

It Takes Time to Heal

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Author’s notes: This short story takes place right after the “Pangs” & “I Will Remember You” crossover episodes (which I suggest you watch before you read this). It explores the range of emotions that Angel experiences having had his heart’s desire for a fleeting moment and how he immediately dealt with the repercussions that it caused within him. Internal dialog is represented in Italics. This award-winning fanfic was written in January 2000.

Teaser: An Angel story that takes place right after the episode "I Will Remember You" and before "Hero".

Prologue

One moment Angel was desperately holding Buffy in his arms with his eyes shut tight and tears running down his cheeks, and in the next moment, a white flash occurred and washed over his entire body leaving him numb. Buffy’s last tearful words ‘I’ll never forget’ were still echoing in his mind as he blinked and looked around feeling disoriented.

“So then, let’s just stick to the plan.” Buffy’s voice caught his attention as he braced himself on his desk. His mind was in shock for the moment as he realized the temporal fold had actually taken place. It didn’t seem real to him until it occurred. He looked up while Buffy paused and he met her gaze. She was standing by his office door, dressed as when she first came in 24 hours ago. “Keep our distance until a lot of time has passed.” As she spoke Angel looked downward realizing where and when he was. “Given enough time, we should be able to—”

“Forget.” Angel interrupted her thoughts as he met her gaze again. A strong sense of déjà vu washed over him. He swallowed hard on the knot in his throat. It was an odd moment for him. His mortal injuries were gone, his heart wasn’t beating anymore, and his eyes were dry even though a moment ago he had cried with Buffy held tightly in his arms. He felt the tears threaten to well up again, but he forced them back. He felt his heartache with the knowledge of what he had to do... of what he had to give up... in order for them to continue on with their lives as they were meant to be. In his mind, he could still see the teary-eyed Buffy he had held only moments ago. Her pleading and desperate voice haunted him now as he stared at her.

I... I can’t believe this is happening! We were just... If only I could... just hold you in my arms for one more day. If you only knew how much I love you. What I’m sacrificing for us.

All these thoughts came to him during their awkward moment of silence as they just stared at each other. Buffy quickly glanced downward.

“Yeah. So...” she paused then met his gaze one last time “I’m gonna go... start forgetting.” Buffy spoke hesitantly then quickly she turned toward the door and started to leave.

Suddenly the Mohra demon crashed through the back window of Angel’s office. The sound was sudden and unexpected and it caught Buffy off guard. Angel, however, knew that this was his defining moment.

For him, it was the ultimate test and choice of his unnatural life.

On one hand, I could have a mortal life with Buffy, but it would end shortly with our inevitable deaths and the deaths of others during the coming of the end of days. Or on the other hand, I could remain as I am, a vampire cursed with a soul, and save the lives of countless others...

He thought this as he spun around to face the demon. He hesitated for a split second then he made the choice for her... and for himself.

He quickly grabbed the clock off of his desk and ducked under the demon's high kick where he knew it would swing. The demon seemed surprised that its move was anticipated and it was caught off guard for a moment. Angel sensed the demon's hesitation and seized the open opportunity. He advanced on it and, already knowing its weakness, he smashed the jewel in its forehead with the clock.

The demon grabbed its forehead as it landed against the back wall, shock written on its features. It glowed a bright red that turned to yellow then white as it got brighter. It screamed and vanished altogether.

Angel let out a sigh mixed of relief and sorrow that he hoped Buffy didn't hear.

It's done. I'm sorry, Buffy. I... I hope I made the right choice. I hope you can... forgive me.

Angel turned back around and walked to the front of his desk. He leaned on it for support. He was in shock for the moment; the realization of what he just did slowly registered in his mind. He was amazed that he'd had the strength to follow through with what he knew had to be done.

Rather than what he wanted to do.

Buffy stood only a few feet from him. She had been frozen in place and now she stared in wonder.

"That was unreal." She couldn't suppress the hint of admiration in her voice that told Angel she was impressed. As such he averted his eyes as she praised him. "How did you know how to kill it?"

"It was a Mohra Demon." Angel met her eyes finally and he paused. When Buffy gave him a questioning look he explained further. "I, um... I've had a lot of time to catch up on my reading." He stated simply. He was lying to her and he didn't like it but he hoped she would buy it.

Buffy nodded and looked away again as she took everything in for the moment.

Angel felt the anguish in his heart again as he read the expression on Buffy's face now. She looked as if she were battling with herself. Just as he fought his own emotions. She knew what had to be done. They both knew it in their hearts. Yet it didn't make it any easier for either of them.

Especially for Angel.

"So... okay... I guess we've covered it, right?" Buffy stared into his eyes with determination as she got ready to leave again. She was fidgeting and Angel recognized it as one of her signs of being restless. He couldn't blame her since he felt the same. He could really feel the tension in the air between them.

It was almost tangible.

It was unbearable.

Their need for one another was threatening to resurface and overwhelm them both.

"I guess we did." He replied at a loss for words.

There was another long awkward moment of silence between them.

"And that's all there really is to say." Buffy's eyes were locked with his. Her voice was a little broken and she spoke quickly as if her resolve was failing.

To help ease his own inner conflict Angel glanced down at the clock lying on the floor next to him where he dropped it after he attacked the Mohra demon. It was broken beyond repair. Angel noted that the time on the clock was 9:03 a.m.

He doubted he would forget that any time soon.

"Yeah..." Angel whispered softly while staring at the clock.

Suddenly the sound of his office door opening caught his attention.

"...that's it." Angel sadly whispered as he looked up in time to see her walking out of his office. He could swear she was walking fast enough to be running.

She probably was.

He couldn't blame her for that either. Had they hesitated any longer something would have happened.

Of that Angel was sure. His own resolve was pushed to its very limits. The lingering memories of the day he spent with Buffy were still fresh in his mind. He could recall every moment of that day.

The day that had been taken from them.

The day that Angel, alone, would always remember.

He silently thanked Buffy for having the strength to leave. To walk away. He was the one who had that strength the last time they were together. He knew how hard it was. He knew the inner turmoil she felt right now. He hated that. Hated the fact she had to feel that way. He hated himself for putting her through it.

Of course, it could be worse. In a way, he was grateful that she couldn't remember the day they spent together. In his mind, he could see her again. Standing in front of him in tears. The echoes of the conversation that they had in his downstairs apartment played out again.

"It's not enough time!...How am I supposed to go on with my life knowing what we had? What we could have had?... I felt your heartbeat. ... No! I'll never forget!" Her words cut deep into his heart. In those last desperate minutes that they were together down there... he had broken her heart... and his.

That's when the memories and emotions caught up with him.

The minute she was gone.

Part 1

There was a painful silence in the office.

For what seemed like forever to him, Angel just stared at the space Buffy had occupied before she walked out. His emotions were like a whirlwind and they were threatening to overcome him. He could feel his resolve crumbling now that she was gone. He still felt numb all over. This time, however, it was from all the mixed emotions stirring inside him.

Angel took in a deep breath that he didn't need anymore. After a few more minutes he stood up and slowly walked around his desk and collapsed into his chair. He was oblivious to his surroundings as his mind was lost in recent memories. Without much effort, his mind flashed back to his brief time as a mortal.

Angel closed his eyes as he remembered feeling human. The joy he felt at hearing his heartbeat and the pleasure of feeling his pulse... it had been amazing. He recalled the thrill of standing in the direct rays of the sun, without the fear of being burnt to a cinder. The warmth of his skin in the sunlight had been shocking and yet comforting at the same time. And then, the overwhelming surprise of seeing his reflection... after over two centuries of staring into nothing... it had held him in thrall. He had felt like a real person then.

Rather than like a freak of nature. It all had brought home the fact he was alive. Even the intricate taste of food had made him giddy as well. He found that chocolate in particular had been wonderful. He had enjoyed feeding Buffy Cookie-dough-fudge-mint-chip ice cream while she had fed him chocolate bars dipped in peanut butter. They had done so... while in his bed.

Buffy...Buffy and I...

Angel could recall how different it had felt making love to Buffy as a mortal. Without the fear of losing his soul. Without the fear of releasing his inner demon, Angelus. Without the bloodlust that beckoned for her sweet, hot blood. Without the feel of his cold skin to remind him of what he had become over two hundred and forty-four years ago.

They had shared something new. It had been a rediscovery. They had seen a world of possibilities.

He had liked the simple joy of being just a man.

I was alive. I was mortal.

Angel could recall her gentle touches and her soft caresses. He had treasured her tender and passionate kisses. He remembered how his warm skin had felt against hers. Remembered the pleasure of feeling himself express the love he had for her... within her. There had been a fire between them that they had never felt or known before. It had been very different from the first time they made love.

There had been no fear.

Only love.

And need. Their desperate need for each other.

Their passion had remained dormant since the night of Buffy's seventeenth birthday over two years ago. In between that night and the night Angel left Sunnydale, they had tried to have a normal relationship. They had tried to be just friends. They had tried to ignore their need for each other. Tried to ignore the passion.

But it didn't work.

Angel could fool Buffy, but he couldn't fool himself. He wanted her and needed her like nothing else in his unnatural life. It didn't make it any easier that he knew she felt the same. And it didn't make it easier that he knew they couldn't have a future together. Buffy deserved more than he could ever give her. Which is why Angel had decided to leave Sunnydale.

Maybe... if we are apart...long enough... we can forget.

Angel remembered telling himself that the night he walked away from her without saying goodbye.

Yet... all it took to reignite their passion was one touch.

He remembered sitting in his kitchen talking with Buffy. He had been suggesting that they not rush into anything. He had been convincing her and himself that they should wait. To see if he was truly mortal. To make sure he didn't have any loopholes again. To protect her and himself from further harm. Neither of them wanted to relive the past. They had agreed to wait and she was to leave. Then it happened.

The touch of their hands.

All the sexual tension that had existed between them for so long was set free.

He was grateful now that they had shared those few moments together.

In those moments their love had been everything he had ever dared to dream it to be. Once more he had found a sense of heaven within her arms. After two centuries... he had forgotten his past and lived in the moment. He had been at peace with his heart and mind. He had envisioned giving her the life he thought she should have... with him. He had seen himself living out the rest of his mortal days with her. He had liked the idea that they would one day grow old and die together.

Yet... it was not meant to be.

Their destinies, though intertwined, were not meant for each other.

The day that was taken from them proved that.

As much as I hate to admit it... it can never be. What we want... it can't work. We aren't meant for each other. We belong to the world now more than ever.

Angel finally stood up and walked toward the elevator that led to his downstairs apartment. He ignored the broken clock, the fallen blinds, and the shattered glass that littered the floor of his office. In a daze, he stepped into the elevator and pulled the gate shut. He pressed the down button and waited.

Now that things were the same, there were too many reasons why he shouldn't be with her.

For one... I'm still a vampire. Cursed with a soul and a true happiness clause. And she's still the Slayer.

He could never be with her in the way they both wanted. He couldn't give her the things that she deserved. He remembered telling her as much more than once. He did so when they were tracking the Mohra demon the first time around. They had gotten into another argument.

Just like old times...

That's when he had found out that she was moving on with her life. That she had found someone who could give her what he couldn't. Angel remembered getting a glimpse of the man while in Sunnydale. Willow had been there, at the café, and had filled him in on who Buffy had been talking to. The guy was attending Buffy's college. The guy's name was... Riley... something.

Angel remembered feeling heartbroken about it.

Moron.

I was the one who broke up with her. I was the one who told her to move on. Why would I expect her not to? She deserves a real life...not mine. My life...

It made him cringe. He was the one being on this earth that could do the most damage to her. Angelus, his inner demon, had proved that time and time again. He could recall that long-ago night when his soul was restored to him for the second time. He remembered the disoriented feeling. His soul had been in another place, unaware of what Angelus had said or done. He had woken up in his body to see Buffy holding a sword above him. His last memories at that point were of the night they had passionately made love...after which he could recall stumbling out into the rainy night... and that had been all he could remember.

As she had stared at him, he had called out her name. She had backed away in fear. He hadn't understood it. Why would she be afraid of him? He had asked her what had happened. She didn't tell him. She had kissed him and told him she loved him and to close his eyes. He had obeyed her in his confusion. It was only when Buffy had pierced him with her sword did all the memories return. At first, he had felt betrayed. Then all the things Angelus had done, while in control of his body, were made known to him.

Every horrifying detail.

Acatla had swallowed him into a vortex and then he had spent five hundred years in a torturous Hell...

Angel shook his head to clear himself of that thought. He desperately wanted to forget that place. He opened the elevator gate and stepped into his apartment. It was dark and quiet and empty.

Empty... just the way I feel.

He slowly went to his closet and got out of his clothes and into something more comfortable. A pair of dark gray sweatpants and a black tank top. Out of habit he slowly walked over to his bed feeling the urge to crash. At first sight, he froze in his tracks. Angel just stood there staring at his bed.

The bed he had made love to Buffy in.

He couldn't move.

Buffy...

Every fiber of his being was on fire with the memory.

The memory of her in his arms.

The memory of their happiness.

He tried to put it behind him, but he couldn't. They had held everything they ever wanted. They had found each other after being apart for so long. He had given her every happy moment that he had wanted to since they first met. They had realized how much and how badly they still loved and needed each other.

While in her arms Angel had felt the way he had always wanted too. The way he dreamed of feeling. The way he would have liked to have lived... rather have become what he was now.

Darla changed that... back in Galway.

She had lured him into her arms with promises to show him the world. He had wanted to escape his small town. He had wanted to make his life worth something.

Only he hadn't known it would cost him his soul.

She sired me then...and I hate her for it.

Though certainly not at the time. I had loved her then. As much as a demon could love. She had been my companion. My mentor. My lover.

His thoughts retraced the last two and a half centuries.

The years his inner demon had controlled his body. The years that Angelus had become known as The Scourge of Europe. The years that he had been feared even among his own kind. During that time Angelus had had a talent for pain and cruelty that was unrivaled. Darla had been very proud of him.

Yet... what horrifies me the most? I had done it all with a song in my heart.

Angelus had taken pleasure in it.

For all the evil things I've done over the years... am I really making a difference now? Will I ever know redemption? Or better yet, do I deserve it?

Angel couldn't forgive himself. He didn't think he was supposed to. He walked away from his bed and wandered into his living room still lost in thought.

After all... why would the gypsies have even bothered to curse me if I wasn't meant to suffer for what I've done? They could've easily just driven a stake through my heart. It could've ended then.

After that fateful night in 1898, he had tried to wander the earth alone and secluded to punish himself for what he had done. For nearly a hundred years he avoided humanity and other vampires. The only company he had kept was with alley rats and the memories of his evil deeds.

But a demon named Whistler had changed everything. Whistler had given him a purpose. Shown him a way of life that he never thought he could have. It was Whistler who had shown him the young Slayer. Angel had promised to help her. And in the long run... maybe help himself at the same time by making amends for his past. Though he tried not to, he fell in love with her. He loved her from the very first moment

he saw her. Despite everything screaming in his head to walk away, he had wanted to be with her. Instead of listening to his head... he had followed his heart.

Buffy Summers was the one person who forgave him for his past. She understood what his life was like. She understood his loneliness and despair. Her life as a Slayer was in some ways similar to his. To his surprise, she loved him in return. She wanted to be with him.

But it all went horribly wrong. As much love as there was between them, there was just as much pain. When she had given him a moment of true happiness he had become her worst enemy. He had done things to her for which he still could not forgive himself for committing. Even if it had been his inner demon that did the damage. The damage had still been done to her.

And he would never forgive himself for that.

What difference does it make? Whether I'm a vampire or a mortal man, I can't be with Buffy. I just have to accept that. No matter what I feel... I can't have her... either way. It's not fair... for her.

The day that was stolen from them had proven that to him. Whether he lived as a mortal or as a vampire, Angel could never be together with Buffy. It just didn't work. They were each destined to be warriors. The dangers to either of them and the people they were meant to protect, were too great to compromise. They could only ever be friends... even if they wanted to be more. Fate had decided on that.

Angel could feel his frustration and anger rise from within him. He hated knowing that he couldn't have the one thing he wanted most in his unnatural life. He couldn't stop loving her. He hated knowing that he couldn't let go. Even though he wanted nothing more than to do so... he couldn't.

Even though it hurt... so much. Especially now that he'd had a taste of what his life could have been like... with her. It hurt even more.

That's when he let his emotions out.

The moment he couldn't hold them back any longer.

Part 2

Doyle could hardly contain himself. He really wanted to ask Cordelia out on a date. While he was around her... she drove him crazy. But he liked her company. He figured one of these days he would work up the nerve to ask her out. Which is why he had agreed to go off with her this morning.

It was sorta like a date. Only she doesn't know it was.

Of course, they'd had another reason for leaving the office. The fact that Angel had needed some space to deal with Buffy. It had been one thing to hear Angel talk about Buffy, the few reluctant times he did, but it had been another thing entirely to actually meet the Slayer.

Wow! She was pretty intense. And quite a looker too.

He could tell right off the bat that she was more than a handful to deal with. He imagined Angel would have his work cut out for him.

Of course, Doyle had his own work cut out for himself with Cordelia. They were sort of friends.

Working acquaintances is more like it!

He really wanted to ask her out though. He just couldn't warm up to the subject when he was around her. He kind of lost his nerve for some odd reason. She also single-handedly managed to thwart every one of his attempts to get to know her better. He wasn't even really sure she liked him at all. She was a really confusing woman.

I guess that's one of the things I like about her. She's so unpredictable... and attractive!

Doyle followed Cordelia as they went up the stairs outside the office building so he could admire her... without her noticing. He smiled to himself.

One of these days princess...

As they entered the outer office Cordelia went and set her purse and organizer down immediately on her desk. Doyle walked a few steps towards Angel's inner office as he noticed the door wide open. Not seeing Angel anywhere, he was about to turn the other way when he suddenly caught a glimpse of the debris. He took another glance and stared at the destruction inside Angel's office. There was broken glass everywhere, the back window was a mess, the window blinds were strewn about on the floor, and Angel's desk clock was lying in the middle of it all.

"Whoa! When they fight..." Doyle's thoughts were interrupted suddenly as Cordelia ran past him. She went into Angel's office. He watched her kneel down by some of the broken glass in the middle of the room.

"Oh, my God!" Her voice sounded panicked.

Doyle was trying to imagine what on earth could be so wrong.

"What?!" He felt himself begin to panic just by the sound of her alarmed voice.

"She killed him!" Cordelia exclaimed as he saw her pick up a handful of dust and stare at it.

Angel's... dead? Buffy... oh no way! Oh, man! It can't be! Angel? What are we...

"Oops! My bad." Cordelia said breaking his train of thought as she brushed off her hands. "It's just dust I forgot to sweep under the rug." She nonchalantly stood up and turned to face him.

"What?! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!" Doyle clutched a hand to his heart.

"Hey, don't blame me if he's too cheap to hire a cleaning lady!" Cordelia defensively shot back. She gave out a sigh and started back towards her desk.

Doyle took a minute to recollect his thoughts.

"Well...what about the mess? Someone's got to clean it up." He turned towards her and gestured to the debris in Angel's office. He was still catching his breath.

It's okay... Angel's alive. Well... sort of. In an undead kind of way.

Cordelia stopped and turned to face him with a determined look.

"Look, it already sucks that I have to clean up after his battles with the forces of darkness and those thingamajigs in the sewer. Now I have to clean up his office too? I don't think you ---" Her tirade was interrupted with the sudden sound of a loud crash. It was the sound of something shattering.

And it came from downstairs.

Doyle felt pretty sure about that. He turned toward the elevator that led down to Angel's apartment. He took a couple of steps in that direction, listened, then hesitated.

I wonder if...

"Do you think Angel and Buffy are down there? I mean... or do you think maybe she's left?" Doyle was genuinely concerned for his friend. Angel had saved his life too many times to count now. They got along really well too. They kind of looked out for each other. Like brothers do.

"Hello? Please! They're probably still talking out their differences. I told you we should've rented the director's cut of 'Titanic'. But do you listen? Oh, no! Why should anyone ever listen to me?" Cordelia's voice trailed off as she disappeared into the outer office.

Doyle just stared at the elevator, which was currently downstairs.

I wonder if Angel is okay...

Part 3

Angel stared at the shattered remains of the vase he threw at his staircase. He growled at the debris. He had lost control and now he was wearing his game face.

He could feel it.

It always felt different when he let that aspect of his inner demon out. The physical changes were always the first thing he felt. But he was used to it by now. It didn't really bother him anymore.

It was the inner changes that he didn't care to feel. He walked a dangerous line when he vamped out. He could feel his inner demon rage from within. He could sense it trying to take over. While Angel wore his true face... Angelus was always near the surface. It took every bit of his willpower to maintain control. It wasn't that he was afraid of losing his soul, rather he was afraid that he would succumb to his true nature while he still had one. And that was something Angel didn't think he could bear.

I can walk like a man... but I'm not one.

He remembered telling Buffy as much a long time ago.

He drew in a couple of deep breaths to help calm down. He finally felt his face revert back. His inner demon subsided. Yet Angel was still angry.

That's when he turned his attention elsewhere. He focused on his full-sized punching bag. Without pads or tape on his hands, he struck the bag repeatedly. With each strike, the bag shook violently.

I gotta let it go. I gotta forget her. I gotta move on. I can't have her. I don't deserve her.

Angel bounced on his feet as he moved around the bag... punching it fiercely. He was starting to work up a sweat now as he moved around it. He let out all of his frustrations on the bag. With each punch, he tried to release some of his torment. Some of his pain.

Why me? Why her? Why can't my heart just let go of her?

The vivid memory of her in his arms immediately answered his unspoken question.

He couldn't stop himself from remembering those stolen moments with her. The moments he lost himself in her. He treasured those moments like nothing else on this earth.

Yet even now those memories brought him pain.

Pain from the realization that they never happened. For Buffy... they never had occurred. Her only memory of being with him was of their first and only night together. The night of her birthday. The night they had both almost died.

The night he lost his soul and became Angelus again.

I became the enemy. I became a killer. Because I wanted her. Because I lost control...

The punching bag shook even more violently now.

He barely noticed that he couldn't feel his knuckles anymore.

He remembered the first time he lost control of himself around her. It was the night they had faced the Three. The Master had sent them to kill Buffy. He had come to her aid. When the Three had pursued them she had sheltered him in her house. He had admired her for trying to protect him. She hadn't been aware that he could take care of himself. At the time she hadn't known that he was a vampire. Or that he was a cursed one. He had managed to hide it from her.

Until he kissed her for the first time. They had been in her bedroom and he had tried to tell her that he shouldn't be around her. He had wanted to leave, but he had been compelled to stay. Their attraction to each other had been magnetic. Even then he had wanted her so badly that he lost control when they kissed.

I've never had control. Of myself. When I'm around her. Never.

How many countless nights did they spend together, after that first night, in each other's arms?

Angel could remember every one of those times. The nights they made out like they were just a couple of normal teenagers. He had been a slave to his passion for her. Before he knew that he would lose his soul if they took it further. If they made love.

All for love. I lost her. Because I love her. Because I can't stop.

The punching bag kept responding to his pain as he punched it. Angel didn't notice the bruises forming on his knuckles. Nor did he notice the blood that began to appear on the bag now.

The memory of the first night he told her that he loved her came back to him.

They had been standing together at the docks.

To show Buffy what he felt in his heart for her, Angel had a Claddagh ring made just like his to fit her. He had gotten it for her birthday. It had been a testament to his undying love for her. After he had given her the ring he had tried to tell her that he loved her... but they were attacked before he could say it.

It was only later that night, just before they made love, that he told her the one thing that he knew she wanted to hear. The one thing that took him the longest to admit to her. The one thing that he knew brought him happiness and sorrow.

He had told Buffy that he loved her.
He didn't want to. But he couldn't stop. He knew that after that moment... from then on... they would have everything to lose.

Of course... we did. I lost my soul. My humanity. Buffy.

With each thought, Angel punched the bag as hard as he could.

After I came back from Hell... Did I really regain all that I had lost?

He had tried to stay away from her. They had tried to be just friends. She had helped him heal the wounds he had gotten from his centuries of torment. Just when they thought they could deal with their friendship, they were reminded of their need for each other.

It was the year it snowed in Sunnydale. Last Christmas. The First Evil had been slowly driving Angel insane with dreams of his victims. Then it decided to torture Angel in a different way. Buffy and he shared a dream. They were together, in her bedroom, and realizing that they were dreaming... together... they had given in to their desire. They made love.

It had felt so real. It had felt pure. I had found peace again.

And then the recent memories tugged at him. The moments he was human. The time he had spent with Buffy. Those tender moments in which he had found heaven. The moments that didn't exist anymore. Except in his mind... and heart.

I had what I wanted. What she wanted. We had each other. And we had to give it up.

Angel let his fists fly harder and faster. He could feel the tears well up in his eyes. He felt the knot in his throat that ached. He needed release of a different kind now.

I gave it up. To save the lives of others. For the good fight. For honor and duty.

Angel gave the bag one last desperate punch.

For my redemption.

After the bag settled down he held it. And just stared at it. He felt nothing but his pain. And loss.

Because I love her... so much. I threw it away...

Angel closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the bag.

Our one chance at happiness... together.

He felt the tears flow down his cheeks.

Angel didn't know for how long he stood there. He let the pain and the sorrow wash over him. He knew he had to let it out. He couldn't hold it back. He had tried. And he had failed.

"Buffy..." he breathed her name in between choked tears.

It's over. For all time. Knowing what I do now... it can never... be the same... between us.

Angel pushed away from the bag. He looked down at his hands. They were bruised and covered with dried blood. His blood. He looked up at the bag. His blood was there too. He couldn't recall when it had happened. In a daze, he went to his bathroom. He washed his hands and his face. His knuckles were already healing. The bruises were starting to fade.

One of the few benefits of being a vampire.

Angel watched the water mix with his blood then flow down the drain. As he did... he wished his pain could be washed away... just as easily.

I just have to live with it. Like I always have. It's just another burden.

Of course, that was a lie. He knew it. This new burden wasn't like anything else he had to bear. Fate had found a new way to test his strength. Only... deep down inside of himself... there was a part of him that had wanted to fail... that had wanted her all for himself.

And then it hit him again. The memory of the day and night he spent with her.

The sudden wave of pain and sorrow almost overtook him.

Don't think about it! I gotta focus. Focus on something else.

Angel decided to try a different approach from the punching bag. He walked back out into his apartment and stood in the largest empty space. He took a deep breath... and closed his eyes.

Epilogue

Doyle was debating whether or not to check on Angel. He didn't want to interrupt anything. If Buffy was still here, he wanted to leave Angel and her alone. It was past five o'clock. He was beginning to lean more to the notion that Buffy was already gone. There hadn't been any more noises coming from downstairs.

Maybe they didn't have that much to say to each other and she left already. Maybe Angel's by himself... doing what he's best at... brooding... in the dark.

Doyle let out a sigh.

I should cut him some slack. I know how it is. Dealing with an ex.

Doyle walked over to the couch and grabbed the newspaper. He settled down and began to glance through the sports section.

Angel just needs some space.

"You should go down there and check on Angel. We haven't seen him all day long. And besides, he needs to clean up his office. What a mess that is!" Cordelia's voice came from a few feet away. She was pruning and watering one of the office plants.

"Huh? I think he needs to be left alone. Besides, Buffy might still be here." Doyle folded his paper up while he watched Cordelia straighten the plant. She smiled at it then walked over to Doyle.

"Please! Buffy! Why is it always about Buffy? We would've seen her by now. It's just as well that she's gone. I swear, where she leads dark forces follow. If it's possible for Angel to brood even more than he usually does, it'll be now. So why don't you talk to him? Have one of those vision thingies of yours so he'll get out and fight evil. Do something to get him out of his funk." She sat on the couch next to him while picking up a magazine to flip through.

Doyle tossed his newspaper on the coffee table and stood up.

"Alright! Alright, your worship! Anything else I can do for you?" Doyle called over his shoulder sarcastically as he began to walk towards the stairs that led down to Angel's apartment.

"You could get me a cappuccino." Cordelia sounded hopeful.

Doyle ignored her and stopped at the top of the stairs. He listened and didn't hear anything.

Of course... if I used my half-Brachen senses I could... except that Cordy is in the next room. She can't find out about my half-demon side. No... I'll do it the old-fashioned way.

Doyle stepped as silently as possible down the stairs. As soon as he caught a glimpse of the shattered fragments of a vase he froze. He stared at all the pieces scattered around the floor at the base of the stairs.

Well... that explains the crash I heard earlier. I wonder if...

Doyle heard Angel exhale a sharp breath and it caught his attention. He looked up into the living room area and saw Angel moving in a slow deliberate pattern with his eyes shut in concentration. As Doyle quietly watched Angel perform the movements... he finally recognized what Angel was doing. He had seen Angel perform it before.

T'ai Chi.

It only means one thing... that Buffy got him where it hurts most. His heart.

Doyle could read Angel's face pretty good. He recognized and understood the inner turmoil. It was the kind of pain only love could cause. After a few minutes, he retreated slowly back up the staircase. Angel needed to be left alone, at least for a while. Doyle would make sure that Cordy stayed upstairs as well. He knew what Angel needed in order to get through this.

It's gonna take the thing he has the most of... time.