

Dimension Hopping

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/282) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/282>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: The Original Series , Buffy the Vampire Slayer
Relationship:	Spock/Buffy Summers
Character:	Spock , Buffy Summers
Additional Tags:	Time Travel , Pon Farr
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-01-26 Words: 14,817 Chapters: 1/1

Dimension Hopping

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

Summary

Buffy and Spock are both lost, a long way from home.

Notes

Written for LittleRaven in Past Imperfect Future Unknown 2020

It was pure luck that Buffy was near the portal when it opened. This dimension, while not the worst Hell-dimension out there, wasn't exactly the nicest either. Even a Slayer wasn't safe wandering around in the open plains where portals were most likely to form, so she tended to stick to the villages, fortresses, and towns that nestled in the foothills. But she needed money to live on, and bringing in a Grankthror would get her the funds to live on for a *long* time. And the Grankthror lived on the plains.

She was looking for tracks, using her spear as a walking stick, when her Slayer senses started tingling and she dropped flat to use the grass as cover. There was a nice big bush about ten feet away, but it was too far to reach.

A portal opened out of thin air, and spat out a human-shaped being in a red tunic and black pants. The being picked itself up—flat-chested, so probably a man; mostly human-looking, except for pointy ears—and glanced around. Seeing the portal, he lunged for it, but the thing had already faded. Buffy could have told him it wouldn't do him any good; unless you had staked things out ahead of time and put up wards to force it into a longer lifespan, they didn't last long enough to go back through.

He had impressive reflexes, though.

Seeing the portal disappear, he picked up a black case hanging from a shoulder strap and flipped open the top. Buffy could hear beeping and whistling from it.

"Fascinating," he said.

Buffy put a hand across her mouth to keep from crying out. He spoke *English!* She hadn't heard that language from any lips other than her own for ... a long time.

He wasn't Human, but he wasn't a vampire, either, nor any kind of demon she recognized. If he was a threat, she could probably take him.

And if he wasn't a threat ... then perhaps she would no longer be so alone here.

She stood up. "Hello," she said. She thought about making some sort of witty remark, but she'd fallen out of practice.

The man spun to face her, and pointed the black case at her. It was a device, she could see now. Metal and plastic and leather. Probably not magical; magic doohickeys tended to be more elaborately decorated, and also to not be made of plastic. A gun-shaped object was clipped at his hip.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Spock. Where are we, and how did I get here?"

"I'm Buffy Summers," Buffy said. "And we're in a Hell-dimension. Sort of. Hell-adjacent. Dangerous, but not actively evil. I can't pronounce the name of it. And you fell through a portal just now."

"I see," Spock said. He fiddled with the device a bit, but kept most of his attention on her. "Do you know how the portal came to be? And how another one might be created?"

Buffy shrugged. "Random portals form on the plains every so often. Usually they're too short-lived to be useful, unless you know one's coming ahead of time and put up wards to make them last longer. Sometimes they spit people out from elsewhere. Sometimes they're cyclical, so a portal to the same place and time will come back every so often."

"Do you know if *this* portal is cyclical?" Spock asked. He continued to wave the device around, frowning at it occasionally.

Buffy shrugged. "Sorry. Wish I could tell you, but I'm only passing through. Where are you from?"

"I am from a starship called *Enterprise*," Spock said.

"Starship," Buffy repeated. "So, you're not a demon, you're an alien?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Yes. I am a Vulcan. But my ship's home port is Earth. You appear to be Human. Are you from Earth?"

"Yes," Buffy said telling herself not to get excited. "California, originally. But my Earth doesn't have starships. What year is it, where you're from?"

"In Earth years, it is 2279," Spock said.

Buffy's heart sank. Two hundred and seventy years. They'd all be long, long dead, except for *maybe* Spike and Angel. "I'm from 2005," she said.

"Indeed?" Spock said. "Is your continued survival due to some preservative function of this space, or an intervention from those who inhabit it, or merely a function of us having come through different portals?"

"Pretty sure it's just the portals," Buffy said. "Different portals go to different times and different places. If the portal comes on a cycle, it'll be constant to one time and place. There are a couple of cyclical ones on the edge of the plains that people use to travel back and forth for trading and stuff like that. One of them even goes back to Earth! I've never tried it; from the way they described it, it sounds like it opens up somewhere in South America, before the Spanish showed up."

"Not exactly helpful for either of us," Spock said.

"Nope. I like running water and electricity," Buffy said. "And being able to speak the language." Though she'd thought about it; she wasn't good with languages, but she'd learned enough of the local language to get by. She could learn at least that much again, and she'd be with other humans, then ... but it would mean giving up hope of ever going home, and she wasn't quite ready.

Spock's thingy beeped, and he frowned at it and started slowly circling the space where the portal had been. He raised an eyebrow at whatever he saw there. "Fascinating," he said.

Buffy had learned patience, in the time she'd been here, so she waited while he did his thing. It wasn't like there was a time limit on her hunt, and her Slayer senses told her that there were no predators or demons close enough to be a problem.

But her patience wasn't unlimited. "Watcha doing?" she asked at last.

"Gathering as much data as I can about this portal and the surrounding environment, in the hopes that it will allow me to determine a way to reopen it. Or, at least, when it is likely to return, if it is cyclical."

"Cyclical portals tend to have at least a couple of weeks between open periods, even when they're being kept open by magic."

"Magic?" Spock asked.

"Yeah," Buffy said. "Mostly crystals and candles and chanting. No blood sacrifices." If they'd had blood sacrifices here, the sort of magic that killed and maimed and hurt people ... Buffy didn't know what she would have done.

"There is no such thing as magic," Spock said. "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

"Boy, are *you* in for a surprise."

Spock looked up at her and lifted one eyebrow, before returning his attention to his doohickey.

"Do you know how the portals are stabilized and held open?" Spock asked.

"Nope," Buffy said, popping the 'p'. "I've seen it done, but I've never had much of a talent for magic."

"Are there experts who could come here to open it for me?"

Buffy shook her head. "The shamans won't come this far out into the plains because it's taboo. The mages won't come this far out into the plains because it's too dangerous, and they get enough hazard pay just maintaining the gates on the edges of the plains close to the towns and cities."

"Hazard pay? Is there a particular hazard of the plains that is not readily apparent?"

"Hoo, boy, what *isn't* hazardous?" Buffy said with a mirthless laugh. "The local wildlife is pretty nasty. Stuff's either big and mean, small and venomous, or travels in deadly swarms. Or all of that at once. The mundane weather is pretty bad—they get these huge storms, and lots of

tornadoes, and you can't always see it coming. (We probably don't have to worry about that, it's the wrong season.) And the *magical* weather is worse. Besides the portals, there's places where a geyser of magic will come outta nowhere and if it hits you, you better *pray* all it does is change you a funny color. And time doesn't always run the same way here it does other places. You walk through the wrong area, you may get back to town and find it's been a month since you left when *you* only thought it was a week. And the further out into the plains you get, the worse it is."

"Yet here we are," Spock said. "I arrived here by chance, but you travelled out onto the plains on purpose."

Buffy shrugged. "I'm a Slayer. Which means I have mystic senses that can spot the worst of the magic problems in time to avoid them, and tough enough and strong enough to fight off the wildlife."

Spock aimed his thingamajig at her again. "You appear to be a standard human."

"Appearances can be deceiving." Buffy cocked her head. "Are you done?"

"I would prefer to remain long enough to get a baseline reading, if possible," Spock said, "although I could forgo that if there were an immediate danger."

Buffy reached out with her senses. Giles would be so proud of how much she'd honed them, if he only knew. "Nothing close by. Lot of things scatter when a portal pops up, 'cause you never know what might fall out of it, and you probably don't wanna fall *into* it."

"I see," Spock said. "Would you be willing to stay with me, and guide me to the population centers when my readings are done?"

"I've got nowhere better to be," Buffy said. "I mean, I do need to take down a Grankthror while I'm out here—that's how I make my living—but it's not like I've got a timecard to punch." She went over to the bush and sat in its shade, using her pack as a backrest.

Buffy sat and watched him, and eventually got bored enough to meditate for a bit, a light trance that focused on her senses while letting her mind drift. Nothing could sneak up on her, but she wasn't fully awake, either. It wasn't quite as good as sleep, but it did refresh her and would let her go longer without sleeping ... which was a very good thing, here on the plains.

Spock roused her as the sun was beginning to go down. "What preparations should we make for camping tonight?"

"No fires—those interact with any magic in the area in a weird way, sometimes." Buffy opened her pack and brought out the Kthrobar-wool blanket that took up a third of the space. "Even a small fluctuation can make them flare up, and then you've got a grass fire and you're dead. This blanket has a charm on it that will keep us warm, but I only have the one, so we'll have to share." She glared at him. "I warn you, try anything and you'll regret it."

"I give you my word I will not harass you in any way," Spock said seriously.

"Good," Buffy said. She rummaged around in her pack some more, inventorying supplies with an eye to how long they would last with two of them.

"How much do you eat a day, relative to a human?" Buffy asked.

"My caloric intake is similar," Spock said, "although I am a vegetarian by choice. My water needs, however, are significantly less. My homeworld is much dryer than Earth."

"Okay," Buffy said. How much did a regular human adult eat, anyway? She ate more than a normal human, she knew that, but it had been long enough since she'd lived with other humans that she'd forgotten what was normal.

"How long do you want to stay, anyway?" Buffy asked. "A couple of days is not a big deal, but I don't have the supplies to stay here forever."

"Twenty-four hours will probably be sufficient, barring unforeseen changes," Spock said, "as the readings are falling into a fairly narrow and predictable pattern, and have since .97 hours after the portal closed. Longer study would be preferable, but probably not practical."

"We should probably mark the spot," Buffy realized, "so that we can find it again if we have to get out of here." She pulled the ribbon out of her hair, and tied it to the top of the bush where it would be visible a long ways off.

"Is that likely?" Spock asked.

"Who knows?" Buffy said. "Sometimes everything is calm and simple. Sometimes everything goes wrong at once. Better safe than sorry."

"Indeed," Spock said. "Do you wish to split the night up into watches?"

"You can keep an eye out for predators, but you won't be able to sense a magic flareup," Buffy said. "So there's no point in you taking a watch." She took a few pieces of dried fruit out of the bag of trail mix, and tossed it to him. He caught the bag deftly and began picking through it, examining everything and pointing his doodad at it before eating.

Buffy took the stopper out of her canteen and took a swig. "I can meditate, I'll be fine. Slayers can go without sleep longer than most people can—I'll just sleep a lot when we get back to safety."

"I see," Spock said.

"Thirsty?"

"Yes," Spock said.

She passed over the canteen.

He took a few swallows and handed it back. "Thank you. May I ask what a 'slayer' is? Is it a title, or a description?"

"It's a sacred calling," Buffy said. He didn't need to know the long history of the Slayers and the Watchers and the whole story of how 'one girl' became many. "Do you know about demons?"

"I know of various mythologies with supernatural creatures," Spock said.

"How about vampires?"

"Fictional undead creatures popularized by Bram Stoker's novel 'Dracula.'"

Buffy winced. "Yeah, no. Not so fictional at all. And demons aren't just myths, either. Most of them come from other dimensions, and when they end up on earth, they often like to eat humans. Or devour their souls. Or murder them for various demonic rites. Vampires are the most common, but honestly the least trouble. They're faster and stronger than humans, but not by much, and they die really easily. You stake 'em in the heart, and poof! Dust in the wind. A lot of the others, though, are either just really tough in general, or only vulnerable if you have special knowledge about them. A slayer is a girl given special power by the Powers That Be, so she can slay any demons that need slaying. Speed, strength, resilience, *and the* ability to sense things most humans can't."

"I see," Spock said. She could tell he didn't believe her. And it wasn't like there were any vampires to use as a handy example.

"So, what are your readings good for?" Buffy asked.

"I do not yet know," Spock said. "That will require more analysis. But the patterns in the subspace fields are intriguing. If I can compare it with the cycles of other portals, and study the methodology for keeping portals open, I *may* be able to predict when it will open again and hold it open long enough to travel through."

"That's a lot of ifs," Buffy noted. "And that's assuming that it *is* a cyclical portal."

"True," Spock said. "Yet it is preferable to try and be proven wrong, than to lose hope and then later learn that an effort might have fixed the problem."

"True," Buffy said.

It was a long night, even with meditation. On the bright side, Spock added some body warmth, so she was a little more comfortable than usual. Even enchanted Kthrobar-wool wasn't quite up to the chill of the plains.

On the downside, even asleep, he was very distracting. He was the closest guy she'd seen to a human man since she got here. And he was cute. And he smelled nice, though that would change, given the lack of bathing facilities. Buffy didn't normally go for geeks, but he was nothing like Jonathan or Andrew or Warren. He seemed nice.

She'd warned him off of funny business, but maybe *she'd* like to start some herself?

Buffy shook her head. Now was not the time for distractions. Once they were off the plains, then maybe. She firmly put the thought of sex out of her head, and started to meditate.

The next day, Spock busied himself with his whatsit while Buffy sat there and watched him.

"You know," Buffy said at last, "my family would be shocked to see me sitting like this. Not talking, I mean."

"You are talking now," Spock said, not looking up from his gismo.

"Yeah, but I *haven't* been, all morning. I used to be really talkative. Banter, that was me. Witty lines for every occasion."

"What happened?"

"I got stuck here," Buffy said. "There's not much point in talking when nobody understands you. I mean, I did learn the language eventually—sort of—but it's hard to have any sort of repartee when you're mispronouncing everything and you have to keep it simple so people can understand you."

"Conversation is a skill that must be practiced," Spock said. "May I ask how long you have been here?"

"Sure, you can *ask*," Buffy said, "and I'd tell you if I knew for sure. It's been a couple years, at least, and possibly more. Local years, I mean. Who knows how long that translates to in Earth years. I spent a lot of time sick, too—I was poisoned by a swarm of shth'Grhombs, like five minutes after I got here. If I weren't a slayer, I'd be dead. I was hallucinating really badly for a *long* time."

"Is that why you weren't able to return home?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, it wasn't a cyclical portal. Just some idiot adolescent demon with an untrained mage-talent forcing open random doorways and hopping through to go have fun where its parents couldn't see. Its idea of 'fun' included attacking what it *thought* was a defenseless human."

"That is a definition of 'fun' that I am not familiar with," Spock said.

"Yeah, me too," Buffy said. "Anyway, it attacked me, I beat it up, it escaped and triggered a jump home, I caught it just as it went through without realizing what was up. And here I am."

"It couldn't send you home?"

"Nope," Buffy said. "It was a random crack between dimensions. No way of duplicating it. And while the Watchers and Slayers Council has some pretty good witches on staff, they would need at least *some* idea of where I went to figure out how to come get me. I mean, if I set out on a quest from one hell-dimension to another, I *might* eventually find one with a portal to the right time and place. Maybe. Or I might just end up stranded in a worse dimension than this. If I'd had *any* leads, *any* clue on what dimensions might lead me home, I'd have tried it, but ..." she shrugged. "You know, nobody here's ever heard of vampires? Or, obviously, vampire *slayers*. Or any of the other demons and stuff I've fought over the years."

"I would think that would be a good thing," Spock said.

"Well, it's sure nice for the local property values, I can tell you that," Buffy said. "Nothing like a vampire infestation or a hellmouth to drive home prices down. But what it also means is that nobody here has had contact with any of the dimensions that regularly have contact with Earth."

"I thought you said there was a portal to pre-Columbian South America," Spock said.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure it's actually *my* Earth," Buffy said. "Or, who knows! Maybe the Americas didn't have vampires until White people came, I don't know. Anyway, if there was a chance—*anything* familiar, *anything* that seemed like it would lead me home—it would be worth it. I tried randomly going through portals, for a while, and never found anything useful ... and I almost got stuck someplace a lot worse more than once."

"I am sorry you were stuck here," Spock said.

"I hope you're *not* stuck here," Buffy said.

"Does it distract you if we talk?" Buffy asked, a while later.

"No," Spock said. "Monitoring the tricorder's work is not mentally taxing."

"Tell me about where you're from," Buffy asked.

"What would you like to know?"

"Everything," Buffy said. "What's Earth like? What's your planet like? How'd you end up going through that portal?"

"Earth is the capital planet of the United Federation of Planets," Spock said. "It is unified under a single government, and a peaceful, prosperous place. You are from the Late Capitalist period, so it may interest you to know that poverty has been eradicated. All residents of the Federation receive what they need to live regardless of what employment they choose, so all are free to pursue whatever vocations they desire. Earth is known for its vibrant arts scene, as well as a profusion of small-scale agriculture. In addition, of course, to its political, scientific, and military contributions to the Federation, which are not inconsiderable."

"Everyone gets paid whether or not they work?" Buffy asked. That would have made the years just after Mom's death *so* much easier.

"The Federation does not have a monetary economy as you would understand the term," Spock said. "Housing, food, clothing, medical care, and education are free."

Buffy scrunched up her face. "Who pays for all of that?"

Spock launched into a description of Earth's economy that sounded pretty weird to Buffy. "That sound's nice, but I don't think it would actually work," she said dubiously. Her Dad would have *definitely* said it couldn't work, and he was a selfish jerk, but he was also a successful businessman, so surely he had to know *something* about economics?

"Unsurprising, given the state of early Twenty-First Century economic understanding. Theorists of that period believed that a great many of their assumptions about social behavior as regards both individual and communal resource allocations were universal. Many of their core beliefs were not only not universal, but not true even of their own society."

"Great," Buffy said. "Another Giles." Although, at least with Giles she had eventually learned his jargon well enough to work with him. "Break that down into smaller words, please, I dropped out of college."

"Every economic system depends largely on the culture in which it is practiced," Spock said. "A great many sociological, anthropological, and psychological factors are at play. What do people think is fair, and reasonable? What do they value? Who has access to resources? Whose needs are prioritized, and why? When making decisions with financial consequences, what factors are seen as important, and which are not? All of these questions, and more, have a deep impact on the way the economy functions, both on an individual level and a societal level. Change the answers to those questions, and the economy changes."

Buffy thought back to her psychology classes. "Right. People are complicated, and any decision a person makes is going to be affected by a lot of factors, only some of which they're aware of on a conscious level. And that affects what they do with their money. Change enough peoples' minds, and you've changed the whole society. Add money, and you're talking about a different economy."

"Precisely," Spock said. "In the twentieth century, economics was considered its own separate branch of science. In my time, economics is a subdiscipline of sociology. And the twentieth century was much given to believing that economic systems were objective truths. You are probably familiar with your culture's tendency to take one narrow perspective—that of the middle and upper class heterosexual white male—as normal, and the default by which all others were judged. Twentieth century economics took the beliefs and practices of *that* subset of society, and presumed that they were universal human traits, without ever bothering to test their hypotheses. As it turned out, they were not even universal in Western society of that period, much less intrinsic to humanity as a whole."

Buffy thought about that for a bit. She hadn't been able to really *talk* to someone since she fell through this place; she'd grown used to her own thoughts treading and re-treading the same ground. Listening to him talk felt like breaking out of a cage. It reminded her, a little bit, of college: not the boring classes, but the good ones, the ones that had blown her mind. Like Walsh's, before she'd turned out to be evil. She hoped Spock didn't turn out to be evil. "So, you're saying that all their theories were wrong because they didn't know enough about different people."

"Precisely," Spock said. "They also attempted to force every possible industrialized economy into one of two categories, either capitalist or Marxist, regardless of whether there was any value or justice to that categorization. One of them was good, and one was evil—and which was which depended on the economists own political ideology."

"My Dad was a businessman," Buffy said. "He worshipped the free market. Not literally, but I know what you're talking about."

"Many did, despite the fact that the so-called 'free market' was notoriously neither free nor fair."

Buffy thought for a bit, and came up with examples that proved his point. Eventually, their conversation turned to his home planet's economy, which had also eradicated poverty, though in a different manner, with most issues of basic needs met by the clan, with the government only stepping in when the clan failed to do so. Buffy thought *that* was rotten, and told him so; she'd had enough problems with both of her parents to be leery about the family being the one to take care of everything. (It felt disloyal to Mom, but on the other hand, Mom had thrown her out, once. And institutionalized her before that.) And more distant relatives had done nothing but send cards when Mom died. Spock assured her that failures were rare, but Buffy was even more skeptical than she was about his description of Earth's economy.

The crucial thing, though, was that if Spock managed to figure out how to get the portal open long enough to go home through, and if Buffy chose to go with him, she wouldn't need to worry about having no qualifications for any 23rd Century jobs—she'd get a place to live and money to live on. Not much, but she wouldn't have to worry about starving.

If he could get it open. If she chose to go with him.

They chose to spend another night there, and set out to track a Grankthror in the morning.

As they walked, Spock asked her about the Grankthror: how intelligent they were (fairly dumb, for a predator, but they made up for it by being vicious as hell), if they travelled in packs (no, thank God, they were hard enough to take down one-on-one), what they ate (anything they could get), what sort of tactics they used (spitting venom that paralyzed their prey, and then eating them alive), if they had different sexes and how to tell the difference between them (Buffy had no idea, they all looked the same to her and it didn't matter to her customers).

Also, he wanted to know what tactics she used to subdue them. "I chuck this spear through the hole they use to spit venom," Buffy said, wagging her spear, "and then I dart in and put an axe through their skull. Usually takes a couple of whacks to get it. They do have veins close to the surface in their neck, but their blood is toxic, and there really isn't a way to get at them from any direction other than right below them, which means you can't avoid getting splashed."

"I see," Spock said. "A formidable beast. I carry a weapon, a phaser, which can kill from a distance; perhaps we should try that."

"A phaser?" Buffy asked. "What's that?"

Spock took the gun off its hip. "A phaser is an energy weapon. Starfleet phasers fire nadion particle beams, and can be adjusted to achieve different effects such as heat production, rendering a victim unconscious, killing the victim, or even vaporizing many materials."

"Uhuh," Buffy said. "And those Nadya-whatevers, what are those?"

"Nadions are artificially-generated particles capable of liberating atomic nuclei which disrupts nuclear bonds within atoms and molecules."

"Nuclear?" Buffy stopped short. "That thing is a *nuke*?"

"Not in the sense you mean," Spock said. "It is not capable of producing either a fusion or a fission reaction, without additional materials and tools which are almost certainly not available here. However the principles from which it is derived were discovered through studies of nuclear physics. It is not hazardous to you, unless it is fired at you while set to kill."

Buffy wasn't quite sure she understood what the difference was, but Spock was pretty clear that there *was* a difference. She started walking again. "You can try, but the Grankthror are pretty resistant to magic attacks—that's why the mages and shamans hire other people instead of hunting themselves. If their magic is anything like the Nadya-whatevers your gun makes, it's not going to work. And if I wait to take out the venom-hole, it'll probably be too late. Those things have a range of almost 100 yards, and they can run *really* fast. It'll only take it a few seconds to get within spitting distance of us. How about I take out the venom-hole, you try and shoot it, and if that doesn't work I'll try the axe, okay?" She doubted the phaser would work, but even if it didn't, staying back to try would probably be safer for him than trying to fight a Grankthror.

"Very well," Spock said.

It usually took Buffy a few days to track one down, because Grankthror had such large territories, but she actually found fresh tracks only an hour or two after they settled on a plan. Buffy shrugged off her pack, checked that her axes were in their places on her hips and ready to go,

and settled her spear-butt firmly in the pin of the atlatl. (Why Giles had never suggested an atlatl and spear to her, she didn't know, but they were fun to use and let her throw spears farther and faster than even *she* normally could.) She held the spear and atlatl at shoulder height, elbow tucked to the side of her body, in a posture that would be comfortable for hours, and which would also be fairly quick and easy to throw from.

Spock held his phaser with the same competent air he did everything with.

"You ready?" Buffy asked.

"Yes," Spock said.

"Let's go," Buffy said. "Stay quiet, we don't know how close it is." It couldn't be terribly close, or she would sense it, but those tracks were pretty fresh.

Buffy crept quietly along the tracks, Spock behind her. She hadn't worked with a partner since she fell into this place; she worked differently than the other hunters, and besides, it was hard to hunt with someone you could barely understand. It would be too easy to miss something in the heat of battle.

It was nice to have someone at her back again. True, he was no slayer, and he was probably as vulnerable as any of the Scoobies had been. Still, it had been good then, and it was good now.

They crouched low as they went, so that it would be easy to duck down into the grass if the Grankthror appeared unexpectedly.

Eventually, Buffy slowed. "See that ridge up ahead?" she murmured. "I'm pretty sure the thing we're tracking is on the other side of it. If we can get to the top, and then pop up and take aim, that's probably our safest bet." She lifted her spear up, ready to throw it.

"Agreed."

The crept towards the ridge, slowly, not wanting the beast on the other side to know they were coming. They were about halfway to it, when the Grankthror appeared at the crest.

It saw them just as they saw it. She was close enough to *see* the venom hole flexing.

"Shit," Buffy said as she whipped atlatl forward with all the strength and accuracy she could muster. The thing was less than a hundred yards away, they were within its range already! The spear hit its target with an audible crunch, and the Grankthror roared and started to charge.

Beside her, Spock fired his phaser. It did nothing.

Buffy took out her two axes and darted forward to try and get within the thing's reach before it could recover from the attack. Quick as a flash, she reached the Grankthror and leapt onto its back.

It took several blows in the right place to break through the skull into the brain beneath, and one or two more to actually kill it. She gripped its neck with her thighs, and brought the two axes down repeatedly, quickly, in a rolling rhythm.

It yowled and shook, trying to shake her off, jerkier than a bronco ride in a bar, and with more force. Buffy clung and kept up her rhythm. It threw itself into a sideways roll just as her axe bit through the skull. The momentum of the roll threw off her aim, and her axe bit into the side of the crack and lodged there. She yanked it free with a jerk as the Grankthror landed on its side and twisted onto its back trying to scrape her off.

Buffy arched her back, pressing against the ground, to try and gain some space for an axe. It didn't work. She dropped one and grabbed her knife from its belt sheathe instead, stabbed it deep into the creature's brain and twisted.

Buffy was being crushed, and her left leg was on fire—injury or venom splash? She couldn't tell—but she kept at it with the knife. The beast yowled again, and died.

Leaving Buffy trapped under its corpse. Its twitching, reeking, venomous corpse. A bit of brain leaked out from the hole in its head, and landed on her with a plop. Gah. At least it wasn't blood.

"I'm okay!" she called to Spock. She gritted her teeth, shoved at the beast, and wriggled out from under it as best she could. "Don't come near, okay?"

"Is the corpse hazardous?" Spock asked.

"Yeah," Buffy said. "The venom and blood all. But also, I forgot to mention: if you come within about twenty feet of a dead Grankthror, you have to go through a purification ritual when you get back to the town, and the first step is burning all the clothes you've worn since you were close to it."

"Does that rule also apply to proximity to a *live* Grankthror?" Spock asked.

"I don't know," Buffy said. "It's not like most people who get that close to a live Grankthror without killing it live to tell the tale." She poked at her leg. It wasn't venom, thank God, just a twisted knee that would be good to go tomorrow.

"I see," Spock said. He paused. "How much of the carcass will you be transporting back with us?"

"All of it," Buffy said. "Put a rope around the neck, and drag it along on its back. The carapace is smooth enough that it slides fairly good." She stood up and hobbled a little ways away from the Grankthror, enough so that the smell was less overwhelming.

There was another pause. Spock came into view; he'd circled around to where he could see her, staying far enough away that he wouldn't need the purification ritual. "Ms. Summers," he said, "you appear to have abilities beyond those of a standard Human."

She shrugged. "I told you I was a slayer. And what that meant."

"Where did your abilities come from?" Spock asked.

"From the Powers That Be," Buffy said. "The great cosmic forces that rule the universe."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Through what mechanism?"

They were doing this now? "Thousands of years ago, demons ruled the earth, and humanity was being wiped out. The shadow men put the power of a demon into a girl, giving her the strength and speed to be able to fight the demons. Some girls have the power to become slayers, some don't. When one slayer dies, another is Called. Any particular reason you're asking?"

"In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, certain scientists who believed in eugenics began using genetic engineering to try and create a better human—stronger, faster, smarter. While your speed and strength are well outside human norms, they would be within the realm of possibility for an augmented human."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. Walsh wasn't the only one? Gross. "Well, there's no genetic engineering in me, just mystic powers passed down since before history began."

"I see," Spock said. He tilted his head. "Are you injured?"

Buffy shrugged. "Yeah, but it'll be better by tomorrow. There's a bit of processing I need to do to the Grankthror, should be able to get it done today. We can camp overnight, and start heading back to town tomorrow. Be there in three days."

"Will scavengers be attracted to the corpse?" Spock asked.

"Nah," Buffy said. "Not if I spread some of the venom around—the only thing that doesn't care about the venom is the Zroomble, and they're dormant this time of year. Everything else will wait until the venom has degraded enough to be safe before coming to try and eat the corpse, and by that time we'll be long gone." She shifted, and winced. "Hey, there was a clump of bushes a ways back, could you get me some branches? About four feet long, with the leaves and stuff still attached?"

"Very well."

By the time Spock was back with the branch, Buffy had retrieved her spear and yanked it out of the venom hole. She took the branch where he had laid it, and shoved the leafy end into the venom hole, coating it. She then used the branch to paint a wide circle around the corpse, as a deterrent for any creature tempted to start snacking early. Then she got to work.

While she worked, Spock asked questions about what she was doing, and about Grankthror biology. He kept his tricorder pointed at her. Buffy answered as best she could, although she didn't know all the answers. It was enough like working with Giles that she felt a sharp pang of homesickness and grief. The difference was, this time she was giving answers instead of being lectured about them.

Giles and Spock would probably have really liked each other. They could have geeked out about the demon together. Except the two men would never meet, and Buffy would almost certainly never see Giles again.

"So, what are we going to do about camp?" Buffy asked. "If I'd gotten any venom on me, we'd know it by now, but I betcha I smell bad enough you probably don't want to share a blanket with me."

"If we can find a few rocks, I can heat them up with my phaser," Spock said. "That will provide sufficient heat for me overnight. I can take watch. You need to sleep, to recover."

Buffy nodded. "Sure," she said. "We can just hope there aren't any sudden magic flares overnight."

The next morning, Buffy was stiff but her leg felt a thousand times better. And she smelled even worse. "Ugh," she said. "This is so gross. I miss plumbing. Back on Earth, when I slayed something, I could go home and take a *shower* and throw my clothes in a washing machine."

"Did you slay often?" Spock asked, looking remarkably chipper for someone who had meditated instead of sleeping. His beard was coming in thickly; it looked really good on him.

"Yeah," Buffy said. "I lived on a Hellmouth. That is, a place with connections to various Hell dimensions, so that you get a lot of demons and mystic energy and stuff like that. Mostly vampires, though. Lots of vampires. Vampires are my favorite. Easy to kill, mostly pretty dumb, they turn to dust so there's no body to dispose of *or* gunk to get on your clothes." She shook her canteen and wished she had enough water for more than the perfunctory sponge bath she'd given herself last night. But she didn't, and you needed soap to get out the Grankthror smell, anyways.

With a sigh, she ate her breakfast and stuffed her blanket back in her pack.

The hike back to town was long, frustrating, and smelly. The Grankthror didn't smell any better after being dead for a few days, and she wasn't sixteen any longer—even with Slayer healing, her knee was *not* happy with the extra work of hauling the carcass along behind her. And Spock walking far enough away from the Grankthror that he wouldn't need to burn his clothes meant that they were too far to talk conversationally. (He walked upwind, she noticed—lucky him.)

But when they stopped for the night, it was nice. She hadn't spoken English in years; nobody here knew it. She'd learned the language the

locals spoke, but even if she'd been good with language there were some sounds she just couldn't make, and some nuances she just didn't get. Just being able to *talk* was a relief she couldn't put into words. Ironically.

And she'd spent so long inside her own head that she was finding it a bit difficult to come out of it enough to hold a long conversation.

"Wait," she said, attention caught by something he said, "you mean you don't feel any emotions?" They'd been talking about what their homes were like—he was just as curious about 20th Century Earth as she was about his planet.

Spock paused, tilting his head. "Although that is often the way we are perceived—and Vulcans will occasionally work to enhance or confirm that belief—it is not actually the case. We do have emotions; however, through the use of meditation and other mental disciplines, we endeavor to master them so that we live by pure logic and rational choice."

"And does that work?" Buffy asked.

"Yes," Spock said. "The discipline is not perfect, but it is sufficient."

"So, perfect logic and rationalism," Buffy said. "What do you do when you get angry?"

"I acknowledge the emotion, attempt to find the root cause, and release it," Spock said.

"Uhuh," Buffy said. "And happy?"

"I acknowledge the emotion, and seek to enjoy it in good order so that pursuit of my own individual emotional well-being does not override logic and compassion."

"And when you're horny?" She'd been daydreaming about what they might do together once they were back to where people lived and she'd had a bath. He was *very* good looking, and good company in general.

"Sexual cravings are not an emotion, but an appetite like any other, to be regulated as appropriate." His face was completely straight as he said it, no hesitation, no shame, no innuendo. Did that mean he never had sex, or that he boinked like rabbits when the urge took him, or something completely different?

"If the beast is truly that noxious," Spock said, from a safe distance away, "why are you bringing it back to the town?"

"Oh, it's not going to the town itself, there's a processing hut safely away from everything else," Buffy said. "And they use pretty much all of it. I mean, some of it is too toxic for anyone to use safely, and that gets disposed of. But the venom is used in some potions (though it's highly regulated), and the skin makes some of the toughest leather you'll find anywhere, and they've got a trading partner in another dimension where the rotting flesh is a delicacy. And the spleen is a major part of a popular aphrodisiac. And the other organs have other uses, too."

"Fascinating," Spock said. "How did they hunt the creatures before you arrived?"

"Well, the locals are stronger than most humans," Buffy said. "Tougher, too. Mostly they go out with a large group and a lot of spears and axes. People often die."

"I see," Spock said.

"Some people are complaining that with me here to do it for them, they're not practicing their traditional skills, so they'll be rusty if I ever leave," Buffy said. "But I only go get one when I'm running out of money, and so this is only the third one I've got. So the traditional hunting teams still go out, they're not rusty or anything, they'd just rather pay me sometimes than risk their own lives. The ones who complain aren't on the hunting teams."

They got back to the town Buffy was currently living in around midday on the third day after she got the Grankthror. Buffy deposited the carcass at the processing hut, told everybody that Spock was with her and asked them to show him to her rooms, and went off to be purified.

The first step was burning all her clothes and having a ritual bath. She stripped and dumped her clothes on the roaring fire in the hearth, and stepped into the tub next to it. The herbs and flowers in the water weren't what she would have chosen, but they weren't bad, and the water was nice and hot, and she had it to herself for as long as she wanted it, without having had to carry and heat all the water for it. It was heavenly. The shaman's assistant sat in a corner, idly spinning thread with a drop spindle. It was young and coltish, not having grown into its feet and hands, yet. Like all the demons native to this dimension, it had four legs and two arms.

When she was all pruned, she dried herself off and put on the ritual robe while the shaman's assistant went to get the shaman. Buffy lay down on a mat before an altar. After a brief liturgy where she said the words as best she could (and, from the pained look on the shaman's face, made a hash of the whole thing) she fell asleep. The rest of the ritual didn't require her participation, or even her attention, and she was really tired.

Buffy woke when the sun began to set, slayer senses always more alert after dark. The shaman had long since left to oversee the harvesting of the Grankthror. She took her first payment (she'd get more, later, when they sold parts of it) and headed back to her rooms, where she slept some more.

The next day she found out that not only did Spock have a doohickey that could translate pretty much everything (which sounded like magic to *her*, not technology), but his Vulcan vocal anatomy meant that he could actually make some of the sounds in the local language that Buffy simply couldn't.

"I'm jealous!" she said, when she found out. "Do you know how long it took me to learn the language? And I *still* make mistakes. And

apparently my pronunciation still sucks like a vacuum cleaner."

"You cannot help your anatomy," Spock said. "And while mechanical translation is quicker and easier, there are always some nuances lost. I only hope my understanding will be enough to learn more about the portals."

"I can probably translate at least a little, if it's not," Buffy said.

She took him to the local mage, and hired him to consult with Spock (the mages were more expensive than the shamans, and only really reliable when it came to places that had long-established trade links, but the local shaman would be busy with the Grankthror for a week at least). She hung around, and she *was* needed to help with a bit of nuance every so often, but it was boring. The next day they were supposed to go watch the mage open one of the scheduled portals to a world they regularly traded with. That would be *slightly* more interesting; at least she'd get to watch the caravan and see the different types of demon who came through. (Never anything dangerous or evil in the Hellmouthy way, which was why hunting Grankthror was the only use for her Slayer talents.)

"So, anything useful?" Buffy said, as they walked back to the town from the last of the portal sites the mage had operated that day.

"Possibly," Spock said. "I obtained a great deal of data, at any rate, and will need to spend time analyzing it to determine what further data I require. Preliminary analysis suggests that the subspace energy patterns of the cyclical portals are similar to that of the one I came through, which would imply that it may *also* be cyclical, but no firm conclusions can be drawn as yet."

Buffy pondered that. "So, if it is cyclical, what next?"

"Analyzing the periodicity of it to determine frequency of its appearance," Spock said. "And then determining if it is possible to build some mechanical means available to hold it open, or if it will be a matter of extremely precise timing in jumping through."

"If it *is* a matter of timing, I can feel the magic surge just before a portal opens," Buffy said.

"My tricorder will also be able to detect the imminent opening."

The town had apartment buildings—most people lived in them, actually, because arable land off the plains was at a premium and they didn't want to take up space with urban sprawl. But it wasn't an apartment like Buffy was used to: one room, with a bed she'd had custom-made because the local demons didn't use them. A chamber pot to be emptied into the middens. A pump for water at the front of the building. A few enchanted blankets for warmth, because fires in the building were strictly forbidden. It wasn't much, and sharing with Spock made it feel kinda small, but small was better than alone.

There were four restaurants in town and two bakeries, all of which did a great deal of business because only the wealthiest people had houses with their own kitchens. She and Spock generally got takeout, because the tables and chairs were at a weird height.

Today the weather was nice, so they were sitting with their pastries and soup in one of the tiny orchards that dotted the town.

"So," Buffy said, once they'd both finished—Spock preferred to eat in silence and talk afterwards—"how's the progress? Any idea when you'll know for sure?" He'd had a couple of weeks to follow around the mage and shaman as they worked with portals, and he kept saying he needed more data.

Spock shook his head. "I have been unable to narrow down which model is most likely to be correct. I believe I have learned all I can from the local experts; what I need is more data about that *specific* portal. Would you be willing to escort me back to it? I believe I could find it again without your help, but the company and the protection would be greatly appreciated."

Buffy shrugged. "Sure. I get bored, sitting around all the time." She helped at harvest and planting, and whenever they had a job that required a lot of strength, but life here was still pretty monotonous. "I don't mind going out on the plains, for a few days."

"Thank you," Spock said. "You have been very generous."

"You're a nice guy, and I like you," Buffy said. "I've been thinking about getting you your own room, if you're going to be here for a while. I've never really slept with a guy I wasn't, you know, sleeping with."

"Paying for a second room would be a large drain on your funds, and would require you to kill another Grankthror sooner than you otherwise would to replenish them," Spock pointed out. "I do not wish to put your life at risk; if you wish for privacy, I am sure I could find employment sufficient to pay for my own lodgings."

"Maybe," Buffy said, "but you don't have any skills they need, so it'd probably just be as a field hand ... and that wouldn't give you time for research. I don't *mind* sharing a room, it's just ... awkward. A bit." And she was getting *really* explicit dreams that she would *like* to make a reality, but she'd tried flirting and he hadn't really responded. "Anyway, we can decide what we're going to do after we get back," she said. "Do you have any particular time in mind to go?"

Spock shrugged. "Any time will be acceptable; I have no other plans."

"Well, the storm season's starting, so it's better not to put things off," Buffy said. "It'll take a day or two to gather supplies, and then we'll go."

Spock knew how to build a tent out of a blanket, a few poles, and some rope, which Buffy was very impressed by, so they had a tent this time. Which was good, because a storm blew up out of nowhere *really* quickly, their second day of hiking, and getting their tent up quickly meant they stayed fairly dry.

"Would I be able to come with you?" Buffy said, as they lay in the tent listening to the wind howl. "Through the portal, if you can make it work?" She'd hinted that she might go with him, but it was the first time she'd said it out loud. The first time she'd admitted that she'd given up on going home, on ever seeing her family and friends again.

"Yes," Spock said. "Starfleet would see that you received transport to the Federation world of your choice, and you would receive social services to help you adjust to the current era. I imagine you would be of quite some interest to historians and archaeologists."

"As a native guide to the late 20th and early 21st centuries?" Buffy said.

"Of a sort," Spock said. "You would have the resources and time to pursue any educational or vocational training you desired."

"I wonder if the Council still exists," Buffy murmured. Given that Spock's tricorder could pick up at least some magic (he called it "subspace"), she didn't see how they could have kept demons and vampires and stuff a secret, but evidently they had.

"I do not know," Spock said. "Even if we are from the same dimension and not parallel universes, the 21st Century was a time of great social, political, and economic upheaval."

"And it might not be the same dimension," Buffy said. "A world where there were never any slayers. I've been a slayer since I was fifteen, you know. Almost half my life, now. I wouldn't know what to do with myself, if I didn't need to be a Slayer."

"You have a sharp mind which has never been truly nurtured," Spock said. "In addition to your physical prowess. You would have more options and ability to choose a lifestyle that suited you."

"I suppose," Buffy said.

"And I was not under the impression that you have been acting as a slayer during your years here," Spock said.

"Not really," Buffy admitted. "The locals aren't evil, and although they trade with a lot of places they do a pretty good job of keeping the undesirables out. Hunting Grankthror uses a lot of slayer skills, but they're not evil, just mean."

They lay there in silence for a few minutes. Well, silent except for the storm.

"I don't think I'd like an office job," Buffy said. "I need to be out *doing* things, or I get antsy."

"Then find a job that includes physical labor," Spock said. "Unlike in your time, such jobs are neither socially devalued nor paid insufficiently."

"And you'd be off travelling the stars in your starship," Buffy said. He was by far the closest friend she'd had since she was pulled through here. The locals were nice, but mostly ignored her unless they had business. And whether she went with him or not, they wouldn't be living near one another. So their friendship shouldn't be a matter of consideration one way or the other.

"Yes," Spock said.

The next day was crystal clear, although the ground and grasses were still soaked enough that they got very wet as they walked. Between the two of them, they found the bush Buffy had marked without much trouble—it wasn't as if there were many bushes in that section of the plains.

It wasn't *finding* the bush that was the problem. It was the fact that the bush was inhabited by a swarm of K'Geer.

Buffy swore quietly when she saw the bright orange and blue carapaces glinting around in the air. "How close do you need to be?" she asked, quietly.

"Closer would be better, but I should be able to collect sufficient data from here," Spock said.

"How about another couple hundred feet back?" Buffy asked. She did *not* want to take *any* chances of the swarm noticing them.

"It should be possible."

"Okay, then, let's move back nice and quietly and smoothly," Buffy said, keeping an eye on the bush. "And if I tell you to, drop your pack and run."

Spock nodded, sliding his pack off and resettling it over one shoulder, easy to discard. Buffy did the same with hers.

Once they were at a safer distance, Buffy heaved a sigh of relief and Spock busied himself with his tricorder. Buffy stood around watching, keeping an eye out for movement in their direction. She also wanted to give the ground as much time to dry out as possible before setting up camp. Even with an oilcloth tarp to cover the ground, some moisture would probably seep through.

The days here weren't quite 22 hours long, one reason Buffy didn't know exactly how long she'd been here. Spock wanted to get recordings over a full day/night cycle, and he had modified his communication device to be able to take basic recordings through it.

"Its sensors are neither as sensitive nor as broad-spectrum as a tricorder," Spock said, "but it *is* quite sensitive on the subspace bands. I had planned to leave it underneath the portal's location, for it will need to be quite close to be of any use at all, given its limitations. I do not know if that will be possible, however."

Buffy bit her lip. "And the more data you have, over a longer time, the better you'll be able to predict when it opens up again."

Spock nodded. "Yes. However, if my data is incomplete and we miss its next opening, we will have opportunities to try again ... and times when it is less hazardous to plant the communicator."

"I think I can do it," Buffy said. "I've got a *very* good throwing aim. I think I can make it from outside their threat zone. Just in case, though, we should move our stuff *very* far away, and you should be ready to run for it."

"Can we outrun them?" Spock asked.

"No," Buffy said. "Even *I* couldn't. But we're not their regular prey, and once we're far enough from their current home, they'll *probably* be satisfied and turn back.

"How far is far enough?" Spock asked.

Buffy shrugged. "Each swarm is different. If this swarm has a particularly large radius ..."

"I see," Spock said.

They moved the camp a couple of miles away, and then Buffy went back alone to throw the communicator. It was nerve-wracking, but though she could *feel* them watching her approach, they never stirred from their bush.

"You did an excellent job," Spock said, when she got back to the new campsite.

"Thanks," she said.

He was quieter on the way back, she noticed.

"Bad news?" she asked, at last, as the ground began to slope upwards towards the foothills.

Spock sighed. "Although further analysis will be necessary as more data is collected, I have a rough estimate of how long it will take before the portal re-opens."

"That's good, though," Buffy said. "Now we know."

"It will take approximately six months," Spock said.

"Could be worse," Buffy said. "Could be years."

"True. However, on a personal level, six months is ... a supremely unfortunate length of time."

"Oh? How so?" Buffy took a swig of water out of her canteen, and offered it to Spock, who declined it.

He sighed. "What I am about to tell you is extremely private. It is taboo. It is *not* spoken of, even among my own people, except when *absolutely* necessary."

"Okay," Buffy said.

"I must ask you never to speak of it with anyone other than myself and any necessary medical professionals, once we return through the portal," Spock said.

"Sure."

"May I have your word?"

Buffy sighed. "Cross my heart, I promise I won't say anything."

"My species has a mating cycle," Spock said. "It is called Pon Farr. We go into heat every seven years. But that is too mild a term for it; we lose our logic, and, indeed, most higher brain functions. And given that it has been six and a half years since my last one, and various changes in my body and brain chemistry, I estimate my next one will arrive within the next three months."

"Okay, so you get super horny," Buffy said. "I'd be fine with helping you out. I don't know if you've noticed, but I think you're attractive, even though you've never really responded to me flirting with you."

"Thank you," Spock said, not meeting her eyes, "but you should know the full ramifications before you agree."

"Do you get violent or something?" Buffy said. "I know you're stronger than most humans, but you're not as strong as *me*."

"Violence ... is not unknown," Spock said, "although usually it is reserved for cases of challenge, not for sex. And I do not believe there is any person on this planet besides yourself that I would see as either a potential mate or a potential rival."

"So what's the problem, then?" Buffy was a little annoyed; she'd already said *yes*, and he didn't usually beat around the bush like this.

"I am a telepath," Spock said. "If I touch you, skin to skin, I can hear your thoughts."

"That's why you don't touch people," Buffy said. "I'd wondered." She thought about that for a bit. She didn't like the idea, but she trusted him; even if he did learn anything she didn't want him to know, he wouldn't hold it against her or tell anyone. It wasn't a deal-breaker.

"Yes," Spock said. "But my people form telepathic bonds with our spouses. In the midst of Pon Farr, my instincts will be driving me to form a bond with you. I may not have the higher brain function to stop myself. And if a bond *is* formed, I will not be able to separate us—that will require a telepathic adept or priestess of my own people."

"Oh," Buffy said. "Would it be severed if you went through the portal and I didn't?"

"I do not know," Spock said.

"Well, I hadn't made up my mind to go through with you, but I was leaning that way," Buffy said. "I'm never going to get home. I know that, really, even if my heart hasn't quite given up hope yet. But it would be stupid to stay here when I have a chance to get to Earth, even if it isn't really *my* Earth."

"So," Buffy said a few days later, as Spock was taking a break from analyzing his readings, "if we're going to have sex when your time of the decade comes, I'm going to need to know more about you and sex. Do you have the same junk as a human man? Would it be better to have sex *before* your time comes, so we could be used to each other?"

"Although the internal anatomy is quite different, the external anatomy is similar," Spock said. "And sexual familiarity would probably be good, if you did not mind."

"Mind?" Buffy said blankly. "Spock, you're smoking hot, you're nice, you're considerate, you're smart, and I haven't gotten laid in literal *years*. If you'd been interested, we'd *already* be boinking. And oh, my God, I sound like Faith." She shook her head. "I don't know why you're so hesitant about this."

Spock was quiet for a bit. "It is a source of great shame," he said at last.

"What is, sex?" Buffy said. "What happened to 'it's an appetite like any other'?"

"It is not the sex that is shameful, it is the loss of control," Spock said. "Turning into little better than a brute animal."

"Oh," Buffy said. She thought for a while, as Spock turned back to his work.

"Once, in college, I was given enchanted beer that turned anyone who drank it into cave people," Buffy said that night as they laid in bed. Sometimes it was easier to talk when you didn't have to look in their face. "I did and said some embarrassing things. Probably not much more embarrassing than stuff I probably would have done while under the influence of regular beer. But I still wasn't happy my friends saw me that way."

"Pon Farr strips away our sense of self," Spock said. "The acts themselves are not shameful; it is illogical to feel shame for things which are not your fault. But when your mind is not your own, when you are reduced to nothing but base instincts, when you have no choice but to become something you abhor—it is ... difficult."

"I'm not going to judge you, or hold anything against you," Buffy said. "One of my good friends was a werewolf." And then there was Angel. The things he did without a soul were terrible, but with a soul he was a completely different person. It hadn't been his fault he'd lost his soul, and it hadn't been her fault (though that had taken her years to truly believe), it simply *was*. And then there was Spike, who'd gone on a quest to gain his soul, because he wanted to be a better person. Buffy had learned to judge people by the choices they made when they were in control of themselves and striving to be the best they could be, not the things they did when they didn't have a choice.

"Thank you," Spock said, though she could tell he was still not happy with things.

"Hey," she said, turning over in bed to face him, although even with Slayer sight it was too dark to see. "If you don't want me, I won't be offended. You can hole up in here, or we can get you a room of your own, and I'll stand guard until you're yourself again. I've done it before—not for your sex thing, obviously, but Oz needed a cage one night a month and we took turns watching to make sure he didn't get out."

Spock was silent for a while. "The chances of death in that scenario are, unfortunately, too high to seriously consider it when a willing partner is available."

"Wait, *what*?" Buffy said, sitting up in shock. "Death? You never said anything about death! Who's dying?"

"Hopefully, no one," Spock said. "However, without mating, death is the most likely outcome. Some Vulcans, highly skilled in the mind arts, are capable of meditating and controlling their bodies such that no permanent damage occurs. I attempted that, in my previous Pon Farr, but was unsuccessful. I have since studied at Gol and progressed in the Disciplines, so my odds of success would be greater this time, but—"

"But it's stupid to take the risk when I'm here and willing," Buffy said.

"Exactly," Spock said.

"So, sex or death," Buffy said. "Quite a biology you have there."

"It has its drawbacks."

"Any *other* methods of satisfying it?" Buffy asked, just to be sure.

Spock hesitated.

"There is one! Come on, spill."

"A fight to the death will sometimes provide the shock needed to end the plak tow, the blood fever," Spock said.

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "And we're back to death. I mean, if you don't want to have sex, we can fight! I'm stronger and faster than you are, and a *lot* more experienced in hand-to-hand fighting. I'm pretty sure I can beat you. But I think the sex would be better."

"I do not want to fight," Spock said, and she could tell there was something he wasn't saying.

That was okay. She knew what she needed to know. "You don't have to. Whatever you need, whatever you want, we can figure it out."

She waited to see if he had anything more to say. When he didn't, she lay back down.

Buffy was drifting off to sleep when he spoke again. "Hmm?"

"Thank you for your sacrifice," Spock said.

"It's not a sacrifice," Buffy said. "Trust me. I *know* sacrifice. I've *done* it. This is sex with an attractive man I like. This is something I'd love to do just for *fun*. I mean, I know it's a big deal for *you*, and I'm sorry you don't have more options, but just because it's this big terrible thing for *you* doesn't mean it's a big terrible thing for *me*. And honestly, you talking about my 'sacrifice' is really wiggling me out."

"Then I shall not speak of it," Spock said. "Does praise for helping someone generally make you uncomfortable, or only when your contribution is sexual in nature? You have provided a great deal of assistance to me already; without your help, I would not now be in a position to plan a return home, and there is a high probability that I would have died out on the plains without ever finding the sentient habitations here. At the very least, everything would have taken *much* longer and been a great deal harder. Yet when I acknowledge your contributions, you always minimize them or change the subject."

Buffy thought about that, for a while. "Part of being a slayer is that you don't often get credit for what you do," she said. "When I was first called, I saved my school from vampires, and I got expelled and sent to a psych ward. At best, I save the world, and my friends are happy, and nobody else notices. At worst ..."

"I am sorry for your experiences," Spock said. "If you regret not receiving your due before, would it not be more logical to accept it now, instead of downplaying or rejecting it?"

Buffy hummed. "Maybe."

There were some logistics to plan out. Spock didn't want to be around town, so Buffy found a herder's hut up in the mountains that was in good repair and would be empty at the right time, and arranged for it to be well stocked with food.

When Spock started paying more attention to her—he was apparently an ass man, not a boob man, she noted with some amusement—they started up the trail.

"My time has not yet come," Spock objected.

"Yeah, but I'd rather get there with plenty of time before-hand, wouldn't you?" Buffy said. "Besides. It'll give us time to get familiar. With the cabin, and with each other." She waggled her eyebrows. "I don't know about you, but I'd rather our first time together be when you're still, well, mostly you ... and I'd *also* prefer to have a bit more privacy than the thin walls of our apartment allow."

"Ah," Spock said. "Flawlessly logical."

There wasn't a bed, of course, because the locals didn't use them, but there were enough blankets and large pillows to make a sort of nest, cushioned with moss and leaves and other things Spock's tricorder pronounced non-toxic to Humans or Vulcans.

"Well," Buffy said, rolling around on it to test it a bit, "it's not the Ritz, but it'll do, don't you think?"

She glanced up to see Spock watching her with hooded eyes. Buffy smirked at him and made a show of removing her jacket and tossing her boots and socks away from the bed. "Wanna test it out?"

"If you are sure you do not wish to conserve your stamina for when it will be needed."

Buffy laughed. "Oh, I'll show you stamina, Spock!"

All in all, it went well. It wasn't the best sex Buffy had had, but it was far from the worst. (And it was kind of a novelty to sleep with a guy who was a bit of a monster in the sack, albeit an easily led one, and wake up to him having returned to himself, as considerate as ever.)

When Spock was back to normal, they hiked back down to town. "I've missed getting laid," Buffy said as they walked. "And you're pretty good at it, when you're not all 'grrrrr.'"

"Thank you," Spock said dryly.

"I'm in favor of continued sexy-times if you are. I mean, we've still got almost three months before we need to be out at the portal, right?"

"That is correct."

"And you're mostly done with your calculations, so all you have to do is be available if your tricorder dings with something new, right?"

"Yes."

"So," Buffy finished triumphantly, "what *else* were you planning to do with all that time?"

"You make a compelling argument," Spock said.

The next few months crawled by with agonizing slowness. Spock spent a lot of time meditating; Buffy spent a lot of time wandering around the area looking for someone—anyone—with chores or work to do that would be hard enough or complicated enough to distract her. There was a growing excitement; she was finally, *finally* going back to Earth!

But there was also a creeping sense of shame, about giving up on Giles and Willow and the others rescuing her.

"It's stupid, I *know* it's stupid," she said, pacing back and forth. "If they could find me, they would have found me by now. And if I could get home by bouncing through portals, until I found the right one, I would have done it—I tried so hard, and failed so many times. I can't live here forever, there's nothing *for* me here, and no future. But I keep thinking ... what if I go with you, and then a week later a portal pops up and they're too late."

They'd dragged her out of heaven, once; she'd clung to that, when she first got here. If they could do that, surely finding her in a hell-dimension should be doable. But it was different, she knew. And even if time passed quicker here than Earth, it had been long enough that they would have found her if they were going to. She flopped down on the bed and groaned.

"It is difficult, to know when the impossible can be done and when it cannot," Spock said quietly. "I, too, have friends who have accomplished things which should have been impossible, and would do so for my sake. But even with such remarkable, determined, capable, and loyal individuals, some things are beyond their abilities."

"Yeah," Buffy said with a sigh. When it came down to it, every slayer failed in the end. Usually that meant death. For all the miracles she'd been through, all the great deeds she'd done and been a part of, she'd always known that someday the charm would wear off.

"Two things occur to me, which may make your decision easier," Spock said.

"Yeah?" Buffy shifted on the bed so she could see him.

"First, a question: which would you regret the most? Staying here, waiting for rescue that never comes, and living here until you die of old age or a Grankthror's venom? Or coming with me, never knowing if your friends found where you had been, but too late? Obviously, the best case scenario would be that you would return to your own home and your own time. But if that is not possible, which of the two bad choices would you regret the least?"

Buffy sighed. "Staying here would be pretty bleak, I think." She shuddered at the thought of a lifetime here.

Spock nodded. "Second: have you considered leaving a letter for your friends, so that if they *do* manage to find this dimension after we leave, they would know what happened to you?"

Figuring out how to leave a letter and with whom took some time. She trusted the shamans more, but the mages were the ones in charge of the commercial traffic to and from the dimension, and so had more contacts. She decided to hedge her bets, and leave duplicate notes with both of them.

It took her a while, and a lot of tears, to figure out what to say. There were messages for Giles and Willow and Xander, for Faith and Robin, for Angel and Spike, but most of it was for Dawn. She wrote and rewrote the letter several times, but at last time was up, and she had to go with what she had. She kissed both copies. "I love you all, and hope you have amazing lives," she said, sealing them.

Spock did not go with her to drop them off, and she appreciated the privacy. By the time she met him on the road out of town, she'd gotten her feelings under control and was focused on the journey.

"Got everything?" she asked.

"Yes," Spock said. He handed her her pack.

"Good," she said, settling it on her shoulders. "Let's blow this joint."

It was a miserable trek: cold, wet, stormy. Not the worst time to be out on the plains, but close to it. Twice they were jumped by predators; Spock's phaser worked on Shtaringas, it turned out, which was fortunate, but not on the vlomb-thingies that Buffy still couldn't even hope to pronounce. But the vlomb-thingy was a solitary predator, and Buffy's spear worked just fine.

The magic was a greater problem. There were blooms and shifts in the magical field all around them, some large enough that it took precious time to go around them.

But they'd allowed extra time to get there, and it turned out they arrived with a day to spare. The K'Geer were hibernating, so as long as they were quiet and didn't get too close to the bush, they'd be fine.

One last night camping in the cold and wet, and then it was time.

They stood, holding hands, right next to where it would open. Buffy would lunge for it as soon as she felt it; Spock would go as soon as his tricorder said it was open. If either one of them got the right timing, the other would be sucked in with them, as long as they were holding on to

one another. Without a shaman or a mage to hold the portal open, it was the best they could do.

Buffy felt the magic flare, and leapt.

They landed in the middle of a forest. It was a lot warmer and dryer than where they'd been, and Buffy stripped off her leather cape and the jacket beneath it.

Spock opened his communicator. "This is Captain Spock," he said, "to anyone within range."

Buffy listened to him trying to call for help. His ship would have searched for him, but they would have had to leave eventually. There was a colony on the planet, but it was a long way away—better to have someone come and get them, than to walk all that distance.

"Captain Spock? The Starfleet officer who went missing?" Whoever was on the other end of the communicator sounded pretty surprised.

"Yes," Spock said. "I have returned, and am in the place from which I disappeared. Please send a shuttlecraft and notify Starfleet."

Buffy sighed in relief. She'd had a nagging fear that something would go wrong, and they'd end up in the wrong place somehow.

But it wasn't until they'd been picked up and flown back to the settlement, and she'd had a hot shower with real shampoo, that she let herself really believe that her ordeal was over.

It took a couple of months to get back to Earth, and once there, she was set up with a social worker and a therapist to help her settle in. The first thing she did was go to the crater where Sunnydale had been. Two and a half centuries had smoothed off some of the edges, but it didn't look *that* different from the last time she'd been here.

The second thing she did was go to London. The First had destroyed the Watcher headquarters, but the land still belonged to the Council, and Giles had always planned to rebuild it.

The building on the Council's land was staid, discreet, and the organization that operated out of it didn't call itself the "Watcher's Council," at least not in the official listings, but she could tell there was magic in it, and it *felt* like Giles' workspaces had felt, first the library and then the Magic Box and then the house in Cleveland.

She walked in the front door, into a non-descript lobby where a man in the 23rd Century equivalent of a tweed suit sat at a desk. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Sure," Buffy said. "I need to talk to the Watchers. My name is Buffy Summers. The Slayer."

It took them very little time to confirm she really was Buffy Summers. She was obviously a slayer, and they had a seer who confirmed she was telling the truth. From that point, they got *very* respectful, which kinda wiggled her out, to be honest, since she was used to Watchers she didn't know being arrogant jerks. They asked her what had happened to her, and she told them, and then while they were looking up information on Dawn and the Scoobies and her other friends, they gave her the general outline of the Slayers-and-Watchers version of history for the last two and a half centuries.

"The massive number of Slayers you called was only temporary, as it turned out," the current head of the Council told her. His name was Nguyen Hau Quy. "For a while there, as they got older and started dying and nobody new was being called, there was a worry that you'd broken the Slayer line forever. But it all sorted out, and now we're back to one girl at a time, for the most part, though with modern medical care and proper support systems they tend to live long, full, and happy lives. Their life expectancy is only a little shorter than the general population, I'm happy to say. The current slayer turned seventy last month."

"*Seventy?*" Buffy said in shock. That was beyond her wildest imaginations. "A Slayer lived to be *seventy?*"

"Oh, yes," Quy said. "Chaska's not here, right now—she's on a tour of the solar system with her grandchildren—but I'm sure she'll be thrilled to meet you when she gets back."

"A slayer with grandchildren," Buffy marveled. It wasn't something she'd ever thought of, really; slayers simply didn't live long enough. And then she'd had Dawn to take care of, and all the baby slayers to mentor. Did she want kids? She had no idea. "Even with a support system and awesome doctors, how do you keep them alive that long?"

"It does help that we've found ways of reducing the Slayer's workload," Quy said. "Vampires are not *quite* eliminated, but almost—most people on Earth today are cremated, and those that aren't, well. We got a protocol written into the mortuary guidelines that corpses be exposed to broad spectrum radiation to sterilize any bacteria that may be on them. That broad spectrum just *happens* to include the particular wavelengths of solar radiation that set vampires on fire."

"Oooh," Buffy said. "That's *evil*. I love it."

Quy smiled at her. "Of course, every so often somebody will want to change it, because it *doesn't* make sense from an infectious disease perspective, but so far we've managed to keep it in place every time it's been challenged."

"And I suppose, even if they did change it, you'd still only have a very small number of vamps, because their numbers have been reduced," Buffy said.

"Exactly," Quy said. "These days, most vampires left are smart enough to get their blood from a replicator. If they *do* try to reproduce, they usually keep their victim's corpse with them, instead of letting them go through the normal burial process like they did in your day."

"Okay, so, not many vampires, that's a good thing," Buffy said. "What about other demons? And apocalypses?"

"Well, first, some of the things we *thought* were demons actually turned out to be aliens," Quyn said, "which means we can let Starfleet handle them instead of needing a slayer. But mostly, it's a matter of using modern information sources to get ahead of things so we can nip problems in the bud instead of waiting until we're facing a full-blown apocalypse. Doesn't always work, of course, but when it does it's a big help. For example, we have subspace scanners that can pick up on portals, so if someone's opening a portal to a hell-dimension, we can be there immediately instead of only finding out weeks or months later."

The door opened, and a woman in a skirt suit came in, holding a PADD and a folder in gloved hands.

"Your sister left a letter for you in the archives, in case you should ever return," she said, holding up the folder. "And the PADD holds all the files of your friends and colleagues. If anyone is missing, do let me know."

Buffy raised a hand to her mouth as the woman set the folder and the PADD gently in front of her.

"We'll leave you to it," Quyn said. "Please let me know if there's anything we can do for you."

Buffy waited until they were out of the room before opening the folder with a shaking hand.

Inside it was a letter with her sister's handwriting. The paper was in very good shape for being as old as it was, and Buffy reached out to touch it with a shaking hand.

Dear Buffy, I hope you are alive and well and happy, wherever you are.

It's been five years since you disappeared on a routine patrol, and it's starting to sink in that I will probably never see you again. For years, I've lived in hope that someone will find some vital clue to what happened that night that will allow us to find you, and in terror that someone will come forward to claim your death. You never know, in our world. Maybe you were put in a coma like Sleeping Beauty, or fell into an alternate dimension where time runs differently and you'll come back in ten years and only a few days will have passed for you. Maybe you died five years ago. I hope that's not what happened.

I'm writing this, so that if you are alive, if you do manage to come back, you will know we looked for you as best we could, and that we love you, and that I miss you more than words can say. I mean, I hope you would know that anyway, but here it is in black and white if you forget.

Buffy scrubbed tears away and continued reading as Dawn detailed all the things they had tried to find out what had happened to her, and how each one had failed, and how more pressing crises kept drawing them away from the search for her, but how they always kept coming back and looking for new things to try.

But after five years, I think we've tried everything, even the screwy ideas, and the stupid ones, and the desperate ones, and nothing's worked. So unless someone has a brilliant idea, or some new information comes to light, I guess you're on your own. I'm so sorry. Forgive us for failing you.

"Oh, Dawnie," Buffy said wetly, "you didn't fail, you did the best you could."

I miss you so much, Buffy, and I hope that you are alive and well and happy, wherever you are. And that you have a good life, even if it can't be here with us.

*Love always,
Dawn*

"I hope you had a good life too, Dawn," Buffy said. "And I'll try."

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