had of ever deserving to be next to her was dead, killed by the demon inside him that saw two headless babies and thought: food.

"You shouldn't do this alone." Her voice was incomprehensibly gentle.

"You shouldn't do this, period. I've seen worse, Slayer. Just wait outside." She didn't move. "Please," he added in a tired whisper, and saw her relax.

She nodded and left the room, and he could hear her use her phone to call the police. He stopped himself from breathing in, and proceeded to move the bodies in what could pass for a respectful position. He scoffed at the thought but still moved them to lie down on the floor instead of crumpled in the corner, with the two babies between the parents, and then covered them with three blankets. He felt the sudden need to pray, but then remembered the demon that was inside him, so he just stood and left the room in silence.

Buffy was outside, leaning on the cabin wall, her phone in her hand; she didn't turn to him when he went to lean next to her.

"The police will be here soon."

He just grunted in acknowledgment, and wondered briefly if he could just scamper off. What was he doing here, anyway? How could he think he'd ever be able to be his own man, when he wasn't even a man?

"Thank you. For helping me."

He grunted again.

Buffy snorted lightly at that point, and he almost felt like smirking at her impatience. "Come on, Spike, talk to me. What was with the sudden rage fit?" He looked at her, bewildered, and she rushed to add, "I mean, aside the obvious. Don't get me wrong, I was and am furious too, but you seemed... a bit out of it."

She looked worried, and again he felt that same hopelessness come over him, making his shoulders slump. *What am I doing?* he wondered, his eyes fixed on hers. *Am I here to just crawl after her all over again? Didn't I want to be my own... whatever the hell I am?*

She must have seen some of that despair in his gaze, because she seemed to become even more worried. She stood away from the wall, and grasped his arm.

"Spike, talk to me." He just looked at her hand on his arm, and felt like hugging her and never letting go. He was so buggered. "Please," she added in a whisper.

Spike trembled, and jerked his arm away from her touch, moving a couple of steps to her side. He felt like he had to make a decision: was he tired of trailing after impossible ideals, of giving himself false hope after false hope? He couldn't be a hero, and he couldn't be a man; he could just be himself, and had to deal with what that meant.

"When I first opened that door, you know what I felt, before realising there was a demon in the room, before anything else? The smell. I smelled the blood, Slayer, and you know what that felt like?" He realised he was still trembling, but he turned and stared at her for a second, before his gaze went down to her side. Apparently, he'd made the decision, because he continued in a hard tone, "It smelled fucking *delicious*. When I went into that room and saw those babies, their throats open and bled out, part of me wanted to eat. To fucking *gorge* on that horror." He faintly realised that his whole body was shaking at that point, and he found the strength to look up at her eyes for a second. The horror and disgust in her face seemed to give him the strength to go on, while making him want to cower in a corner at the same time. "This is what I am, not a hero. So, you were wondering why I didn't want to show my mug around when I came back? This is the reason. Cause the way you saw me go, on the Hellmouth?" He shook his head, a rueful chuckle leaving his lips, and turned from her. "That was a hero's death, all right. A bloody revelation of a moment. Finally, *finally*, I was my own man. It made sense, and I could be the big damn hero of the story, and not just a crying puppy of a demon. And then, how could I top that? How could I possibly show my face around you lot, after that?"

He was pacing by then, still looking away from her, because now her horror could only have sent him running.

"This is what I am, though, Slayer. Not that. That was a hero, dying to save the world..." his voice became a whisper, and he stopped pacing, looking at the ground. "And this is me. A guy who'll literally start drooling at the sight of..." he didn't have the heart to finish that sentence, and he angrily swiped at a tear. "So yeah. I stayed the fuck away, 'cause God knows I couldn't live with you

knowing about my sorry existence, and wanted you to have this *heroic* image of me.” He gave a breathless chuckle, and felt the shaking subside to a mere tremble. “I’m just pathetic like that, I guess.”

He didn’t know what she was thinking, and he couldn’t find the strength to look at her. In the next few seconds, he heard police sirens approach, and then policemen were filling the clearing in front of the cabin, and he felt torn between wanting to thank whatever deity had spared him her answer and wanting to crucify them all over again for postponing that moment.

A policewoman approached them, and Buffy immediately took matters in her own hands; he still couldn’t look at her, but she must have collected herself from the disgust she’d been feeling, since her voice was firm and professional when she explained the situation in the cabin to the police.

After a few moments, he started to slink away, taking his pack of cigarettes from his pockets; while he was bringing one to his lips though, a hand grasped his arm, and he looked up in alarm at Buffy’s eyes. She was looking at him in her most imperious and firm gaze, and he felt like crashing to his knees in front of her.

“We’re not done, Spike. Don’t go.” He swallowed, and she gripped his arm more strongly. “Don’t, or I’ll find you and before talking, I’ll kick your ass and tie you to a chair.” He just nodded numbly at her, and after a second she nodded back and let him go.

He went to the far corner of the cabin and smoked his cigarette, trying very hard – and very likely utterly failing – to look somewhat less pathetic than he felt. At some point, some police people went and asked him for his version of the story; he answered truthfully, omitting the gory details, and feeling Buffy’s stare on him the whole time. The police thanked him for his cooperation and help, and he managed not to laugh or cry in their faces; master of self-control, that was him.

Soon enough, Buffy was told they could clear the premises, so she moved towards him and they left together, a good metre of distance between them. Considering he was thinking that nothing short of an ocean between them could bring him some semblance of comfort again, he figured he was doing all right with settling for a fourth cigarette.

“Come stay with us, Spike.”

The invite came out of nowhere, after several minutes of tense silence, and Spike almost dropped his fifth cigarette to the ground. She just kept on walking while he stumbled around, slowing down a bit after her, and seemed oblivious to his shock.

“I know you mustn’t have great memories of living cramped in between lots of slayers, and we’ve definitely increased the numbers a lot by now, but it’s gotta be better than whatever hotel you’re holed up into.” He finally caught up with her, and started feeling like he could punch her in the face if she kept on being this callous. “Besides, Dawn misses you, and you should seriously start grovelling if you want to minimise her anger.” He opened his mouth to tell her to gently fuck off if she meant to keep ignoring his bloody *soul-opening* to her, but then it clicked. He stopped walking completely.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.” Buffy stopped too, but didn’t turn right away, and he went on, raising his voice slightly. “Oh no, Slayer, you don’t get to do this.” She turned at that point, and looked at him with anger in her eyes. “Don’t you fucking dare to try this. I lay bare my sodding *soul* to you, and you don’t get to sodding *ignore* it and pretend like nothing’s bloody happened, just because you don’t like the fucking sound of it!” He was trying very hard not to openly shout at her by then, and could see the anger in her eyes grow with each of his words.

"I. Have. A. Name." She said, between gritted teeth. He was taken aback at that, and she went on. "And I'll have you know, it's somewhat pleasant to hear it said by the people you care about, instead of being called by my 'sodding' title." She tried to mimic his accent too, and between that and the meaning of her words, he was left completely speechless. "But aside from that, you know what, Spike? As I've mentioned before, I'm *tired*. So you're gonna come with me to the castle, talk to my sister and my friends, and I'll go to sleep and get some rest, and *then* I'll have this conversation with you. Because just for a change, I'm a bit too busy being the one saving people and playing at being the mature adult to get some sleep, and I can't anymore, I'm tired, so is it too much to ask you for a day, after you've made me wait for *over a year*!?"

By the end of that she was, indeed, shouting. He felt sudden shame, but apparently his brain-to-mouth filter decided this was a good time to misfire.

"'Being the mature adult'? What, because you think this is me being an immature child, here?"

"Yes, actually, Spike, I do! You're being emotional and needy, just like a freaking child!"

For a second, he thought he could see regret in her eyes at having said that. But he decided he didn't care, and walked right past her, not adding a word. That was what she thought of him, after all, wasn't it? No need to stay around and burden her with his *childish* thoughts.

"Spike, wait..."

She came after him, and he took ferocious pleasure in thinking that for once, it was her trailing after him, and not the other way around. He scoffed, and walked faster.

"Spike! I'm sorry, all right, wait!"

He actually growled at that, but turned around to stare at her.

"Oh, you're *sorry*, then that's all right, yeah? It's just *Spike*, it's not like his feelings bloody count anyway, right?"

"That's not what I mean! Argh!" She threw her arms up in the air, and he really, powerfully wanted to punch her in the face right at that moment. How dare she, after what he'd just told her... "Why do you have to make this harder! I just asked for one day, *one day*, after you made me wait for *so long* without a fucking word..."

"Oh, right, one day, because telling me you're disgusted with me has to wait for the right moment!"

"I'm not!" she yelled at him, and his eyes flared at her blatant lie. "I'm not disgusted with you!" she insisted, and when he jerked away from her, she clasped his hand in hers, making him inhale forcefully in shock. "Spike, I'm not disgusted with you. I'm *angry* with you." He tried to jerk his hand away, but she gripped it harder. "I'm angry because I thought we had something, something important, and instead you didn't even feel it necessary to mention your being alive, let alone come to say hi." He stopped trying to move away, but her grip didn't weaken on his hand. "I'm angry, because you come back and you don't even say my name. You come back, and you don't even *apologise* for your disappearance, as if I had no right to you contacting me." His eyes widened, and suddenly he realised that no, he hadn't apologised. What kind of git was he?

"Buffy..."

"And I'm angry, because when you finally do turn up, you not only fail to apologise, but you also do

this, at the end of an endless and horrible day. Agh!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms up again, but without leaving his hand. "You know me, damn it! I'm no good with words, especially emotional words! Why do you think Dawn and I are still having so many issues?" She shook her head, and he was at a loss of words. He started realising that maybe, *maybe*, he was the one in the wrong here. *Good thinking there, mate*. "So, please, Spike... please. Give me one night to sleep on it, one morning to think about... about everything. Please."

She was still gripping his hand hard, and her eyes were bright; he looked at her, and the more he looked, the more he could see how really tired she was. His mental assessment of him being in the wrong in this particular conversation quickly went from 'maybe' to 'absolutely'.

"All right, Sla... all right, Buffy. All right." She gave him a tiny, shaky smile, and after a second, finally let his hand go. Even though his fingers felt close to being crushed after all that tight gripping, he still grimaced at the absence. They started walking, still with some distance between them, but considerably less tension.

"And don't think of staying at the hotel. You'd just use the excuse to disappear again and then I'd probably only see you at the next apocalypse or something."

He shook his head at her, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Don't think I'd manage it at this point, pet." He'd given up his hero image already, after all, hadn't he?

"Still," she said with a sidelong glance at him, "I'm not taking chances."

So that was how they both went to his hotel to let him wash the green blood off himself and collect his few things, pay the clerk, and then started for her castle. Once it came into view, he realised that hadn't been an exaggeration: the thing was huge, old like old things in Europe could be, and the closer he got, the stronger feeling of danger he got. *Slayer central, indeed*.

She gestured at the massive thing, and threw him an exhausted smile.

"Home sweet home."

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