

Five Ways the World Won't End (And One Way It Could)

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Five Ways the World Won't End (And One Way It Could)

by [ChristinaK](#)

Summary

Five days; five weeks; five months; five years; five decades; five centuries.

Notes

Inspired by the end of the series, written during season 7. Spoilers through "The Killer in Me"; small spoilers for *Fray*, issues 1-6.

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Five Days After

"Where are you going to go?"

"Dunno."

Buffy leaned on the handlebars of the bike, not looking at his face, because if she did she'd try to figure out what he was thinking at that moment. And that didn't matter, it could be a million things, a million plans or avoidances or lies, and what Spike thinks has never mattered as much as what Spike feels. Which hasn't been in question for a long time.

"Got room for a passenger?"

His hands clenched on the grips, and she really couldn't look at him now. Not until he answered her.

"What are you trying to ask, Slayer?"

You were supposed to say yes, she thought. I gave you an opening and you were supposed to take it without asking. But when had Spike ever done exactly what she wanted? She lifted her eyes from the chrome and steel to meet his gaze, as hard as the metal in the moonlight.

"The Hellmouth's gone. Sealed and erased forever. Dawn's safe. Most of the Potentials are... gone. Giles--" And she couldn't say anything more then. His eyes softened a little, watching her face. She wondered if her Watcher had a grave she could visit, somewhere in England. "Willow and Xander said they'd look after Dawn and the rest of the girls for a few weeks. And I... I need a break. A vacation. Just for a little while." Not like the last time she'd taken off, telling no one and not knowing where she was going. This time would be different. Very different, if she had her way.

"They wouldn't like it, you taking off with me."

"They already know. They said to call when we get where we're going."

"Bugger!"

Blind shock there, and his expression startled a smile out of her. "Xander said to remind you to feed me. And not to take the Pacific Coast Highway too fast, you don't have a license and getting pulled over and jailed isn't a good enough excuse for calling him for bail money. Willow said to be sure to get her a souvenir. Dawn made me promise to check in every night, and to make sure *you* eat."

"Presumptuous lot, aren't they?" He swallowed, looking away from her and closing his eyes. "Pet, this won't work."

"Why?"

And now they were back on script, and he was glaring at her, and the giggles were bubbling up in spite of everything. In spite of grief, and loss, and the layer of nervous fear underneath it all. The Faith in the back of her head was chortling. "Jesus, B, just jump him already, why don't you?" The Anya back there agreed with her. The Giles was refusing to comment. Or watch. Or do anything but polish his glasses and pretend he couldn't see what was about to happen.

"It won't work 'cause nothing's changed! I love you! And you're not in love with me." He calmed down as he spoke, shrugging one shoulder angrily. "We were never friends, Slayer. It's not like we can go off into the sunset and be buddies now. And I don't have the strength or the stupidity to pretend that's fine anymore." He turned back to her, his expression closed off. "Let me go."

"No." She leaned forward, into his personal space, and he blinked with the surprised look that made her gleeful to have shocked him. He always saw her coming, saw too much, and getting him in his blind spot was always funny, whether it was with words or fists. "You're right. We were never friends."

"Damn straight."

"Doesn't mean we can't be now. Or something more. Love might be blood screaming for you, but it takes longer for me to figure out."

There it was again, that wondering gaze that stopped her cold in her tracks; the expression that meant he was holding his metaphorical breath, unable to believe his ears or his eyes, like she was some kind of miracle. "What?"

"You heard me." She wasn't going to say it twice, because she wasn't going to make promises she couldn't keep. Or give more hope than she could make good on.

"Is this some kind of test? Some kind of bloody-- I don't know, some freakish Slayer test to see what I'll do? Turn evil again if you torture me? Damnit, Slayer, I don't--"

"It's not a test. It's an offer. A traveling companion and friend, and maybe..." She shrugged. "It's your call."

"Maybe?" Spike narrowed his eyes. "Man can't live on maybes. What are you waiting for? What's it going to take?" She stayed silent, and he laughed humorlessly. His voice softened as she clenched the handlebars. "It's okay to say it's not going to happen for you, pet. I don't need a damn trophy. You're not my prize. I got the soul, fought the good fight, all of it-- did what I did for me, and to make things right, and 'cause...."

He pushed one hand through his hair, clenched his jaw. "But goddamn it, don't string me along. Let me make a clean break, or tell me what it'll take to make you love me. But I'm not going to beg. Not any more. What the hell's left, Buffy? What's it take?"

And oh, this was so much easier than it deserved to be.

"Time."

"Time?" He froze again, staring at her, his eyes widening at the delight growing on her face.

So much simpler than she'd dreamed it would be.

"Time. Real dates. Talking. Maybe some dancing. Finding out who you are now. Finding out who I am around you when you've got a soul, and we're not saving the world." Her voice choked off at the stillness in his eyes. "No promises. I won't do that to you. The second I know, one way or the other, you'll know too. But-- I want the chance. If... if you don't have any other plans."

"Time," he repeated, and the slow smirk he gifted her with made her want to dance. "Funny thing. I've got plenty of that. And no immediate plans."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he whispered, leaning forward, his gaze flicking down to her lips. Buffy didn't back away. And when the soft kiss broke off, there wasn't any suggestion of violence, passionate or angry. It reminded her of the kiss she'd given him after Glory hurt him, in the crypt. His lips curled up. "Get your stuff. Not waiting on you all night, pet."

"Already here." She skipped over to the nearest gravestone and picked up her bag from the spot where she'd hidden it.

"You daft-- You were pretty bloody confident, weren't you? I should leave you here, just to teach you a lesson--"

"Wouldn't work now. I'd just follow you. I'm not getting ditched by people I care about again, Spike."

"Oh." Buffy caught a glimpse of the rare shyness in his eyes as she settled onto the bike behind him. "Right, then. Hang on tight."

She clasped her hands around his waist, and leaned into the wind as the bike sped up, the streetlights flashing by above. *You Are Now Leaving Sunnydale!* went by in a blink, and then they were outside the city limits, heading north, as she smiled.

Five Weeks

Saturday mornings she gets up with her namesake, makes coffee and hot chocolate, and goes out on the back porch to wait. Friday nights are the big hunting night now, the night when most of the gang takes out whatever monsters are left over from the Hellmouth's disappearance, and they're out sometimes until sunlight takes care of the problem for them. They go without her now and then, not because she can't help, but because she knows they'll ask her along if they really need her.

Dawn blows on her cocoa, still sleepy but unwilling to give up this ritual. She'll go back to bed after they're fed, after she knows they're safe. She'll lie there content with the sounds in the house and the light peeking in under the shades. And she'll think about telling them, one more time, what really happened and where Buffy and Spike really are.

She always decides not to. Not because Giles said not to, after she told him. He muttered a lot of things about "false hope" and "unverified" and "uncertain", along with words about time dilation and extra-dimensional effects. She isn't entirely convinced he believes her, in spite of his magic babble. But she knows what she knows.

They might not come back to this world within her lifetime. Telling Xander and Willow where her sister is might be crueler than letting them believe she's dead, leaving them waiting and hoping for a Christmas that will never come. Like the last time she died.

But that isn't what stops her. She doesn't tell because she's sure-- some where deep, past anything human-- that Buffy will come back. And that if she doesn't come back, Dawn will know when she's really gone.

Being the Key is nothing she's ever been able to touch, or describe, or even believe in most of the time. But maybe this is part of it, the same way she was the only one left conscious and standing when Buffy had to make her choice. Too stunned to correct them at first, when they assumed Buffy and Spike were dead, and then she realized what it all meant.

Which is the other reason she hasn't told Willow and Xander what happened. She won't hurt them the way it hurt her, to have Buffy choose Spike to fight the good fight with on another dimensional plane. She understands the reasons why, and they were all good reasons. She's just not sure if they would've been enough by themselves, or if Buffy would've asked him to go with her anyway, even if he weren't a fighter, the strongest one, the one with the least to lose.

"Dawn, it has to be him."

"And I'll bet that makes you happy." She'd been crying. Left behind again. "This is so unfair! You promised you wouldn't do this--"

"I'll never be happy to leave you." A hug, a whisper. "Try to forgive me. Please? I will come back."

She didn't want to forgive her. But it is comforting, knowing that Spike has Buffy's back. He'll get her home, if anyone can. Some day, maybe, she'll tell Willow, and Xander. When they miss her a little less, when it won't seem like such a betrayal.

Buffy will come back, or she won't. Angel and Cordelia will return with them, or they won't. Dawn will still be alive when they get back, or she'll be gone, or she'll be changed, if this strange confidence in her bones turns her into something *else*, something more than human. Until then, she can wait. There's a pulse inside her, like an atomic clock, counting off the seconds until her sister's return. The universe will have to stop before that knowledge would fade.

She can hear Xander's voice now, coming up the street, and Willow's raised a little higher. She wonders if they've got enough laundry detergent left to clean up whatever mess they got into out there, or if Faith will end up wanting to borrow her clothes again. It's ridiculous. They don't fit her, and it's not like Faith can't get her own clothes. The tight pink and gold top she's wearing now, as she walks across the yard, for instance: it's Dawn's, and it makes Faith look like a stripper who shrunk her off-duty shirts.

"Hey, D." Faith leans against the railing and grins at her, swiping the mug out of her hand to take a sip. "Mmm. Good. But no marshmallows, what's up with that?"

"A long and sordid story of Buffy traumatizing me when I was little." She grabs the cup back and rolls her eyes at Xander. "Someone's hyped. Didja get it?"

"One Fek'lath demon dispatched and half a dozen eggs destroyed after tramping through every god-forsaken square inch of Breaker's Woods. Remind me to take spray paint with us the next time we track something invisible," he says to Willow, who nods wearily.

"Who knew the stupid monster could be so quiet?" Faith says defensively. "It was freakin' huge, it shouldn't have been that hard--"

Dawn frowns at this. "I told you it had hiding mojo, but did you believe me? No? Did anyone? No. Next time, will we listen to Dawn, the Research Queen?" she asks, glaring around at the trio before her.

It had taken time for them to accept Faith, but the groundwork had already been laid before Buffy disappeared. Apologies. A lot of crying. Empathy and guilt from Willow, wary forgiveness from Xander. And the need for a Slayer, any Slayer, who was willing to do the job, which Faith is. Anything to make up for what she thinks is her failure.

If a small, mean part of Dawn lets Faith think Buffy is dead to punish her for not dying or leaving instead of her sister, it's balanced out by the grown-up part that's decided to tell her the truth when she's ready for it. When she's not jumping at shadows, not trying so hard to prove herself. When Dawn can deal with the abandonment a little easier herself.

She blinks, aware she almost fell asleep for a second over her cocoa, zoning out on how everything has changed.

"Yes, Dawnie," Willow is saying, a little indulgently. "You kick research butt. I hand over the crown of Research Girl to you without qualms or conditions."

"Damn straight." She gets to her feet, shuffling for the door, her eyes still half-closed.

"Xander, I got another postcard from Anya yesterday. She says to tell you hi, and she's on a topless beach in Nice."

Faith chortles, Willow snorts, and Xander groans at this information. Dawn grins, yawns, and heads for the cabinets.

"Who's up for pancakes?"

Five Months

"So. You and Wes. What's the story?"

Willow smiled without turning her head to look at Xander. The Bronze was packed with wall-to-wall bodies, music pounding through them like the tide. From her vantage point on the balcony, she could see Buffy dancing with Anya, Molly, and Vi, the four of them shooting c'mere-big-boy looks at a clutch of guys holding up one wall. Two of them had the obviously impaired vamp fashion sense, but the three others might have been prospective meals or innocent bystanders. Luring them out onto the dance floor, Anya and the potential slayers would separate the live ones from the vamps, leaving Buffy to take out the dead-- or assign them to a Slayer-in-Training for practice. They worked as a team now, as they hadn't before; Willow was only up in the gallery for a breather, and then she'd be back down there again, playing bait and snare at the same time.

"No story. We're friends."

"Friends. Uhhh-hunh. Friends who had - smooooochies." Xander pulled the word out into a wet, sloppy kissy sound, drawing closer to his friend. "Are you sure you don't want to get more specific, Miss Rosenberg? Maybe define your terms a little more clearly?"

"Friends covers it."

Xander shot her a disbelieving look, then leaned against the railing. "I don't get it. I didn't get it when Cordy was macking on him, and I don't get what you see in him now. He's a geek. A leather geek, maybe, but still a geek. A book-loving, tea-drinking, myth-hunting freak of nature with a stupid accent. And if you have to go back to batting for the straight team, couldn't you at least pick a pitcher who deserves to play?" Willow tilted her head at him, a tiny smile playing around her mouth. "And yes, I know, I killed that metaphor with a lacrosse racket."

"I'm not playing games, Xander. *Any* games."

"If that's true, then what happened to you and Kennedy?"

"Nothing happened to me and Kennedy. Me and Kennedy is what it always was. A nice place to visit on the Imagination Trolley, but a line without stops." She met his stare with a larger smile, loving the way he rolled his eyes at her. "Okay, leaving Metaphor Island: Wes and I ---"

"Aaagh. Must you *say* that?"

"Wes and I have nothing to do with why there's no Kennedy-and-me. Separate, totally different non-things."

"Ah. Which means the kissing was-- experimental? Accidental? Social? Political? Totally and completely non-sexual?"

She let her hair fall forward into her face a little, hunching her shoulders like she was sixteen again. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Ah-HA! I knew it! I knew it I knew it! The slimy Limey strikes again!"

Willow giggled and brushed her hair out of her face, letting her expression soften as she looked at Xander. "It's-- we're friends. We have things in common. That's all I know. And he's a really good kisser. End of story."

"If that's the end of the story, then I'm dyslexic." Xander frowned. "Wait. No, never mind, being slow at total reading comprehension doesn't count. You're dreaming if you think it's that simple, Will."

"Nothing's ever simple." She turned away from him to watch Buffy twirl in the gold lights, and saw that Anya was spinning away from one of the live guys, laughing over her shoulder at him. He took a step forward, totally smitten, and bumped into a few other dancers, then had to apologize before trying to follow Anya across the floor again.

"Does it hurt? To see her, like this?" Willow asked softly.

"Strangely, no." She glanced at him, watching him as he watched Anya. "I can't explain it. But just seeing her, seeing her laugh, even if she's not over everything we did to each other, or the way it ended, but knowing that she's getting better... It's good. I want... I want her to be happy. I always wanted that."

Why did it hurt her to know what Xander had lost, more than it hurt him? Willow thought she would never understand that about loving someone. Or about watching them lose someone else. "You're not going to leave, right?"

Xander looked away from the floor, his mouth quirking up in a half-grin. "I'm staying. As long as someone wants me here."

"I do," she whispered. He'd kept her from falling off a cliff a second time, and she wasn't sure enough of her grip to let go of his hand yet. Even though she knew she had to. Someday.

His eyes suddenly turned serious, even though his mouth was still smiling.

"Hey, you. Whatcha doing up here?"

Willow kept her eyes on Xander, and didn't turn to look at Buffy. "Watching you guys. Scoping out the floor. I think there's a few more shooting pool in the corner, but they're not hungry, they're just playing the game."

The Slayer joined her at the railing, leaning forward to watch the dancers writhing in patterns beneath them. Faith came back into the bar brushing dust out of her cleavage. She greeted Vi and Molly with a wide grin of triumph as Dawn slipped onto the dance floor with Rona, the younger girls zeroing in on two boys their age leaning against the cappuccino bar, trying to look cool. The taller of the two finally got up the nerve to join Dawn, and she shot him a bright grin as they swayed to the beat.

"God, I can't believe she hasn't stopped growing yet," Buffy muttered, shaking her head. "I had to get her new shoes again on Friday."

"The Dawnster's going to be the size of a redwood before she stops," Xander agreed with her.

"She'll be an Amazon. And that's a good thing," Willow murmured. "You want her to be strong."

"Yeah." Buffy stayed quiet a second, then sighed. "I wish Xander and Spike were here. They should be able to see this, all that we won."

Willow met Xander's eyes over Buffy's shoulder. She spoke to Buffy, but didn't look away from him. "He is. They both are." She put her hand on Buffy's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "People who love you never actually leave."

"Do you really believe that? After everything? Everyone that died, everyone we didn't save--"

"I know it." She finally looked Buffy in the face, seeing the pain that wasn't ever discussed, that she wasn't even sure her friend had a name for. Wouldn't admit to, since she hadn't said it while Spike was alive. "It doesn't make it stop hurting," she took a breath, forced her voice steady, "but they're not gone forever, Buffy. You were where they are now, you know. Just try to believe, okay?" She draped an arm around her friend, and hugged her close. "C'mon. Let's go save that guy Anya has cornered, he's looking nervous."

Buffy snorted, but let Willow steer her toward the stairs. "Sometimes I think the only one who could ever handle her was Xander. And even he never got it totally right either."

"Oh, I don't know." Willow glanced back, saw Xander lean forward to watch Dawn and Anya again, a grin lighting his face. "Maybe he did."

Five Years

"No, I will **not** put him on the phone. Not until you give me a good reason why I should. And 'because I'm the Slayer' doesn't come close."

Giles paused at the bottom of the staircase, and wondered why Faith was calling instead of Xander. Was he hurt, perhaps? Or merely busy? Being the active Watcher to the Slayer was never a simple job, even without occasional side-lines in private investigation and construction. He leaned against the iron railing, debating whether to interrupt. Anya could certainly handle any simple request; possibly Faith was just being difficult as a way to get under her skin. Their mutual pasts with Xander would forever keep them from becoming friends, it seemed.

"You haven't wanted to talk to him for five years. Why should I let you now?"

Buffy?

He was at the top of the staircase before he even realized he was hurrying, adrenaline spiking through his system. "Anya."

She spun around, her dark eyes surprised, but her mouth still set in its most stubborn line as she spoke into the receiver. "Yes, it's him. No! You still haven't told me why!"

"Anya, give me the phone."

She grimaced horribly, ignoring the squawking from the phone, then rolled her eyes and slapped it into his hand. He folded his arms and looked at her, waiting; as she finally stomped up the staircase to their office, he put the receiver to his ear.

"--swear I'll find a way to make you sorry, Anya, even if I have to track down one of your old vengeance buddies and make up a story for them--"

"Buffy, it's me."

He immediately regretted speaking when she stopped talking. In the dead silence, he had time to remember why he hadn't made this phone call before. Perhaps they should have attempted this through an easier medium prior to trying to talk to each other again. Postcards, maybe. Short, detached, limited contact. So much less space to hurt each other in, on the back of a public piece of stamped cardboard.

"Giles?"

"Anya seemed to think you wanted to speak to me." His voice hadn't sounded that rigid and distant since his last meeting with the Council, before everything went to hell. Giles took a slow breath, forcing himself to think past the hurt and guilt. "I assume this must be quite important, or you'd be calling Wesley for help."

"Um, yeah." He could hear her breathing, then a very audible gulp. "I mean, we're all okay. No world-save-age going on. I just-- it's something that Wes can't help with."

"Ah. A translation, perhaps?" No, of course not. If that had been the case, Wesley would have been the better, closer choice. But the inanities gave him something to say, a way not to speak the defensive phrases that had been trapped inside him for five years.

"Not exactly. Um...." A frustrated sound, and he could almost see Buffy pacing, making faces at the phone as she tried to get her thoughts in order, and it made him smile in spite of the ache. "I don't know if you can help. Or if you want to. But I thought I'd better check. It's... Giles, it's about Dawn."

That caught him in the chest like her side-kicks used to. He sat down on the stairs and took off his glasses, fiddling with the frames while he waited for his emotions to quiet enough to think past them.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you." He closed his eyes. "What about Dawn, precisely?"

"I think, maybe-- and I'm not crazy, Giles, it's Faith too, she had the same dream, it's not just me and wishful thinking-- I think we can get her back. As her, I mean. Not just as a blob of glowy energy."

"Oh." Relief. Joy. Pain. He laughed, then made himself be calm. Do not rush. Do not assume. "The dreams you had hinted that there was a way to restore her to her human state? Without the use of dark magics, I would hope."

"Of course." Buffy sounded insulted, then hesitant. "The thing is... I mean, it's tricky, and Wes found something that might work, a talisman-thingy, and a ritual, some kind of portal. I just... I wanted to be sure, and I thought-- no, I knew, that you'd want to know. And, maybe, double-check it? The more heads the better, the bigger the brains the more likely it is to work, and you've still got the biggest brain I've ever met, and--"

She was babbling as she used to when she was excited and insecure, and he immediately responded as he had a hundred times before. "Of course. Have Wes send me a copy of the ritual, and I'll research it at once."

"Um, okay." Another awkward lull, which gave him enough time to think on what she'd said. Wesley had already done all the research; she and Faith had shared a Slayer dream; there was no possible reason she needed his help....

"It's just, I was hoping you could be here."

"You what?"

His question must have sounded more angry than shocked, because Buffy's next stream of chatter was both rapid-fire and high-pitched, a sure sign of distress. "I want you here. I want Dawn to see you when she comes back. I know I said a lot of stuff that was pretty

unforgivable right after Willow saved us and we thought Dawn was gone forever; Spike's told me and told me, and even Xander admitted that I was out of line when he was over the worst of it, and... I know you don't have to do what I want any more, and well, it's not like being my Watcher ever guaranteed that anyway. But... I..." She was crying, he realized, and felt his own throat tightening reflexively. "I know you did the best you could. I'm sorry I was such a heinous bitch, Giles."

"Buffy." He was laughing silently, from relief, from surprise, from sheer delight, and very close to tears. Just when he'd thought himself adjusted to the outcome of that terrible night, to the loss of Willow and Dawn, to Buffy's anger, to the isolation in England.... Just when his life was in a semblance of order, it was broken again-- but in such a way that he couldn't help but be glad.

"And, and, it's not because we might get Dawn back, I've been sorry for years, I just didn't think you'd listen--"

"And why would you? You weren't the only one that said unforgivable things." He sighed. "How is that tosser you're living with, anyway?"

"Spike's fine," she said, her voice wobbling. "He's making a peace sign at the phone. Wait. Xander says that's-- um, never mind."

He did laugh then. "Good to know he hasn't changed."

"Yeah." She sniffed, then said softly, "So, you'll come?"

"Yes."

"When?"

Same Buffy. Impatient, demanding, needy... The litany didn't end there, nor do a thing to stop the next words out of his mouth. "As soon as possible. Tomorrow, hopefully."

Sweet, bright, grateful, jubilant.... "Really? You mean it?"

"Yes, really, I mean it."

"Giles..." Another long breath, suppressing tears, if he remembered it right. "Thank you. Even if this doesn't work. Even if nothing changes. I'm just glad you're talking to me."

He had to swallow and clear his throat at that. "Um, yes, well... It's not as if I couldn't have picked up the phone either. Or sent a card. I should have done this years ago."

"Hey, one of us had to be the mature one."

Which startled more laughter out of him, as well as teasing. "I must check my books. This may be a sign of an apocalypse after all."

She giggled. "Can't be. You just said you were going to check your books. Ergo, it can't be the end of the world. Q.E.D."

"Q.E.D.?"

"Blame Spike. He quotes stuff when he wants to win arguments with me."

"A sure sign of desperation." He didn't want to hang up, to let her go, but he had to if he was going to make the necessary arrangements. "Right, then. I'll call you as soon as I have a flight."

"Yay." Buffy hesitated. "Are we okay now?"

Giles put his glasses back on, and took a deep breath. "I hope so. Too soon to say, really... I think, most importantly, that we can be okay now. Which I never would have believed possible fifteen minutes ago." He slowly got to his feet. "Thank you for calling me, Buffy. We'll talk more when I get there. All right?"

"Okay. Good. Yeah. Thanks, Giles."

"It's not a problem. Truly."

"Be careful flying, and... oh, just get here, okay?"

He restrained another laugh of relief. "As you wish. I'll see you soon, Buffy." He heard her hang up, and was about to disconnect when he heard a second click. Thoughtfully, he depressed the 'talk' button on the phone, before he slowly climbed back up the stairs, then up the second staircase to the office level of his flat.

Anya was industriously typing something on the computer, and he leaned against the doorjamb a moment, watching her in silence. After three minutes of this, her typing had gone past frenetic and into frenzied. She finally banged her fingers down on the keyboard and directed a sharp, "What?" in his direction.

"Do you think I shouldn't go?"

"Go? Go where? Where are you going?"

"Anya." He shook his head, and she finally gave up and just glared at him.

"Fine, I was listening in! I only did it because I was concerned. You were still an emotional wreck two years ago, a long time after they died. I put a lot of work into helping you be functional again, Giles, and a lot of work into this business. If you were going to want to start drinking or sleeping all day, I deserved some warning!"

"All you had to do was ask," he said mildly, "and I would have told you what we discussed. We are partners, after all."

"It's not the same. There's always subtext between you and Buffy. I would have missed half the important stuff if I had to ask you what you said."

"Subtext?" he asked, perplexed.

"As you wish'? I saw that movie, Giles."

"What movie?"

"*The Princess Bride*. It's what the hero always tells the heroine instead of saying he loves her, even though I know you think of Buffy as your daughter, and she'd make a rotten princess anyway." He stared at her in bemusement, and she rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't tell me you haven't seen it!"

"I haven't. Xander always recommended it, but I don't believe I ever did see it."

"Oh." She frowned, and he took a moment to notice the way her whole face got into the enterprise of being frustrated. "Too bad. It's a great movie. But never mind then." He nodded, and she shot him a sharp glance. "And you better make that two tickets. Don't think you're leaving me behind, buster. I want to see Dawnie again as much as you do."

"I was going to ask if you wanted to accompany me, but you didn't give me a chance. And you didn't answer my first question. Do you think I should go?"

Anya stared at him as if he were insane. "As if you wouldn't drop everything the second Buffy asked you to? Like this hasn't been eating at you for years? That's not even a real question, Giles."

"Perhaps not." He rubbed his eyes, and removed his glasses. "But I still want your opinion."

She bit her lip, glancing away. "I know how much it's hurt you, not talking to her. I know you miss them." She glared at him then, crossing her arms. "I just don't want to see you be hurt. It makes me feel nauseous when I think about it. But if Dawn is going to be a person again, I think you should be there."

"Ah. I see." He smiled, closing his eyes. "Thank you, Anya."

"And if Buffy starts yelling at you, I'm going to slap her, Slayer or no Slayer. Even if Spike and Xander gang up on me, and Faith tries to help. I'm not letting her hurt you like that again."

He put his glasses back on, wondering if his imagination were running away with him, if he'd had some kind of breakdown and dreamed up the idea of Dawn returned to them, the conversation with Buffy, and the twists of emotion underneath the confrontation he was having now. Did she even know what her words hinted at?

Of course she did. This was Anya, who never said anything that wasn't exactly and precisely what she meant. From the expression on her face, she was just waiting for him to realize it.

"Oh," he said softly, overwhelmed.

She nodded briskly, turning back to the computer. "Go pack. I'm buying the tickets now. With any luck, we'll be in Sunnydale within twenty-four hours, buying Dawn ice cream and making up with Buffy and Xander."

He paused, then smiled at her very deliberately. "As you wish."

She smiled back while keeping her eyes on the computer screen. "Stop saying that. It's distracting. Go! Pack!"

"Going." He turned away from her, humming under his breath. And after a moment, he realized what it was: "Brand New Day."

Turn the clock to zero honey,
we'll sell all the stock
we'll spend all the money,
we're startin' up a brand new day...

Five Decades

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Tell me a story."

The short blonde swinging her legs from atop a marble tombstone grinned at the old man pacing in front of her, his leather trenchcoat swinging around his legs as he turned.

He scowled at her, face creased in deep lines of disbelief. "A story? You want a story? We're on patrol. You don't get a story when you're waiting for the forces of darkness to attack."

The woman cracked her gum and rolled her eyes. "But I'm boooored. Tell me a story, Xander. Please?"

"You know, you sound like a five-year old. You're not getting a story, you're staying alert," Xander responded, scanning the surrounding rows of the graveyard for any movement, ears cocked for any activity, be it teenagers necking on graves or vampires fighting their way out of them.

"There's nothing to stay alert *for*. This is the third graveyard we've hit, and it's as dead as this tombstone. Tell me a story."

"Are you sure you're twenty-three? Sure you're not one of Willow's kindergartners?"

She grinned, tapping out a staccato beat with the stake being twirled in her fingers. "Stor-y," she sang.

Xander sighed, shaking his head. "You know, in my day--"

"Oh, here we go."

"--Slayers were grateful for a little break like this. They used the downtime to hone their senses, do leg-splits, maybe try some target practice--"

"--la la la while dinosaurs roamed the earth and cavemen dodged werewolves that were this big!" She held her arms out as far as they could go, then quickly corrected her balance when she started to slip off her perch. "Heard it, memorized it, internalized it, bored by it. Wanna hear something new. Tell me a story, Xand."

"--and they were grateful to *live* to be twenty-three, missy," he said, wagging a finger in her face, then backed off when she snapped her teeth toward his hand. "None of this back-talking their Watchers, either! They respected their trainers-slash-guides-slash-teachers!"

"In what universe?" she snorted. "I read those journals Mr. Giles left. And the ones your buddy Dawn wrote too. And the ones that Wyndham-Pryce dude wrote. I'm just upholding a long and glorious tradition of civil disobedience."

"See, this is where we went wrong. We taught Slayers to read." Xander's grin widened at her squeak of outrage. "Yeah, that was it! The second they learned about the printed word, they got too big for their Doc Martens and started questioning their Watchers and upsetting the natural order of things, thinking that they knew everything and didn't need us!"

"I need you to help me kill things. And to tell me stories," his Slayer retorted, "and since there's nothing here to kill-- except you...."

"So you wanted a story, hunh?" he commented, stepping away from her warily. At her answering giggle and nod, he rolled his eyes. "Right. I told you the one about the giant snake, right?"

"Six times. The snake got bigger every time."

"And the one about the Master?"

"Pool of water. CPR. Big fight. Master go 'poof'. Bones smashed later."

"And the one about the enjoining spell?"

"Yeah, but that's a good one, you can tell me that one again."

"Nah, there's gotta be one you haven't heard." He sighed again, letting his voice grow serious. "I didn't tell you the one about why we're out here, I'm pretty sure."

"There's a reason we're out here besides waiting for the stupidest fledglings in existence to walk onto my stake?"

"Yeah. This is where the world ended."

The Slayer blinked, looked around her, then looked back at Xander. "Um, Mr. Harris? Faithful guide? Maybe you *do* need glasses. The world's still here. When did it end?"

"Fifty years ago. Someone just hit the re-set button, that's why you don't notice a difference." He leaned against the tombstone next to hers, his eyes fixed on a spot in the distance. "The First - I know Wills told you about the First, I remember her explaining it to you - wanted to end the world. Permanently. And it had found this loophole to do with Slayers, and Buffy, and Kendra and Faith being called after her." He shifted his weight, pushed thick white hair out of his eyes, avoiding her gaze. "Things were going to keep getting worse as long as Buffy and Faith were both alive. So we had a choice. Let the First Evil keep bringing forth bigger and nastier demons, mentally playing torture games with the people in Sunnydale, or...."

"Or?" She shifted on the tombstone. "Xand. Or?"

"Or the Slayers could die, calling the next one after Faith."

"But they didn't do that. Right?" The girl leaned forward, her dark eyes worried, fluffy dandelion hair drooping as she tilted her body toward him. "Xander? Right?"

He looked at her for a long moment, then smiled sadly. "Right. Not because the First wanted it, anyway." He paused, tilting his head back, eyes drifting back over to that indeterminate spot. "We got It trapped in the Hellmouth. Giles had found a spell, one that let a Champion touch the First; and since everything we'd read said It couldn't be killed, we were going to push It outside this reality. We cast it on Buffy, and on Angel as back-up. Insurance. And it worked, they got It in there. Except...." His voice trailed off.

"I hate your dramatic pauses, you know."

Xander grimaced. "Sometimes they're not dramatic, Josie. They're so the guy telling the story can get it together enough to say the next part."

"Oh. Sorry," she whispered.

"Sokay." His face fell into quiet folds again. "Buffy and Angel grabbed It, and pulled It into the Hellmouth, and they managed to get It far enough in there that It couldn't get out. Then they raced for the exit, and they made it. But when the spell wore off, they were dying. The extra-dimensional energy made it possible for them to banish It, but they couldn't survive. No one could have. Not even a Champion. Angel turned human, but he was still dying. They had a few weeks, and then...." His voice trailed off.

Josie slid off the tombstone and took a few steps toward him, hesitantly. "You never told me that part before."

"You weren't old enough to hear it until now." He smiled, tilted his head to look at the girl he'd known for half a lifetime, and thought again-- for the thousandth time-- that Slayers had too much in common for it not to hurt those who loved them. He cleared his throat. "And so, that is how Buffy the Vampire Slayer and her one-time and maybe-always love Angel saved the world by expelling the First and taking a lot of evil with it, leaving this one to settle into a peace that will last seventy times seven years. If you believe that sort of thing, and if Giles got the math right."

"But the vampires I fight...."

"Last of a dying breed, kid. Weak. Timid. Not gonna outlast my lifetime, according to the guys who made the deal." He grinned wickedly. "Almost made it worth it, to know that. And to know that I'd get to Watch a Slayer who'd outlive being Chosen." He stood up, shaking out the folds of his jacket. "And tonight's the night they come back to remember. The ones who can, anyway."

"They? Who--" Josie followed his eyes over to the other side of the graveyard, where he'd been watching earlier.

A platinum-haired man wearing a jacket very similar to Xander's was kneeling at a grave, laying a handful of daisies under the name. A tall woman with short, dark hair, a sword bound to her back, knelt at the grave next to his with one yellow rose, her face sad, her dark eyes fixed on her companion's back.

She knew their faces; she'd pored over them in albums Xander and Willow had in their bookcase, long before she was called or even knew she had the potential to be called. The man (who wasn't a man) had smiled or sneered out of photographs with his arm around her most famous predecessor. The brunette had smiled perkily next to Xander, and Angel, and Wesley. They'd never seemed real to her, especially since they'd left twenty-five years before she was born. All she could do was stare at them in shock, now that they were here.

Xander took his phone out of his pocket, and hit speed-dial. "Will?... yeah, they're here. No, looks like Lorne couldn't make it... No, he isn't here either. Just the two of them." He smiled gently. "Yeah, I think cookies and blood are a good plan. We'll pick 'em up now. You call Dawnie, all right?" He rolled his eyes at something his best friend said. "Yes, I promise, I won't get on his case. Some of us have grown up, you know... You're gonna lose that bet, Rosenberg. Uh-hunh. Keep your cash handy, we'll see you in twenty." He folded the phone shut, then turned to the wide-eyed Josie. "You ready to meet some legends, kid?"

"No. Duh. And don't call me kid in front of them. I'm a Slayer, you know."

Xander grinned, following his charge as she began running across the graveyard. "Never would've guessed. Hey. Wait up, will you? Some of us aren't as young as we used to be."

Chapter End Notes

I'll be honest: in my head, Josie has always been played by Alison Mack.

Five Centuries

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She'd won. She'd killed Icarus.

She'd choked. She couldn't kill Harth.

Yeah, he wasn't Harth any more, Urkonn made that clear. And if her demon Watcher hadn't explained it well enough, then her twin's anger when she'd told him what she'd done to his lieutenant would've drawn a perfect diagram of what she had to expect from Harth now. Couldn't kid herself any more. Couldn't lie, couldn't pretend there was a way around it. No way past but through, right?

She was going to have to kill her brother, or the whole world would be over-run. Even if... No. Even knowing for sure that the real part of him-- the part that was human and kind and had once looked up to her-- that that part was dead. She still had to kill a part of a person (vampire) who had once been a part of Harth (The One Who Will Lead, damnit), if he didn't kill her first.

Maybe she'd let him. It would be easier for the next Slayer to kill him, right? And Urkonn said there always had to be a next one. So let her do it.

Except that there might not **be** a next one, if Harth won. And Mel knew the only reason she was even thinking about dying was because she couldn't do it. She couldn't kill him. The world was going to end, and it was going to be her fault.

Mel sat on the floor of her room and ran her fingers over the books Urkonn had brought her, the ones he wanted her to study so she'd be ready. She thought about running, about killing everything and everyone around Harth (except Harth), about getting Urkonn to do it, about lying to Erin again, about everything she could imagine. Which still left two things she couldn't see: her killing Harth. Or Harth killing her. Her brain just wouldn't go there, no matter how hard she tried; better to think about something else.

God damn, these things were old. It wasn't just the paper, brittle and warped, like it'd break if she bent the page wrong; it was the ink, all different colors, stuff you couldn't get now if you weren't living high. Purples, blues, green ink, red-- that stood out, brighter than blood-- even pink in some places. **Pink** ink. Crazy.

"Journals of the Watchers, and of some of the Slayers," Urkonn had said. "To help you face what's to come."

Yeah, like that was possible.

--nobly, Eleanora gave her life for the villagers, who never knew of her sacrifice--

--after a prolonged battle, Ysette was finally defeated by a horde of Talkesh, who absconded with her body--

--died at the hands of William the Bloody, who drank her blood and left her within the temple to burn-- This was supposed to help? She flipped through another book, grimacing in disgust.

--died by the judgment of the Watchers, for crimes against the Council-- Was that going to be her? Yeah. Could be. Not at Urkonn's hands, but whoever Urkonn reported to -- and he still wouldn't say -- they couldn't be real happy with her right now.

--don't believe everything you read. My sister died a hero-- but that wasn't important....
Hunh?

It was one of the Watchers' diaries, a red-leather bound thing exactly like the others. But instead of the sensible black or blue ink she'd seen in the scarlet books from before, this was written in bold, livid, green. Kinda hard to miss, like someone meant you to see it in the middle of all that faded black. It was the last entry in the book, dated more than five hundred years before.

May 29, 2017

I made Giles give me this, since I know he wrote the entry the last two times she died. He shouldn't have to do it again. Mel slowly sank back on her knees, brow furrowing as she followed the lines of spiky handwriting with her finger. *This is the third-- well, maybe fourth, if you count the time she got shot-- and final time my sister has died. Buffy-- and Mel remembered Urkonn showing her a picture, pointing her out as "one of the most distinguished of your line" --was fighting an Ilnith demon in single combat, and she did kill it. But it cheated, using a magic amulet to get in the final death blow. She saved our town and maybe our dimension from an enchantment it was going to cast, because the challenge kept it from acting until after she was defeated.*

Giles would say something here about how the Slayer did her duty and was much loved and fulfilled her destiny, and he'd mention that that was what had to happen, because she was the Slayer. Just like all the other Watchers wrote about their Slayers. But don't believe everything you read. My sister died a hero-- but that wasn't important. She saved the world a lot, and I loved her. But that sword fight? Easiest fight she ever had, even if it killed her.

Buffy fought so many other hard fights, things that hurt her more than dying, and that's what you should remember. Not being able to save Mom from cancer, that really hurt. Not being able to make our dad come back to us, that was maybe the first thing that broke her heart. Sending Angel to hell. Almost killing Faith. Letting Angel go. Almost killing me. Not being able to stop Willow. Watching Faith die. Watching Xander die.... My sister was a hero not for what she killed, or how she died, or how often. She's a hero because she found reasons to keep going, to keep fighting even when she lost.

She told me once that the big things, the horrible things, can't be avoided; it's how you handle it afterwards, how you deal, that tells you what you are. Maybe you don't want to be a Slayer, or a hero. Or maybe you think being a hero is winning all the time, and that's what

you want to do, but you're not sure you can. So let me tell you the truth: you're probably going lose someday. But you don't have to accept it as written.

It's not the dying that's important, it's the trying. The only thing Buffy really liked about being the Slayer (aside from being able to pop the tops off wine coolers with one thumb) was being able to make a difference.

You can make a difference. That's the only guarantee you get when they Choose you-- so you have to find a reason to live. It's the hardest thing there is, but it's what will make you try, to fight, and survive, and win. And she did. She won more than anyone thought was possible. Our world is safe now, safer than she ever imagined it would be when she was sixteen and scared. But if Buffy hadn't tried, I wouldn't be here and neither would you. No one is asking you for anything more.

And as her sister... please remember that she loved cheesy ice-skating movies, popcorn fights, silver nail-polish, dancing until sunrise, the beach at high tide, nachos with extra cheese, Angel, Spike (formerly known as William the Bloody), Giles, me, our mom, and her friends. We'll never stop missing her, ever, and that's more important than anything else.

*Dawn Summers Banks
Watcher*

Mel closed the book slowly, wondering for a second what nachos were, then put it aside, hugging herself. Did all Slayers have it that rough? As rough as she had it too? Was this all she had to look forward to, getting killed over and over and fighting and hurting and....

Okay, so, Buffy'd had a sister who loved her. Enough to write her a pretty cool obituary. Erin wasn't going to be doing that.

And friends. Must've been nice to be able to count on someone. All she had was Urkonn. Which, granted, was more than she'd had for a long time. And, okay, maybe some of the others downside. They seemed to look at her differently after she killed Icarus-- like maybe she really knew what she was saying about fighting the Lurks, striking back. Winning.

And she'd made a difference, that Buffy. Mel couldn't even begin to imagine what would happen if she actually managed to stop (kill, admit it Mel, you have to kill him) Harth. Would the Lurks go away? Would they retreat and come back later? Would everyone be safe for once, for just a while?

You can make a difference. Hunh. There was a thought. A safe world.

Was that what had kept Buffy going? The thought of making all the Lurks - the vampires - go away for centuries? She was nuts, 'cause that was just crazy. She must have known it was impossible. Just like the odds against Mel were impossible.

Except that she did win. Even if she didn't live to see it.

So find a reason to live. Would the nightmares go away if Harth really died? Would Erin forgive her for getting him killed? Would she, maybe, be able to leave this stinking city for a

while-- see other places, learn to kill vampires other ways, find out just what she could do-- and be something more than a grabber?

She'd always lived in the moment; half-believed she'd end up dead earlier than this years ago.

Dying wasn't all that scary. *It's not the dying that's important, it's the trying.* If she died killing Harth... that wouldn't be so bad. Maybe they'd be together again, somewhere. Urkonn believed in reincarnation. Maybe they'd get to start over in another hundred years.

If Harth killed her before she killed him... hey. It hadn't stopped Buffy. Urkonn might fix it. The guys he worked for might fix it. And who cared what people said about her if she lost? She'd explain it to whoever had given her the job of Slayer, and they could tell her why they'd set her up with this stupid Chosen deal in the first place.

If she killed Harth... and didn't die herself....

Mel couldn't imagine it. But then, she'd never imagined she'd be picked as a vampire-killer by the forces of Whatever, either. Maybe she just had to believe she'd get through it. Survive it. Maybe some day she'd even be glad she had. You didn't have to see things coming to be able to deal with them. Right?

No one is asking you for anything more. Melaka Fray got to her feet and walked over to the window, watching the sun slowly rise over the city.

Five hundred years since the last Vampire Slayer. Who'd had friends. Lovers. Nachos? Hunh. A life, basically.

It was something to shoot for. Something to live for. And maybe Mel could go for the record while she was at it, so the next Slayer didn't have to show up for another six hundred years.

She grinned, and went clomping down the stairs to look for Urkonn. She'd need to get in some practice if she was going to be aiming that high.

Chapter End Notes

"Nobody gets out of here alive." -- Jim Morrison

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