BtvS Seasons Rewrite: Season 4

by DaniellaHarwood

Summary

a rewrite of Season 4
The Freshman

Author's Note: Here we go, the start of Season Four. Only some dialogue was taken from the original episode, because I changed the plot. With regards to what has been improved upon, very little has changed, as I only wanted the story longer. Enjoy.

The Freshman.

Midnight. Boca del Inferno was resting beneath its crater, the remains of the large scholastic building complex blown up by a member of the teaching staff the day of the graduation of the class of nineteen-ninety-nine. It slept the sleep of an active volcano; seemingly dormant, until something or someone decided to revive it; whereupon it would lash out with a fiery fury akin to an unpredictable and dangerous sleeping dragon.

There were no immediate plans to rebuild the cloistered building complex which had once occupied the once existent ground above the crater. Sunnydale's City Council were too busy trying to recover from the shock discovery concerning the late Mayor to focus on raising the funds required for building a new High school. For now pupils would be shipped out to the next educational district, until they summoned the will to apply for the funds needed to be granted to rebuild and re-staff. Explosives however, counted as arson in an insurance policy, so it was likely to be a very long time before such was even attempted.

As for the staff, most of them had moved on to other High Schools in the district, anxious to get as far away from the school with the most unexplained fatality rates in the state. Three had made the jump to the next education complex in Sunnydale; the university. The lecturing staff of USC were glad to welcome them, as they had suffered recent unexplainable student absences and missing teachers, a task which one of the new lecturers was heard to quietly utter would soon be taken care of.

So the staff moved, the pupils were transferred and the graduating class of nineteen-ninety-nine spent their summer preparing for college. Most had wisely chosen safer institutions in distant states, but a few took the option to stay and attend USC, despite some prestigious offers elsewhere. These few however had another mission in life apart from their education, and that required them to stay. To regroup, after the conclusion of the Ascension. To prepare themselves for what big evil which might come to haunt the hellmouth next.

But first of all, there was the problem of the missing freshman, sophomore and other undergraduates, plus lecturers and tenured professors to take care of. Together they investigated the circumstances behind every disappearance, collated the remaining evidence, formed a conclusion as to the possible cause, laid a trap, and waited for those responsible to blindly walk into it.

"Who's bright idea was it to take on college kids?" One of those responsible parties asked now, in mid flee.

The vampire behind paused in his running for a moment, and looked at his ringleader in puzzlement. "It was yours, wasn't it?"

Sunday growled in annoyance, then found herself pushed to the ground. A blond in flared jeans, a long sleeved t-shirt and long leather black jacket, held her down with a boot pressed upon the undead chest, a stake in her hand.
It did not take Sunday's brain long to realise now who was chasing them. "Slayer!" She greeted, her arrogance in full force. "Wow, uhm, I heard you might be coming here. This is, I mean, what a challenge! The slayer!"

Buffy released her foot and let the vampire get up from the ground. It was only fair that the leader had a slightly fairer fight than the others. "And you are?"

"I'm Sunday," the vampire replied with a deadly smile, "And I'll be killing you here in a minute or so."

The slayer chuckled in mild amusement. "You know, that threat gets more frightening every time I hear it."

"Uhh... are we gonna fight?" Asked one of the vamps in bored stoned tone of voice. "Or is there just gonna be a monster sarcasm rally?"

"I'm in for a piece," another said.

"Everybody gets to play," Buffy assured them.

"Guys, this is totally mine," Sunday decided.

"Ok, but you gotta share the eating," the first vampire who had asked her said, turning his drugged fuelled stare on the slayer. "'Cause I'm thinking slayer's blood's gotta be -Whoa!- like Thai Stick."

Buffy shook her head in disgust at the level of undead intellect daring to challenge her this night. "I thought people were suppose to get smarter in college?"

"Yeah, I think you had a lot of misconceptions about college," Sunday commented mockingly. "Like that anyone would be caught dead wearing that."

Instead of glancing down in dismay at her outfit, Buffy just smiled. "You have a lot of misconceptions about me too. Like, do you really think I'm that stupid?" She punched her, and the fight began.

Sunday fell back, caught off guard by her misjudgment of her opponent. The slayer put a hand to her ear. "Guys, its me, I have them. Come on down."

The discreet headphones had been modified by Willow and Oz during the break, and with a bit of magic from the two practising wiccans, they served as walkie-talkies during the big group slays which required back up for their friend empowered with a chosen destiny.

Now as Buffy launched herself on the leader, the younger of the wiccans appeared out of thin air, followed by the rest of the Scooby gang, launching themselves into the fight.

When the vampires had learnt that their deadly play time about the campus which surrounded the university was over, the gang came together and rested on the gravestones around them.

"'few," Xander exhaled as got his breath back. "And here was me thinking that the summer we spent preparing for this would make us fitter."

"They did give us quite a run," Angel reminded him.

"Almost half of the campus, plus this cemetery," Oz added in agreement. "We never practised for the marathon."
"At least we're prepared for college though," Cordelia commented.

"And you've just jinxed it!" Xander accused her.

Outraged, the former cheerleader glared at him. "Did not!"

"Did too!" Xander countered.

"What are you now, pantomime cat calls?!" Cordelia mocked.

Xander was insulted. "Why..."

"Gee, its like they never split up," Buffy remarked aside to Angel as the argument continued, the two combatants moving closer and closer together.

Xander caught the last part of the slayer's comments and changed tact, halting his movement. "Sorry, Cor."

"Or not," the slayer remarked, surprised.

"No, you were right," Cordelia allowed sadly, sinking down on to one of the marble monuments. "Now I feel a sense of impending doom. We're too prepared. I wonder what can be worse than the Mayor's Ascension?"

They were right to wonder, for all too soon they would find out that no matter how hard their preparation, none of them were in fact ready for what was to come.

And neither was the hellmouth.

Early the next day, a black 1967 Plymouth Belvedere GTX convertible drove into the space reserved for the Professor of Art History, causing other lecturers to stare in appreciation at the sight of the vehicle and its superb condition. They had always admired the car, especially when the top was down. Now there was another cause to look. A passenger. In the form of a beautiful, blond, young woman. They had never seen her before, for although it was rumoured that Professor O'Connor had a girlfriend, someone who had visited him a few times at the end of class, no one had yet to set eyes on her properly until now.

Angel and his beloved paid them no mind as he opened the door for Buffy and led her to the registration office to pick up her campus identification cards.

"Isn't this cool?" Willow remarked when they joined her outside building in the bright Californian sunshine. "There's so much going on. In High School, knowledge was pretty much frowned upon. You really had to work to learn anything. But here, the energy, the collective intelligence, it's like this force, this penetrating force, and I can just feel my mind opening up and letting this place thrust into and spurt knowledge into..." she broke off, suddenly embarrassed. "That sentence ended up in a different place than it started out in."

"I'm with ya Will," Buffy offered her best friend consolingly. "Seen Giles? Or rather, Professor Giles?"

"He took one look at the Library and was in raptures," the red head informed them as they continued walking across the campus. "I hope he shows up for class, its our first. Jenny, or rather Professor Calendar-Giles, is in the Computer Lab, and Professor Doyle is showing Cordelia his lecture hall." She recalled the body language of the former cheerleader and half bracken, silently
speculating. "They're pretty tight lately, aren't they?"

Buffy nodded in agreement. "Well, what with her and Xander amicably splitting over the summer, and Doyle's interest in her almost from the moment he arrived, it's almost expected."

They crossed the area for the resident halls and walked to the resources area, heading for the book shop.

"Can't wait till Mom gets the bill for these books," Buffy said as they dumped the present pile balanced in their arms into the baskets Angel and Oz were carrying. "I hope it's a funny aneurysm."

"I'll go and purchase this lot," Angel offered.

"Angel, she likes you," Buffy replied, "you don't need to curry favour anymore."

"She is coming over for dinner this evening," he reminded her. "Might be wise to soften the ground."

"Good point," Buffy agreed, and he smiled at her before walking to the checkout desks.

"Next, 'Introduction to Psychology,'" Willow recited from the memorised list, glancing at the shelves until she located the desired volumes. "Oh, up there."

"I'll get 'em," Buffy replied, offering to conquer the height. "You know, this store discriminates against short people."

"Oh, I think there's a protest next week," Willow remarked.

Buffy nodded as she stretched to get the books. The pile toppled over, hitting a student nearby. "Oh, ahh. Oh god, I'm so sorry."

"I'm okay," the student replied, rising from the floor. "Well, that was bracing," he joked. "Let me give you a hand," he offered, taking a large clutch of the volume they wanted and moving them to a more easily accessible shelf. "Let's put a few of these down here." He looked at them, his gaze turning into admiration as he took in the blond. "So, uh, are you girls taking Intro Psych, or do you just want me dead?"

"The first one," Willow answered.

"Well, you'll have a lot of fun," he replied. "Professor Walsh, she's quite a character."

Willow's gaze brightened with interest. "You've taken it?"

"I'm her TA," he replied, "I'll be helping the Professor out. I'm sorry, I've forgotten my manners in all the concussion." He held out his hand. "I'm Riley."

"Willow, and this is my friend Buffy," Willow introduced. "And Oz, my boyfriend."

"It's nice to meet you all," Riley remarked, looking carefully at Buffy.

The slayer looked back, but with nothing of the same interest. The boy before her was tall, well built and blond, but he held none of the draw she had felt compared to when she had met Angel for the first time. In a way it was like equating the night with day. This boy whom she had just met and the man she loved were polar opposites in every way.

Willow saw the hostility radiating from her friend and tried to prevent the student from detecting it.
"Hey, do you know if we're going to be studying 'Operant Conditioning' in the first semester?" She asked. "'Cause I hear that's kinda Professor Walsh's speciality."

"Absolutely," Riley affirmed. "Do you know her treatise on Dietrich's work?"

Willow nodded slowly. "I know of it."

"It's not in the syllabus," Riley replied, "but it's a fascinating read, if you're in to that sort of thing. They have it here."

Willow turned eagerly to the shelf. "Oh, where?"

"I'll show you," Riley replied. "I don't meet that many freshmen that know that much about psychology."

"We're not your average freshman," Buffy remarked warningly.

Riley chose to take it another way, misunderstanding the danger in her deceptive tones. "So, I see," he said looking at her with a smile. His gaze ran over her attractive form once more. "So what else are you taking?"

"Mythology and Literature," Buffy replied.

"Mythology, that's one of the new courses isn't it?" he sought to confirm. "I thought that was not going to be open to freshman?"

"It wasn't, but Giles convinced the faculty to make it so," Buffy explained.

He frowned at her familiarity concerning the new lecturer's name. "You know the professor? I thought he was British."

"He is, he came over three years ago," Buffy replied. "He's a family friend."

"Oh. Ah, here's that treatise." He handed it to Willow who began to flick through. Riley turned to Buffy, eager to seize this moment of opportunity. "Listen, there's this coffee place...."

"Buffy, I've got to get going, I'm sorry," remarked a voice at that moment, calling the boy's attention to the tall dark and handsome man who appeared behind the beautiful blonde.

Riley's jaw dropped as he recognised him.

Buffy just smiled and turned to face her beloved. "Its fine, I knew you had an early class today. We're still meeting for lunch?"

"Of course. I wanna hear all about Giles' first lecture." Angel leaned down and the two exchanged a long kiss, attracting the attention of all the students within the shop, but most importantly the teaching assistant standing before them.

When the couple reluctantly broke apart, Willow and Oz turned to him and returned the wave of farewell he sent to all before walking out on to the campus.

Riley was still starstruck. "You know Professor O'Connor?" He asked, hoping that what he had just witnessed was a mere illusion of his own making.

"Yeah," Buffy confirmed, feeling a little sorry for the boy now whose hopes she had just disappointed. "Actually we've been together for over two years." Which was more or less true,
providing one did not count the time she had to send him to hell.
"Together?" Riley echoed.
"As in the relationship sense," Buffy replied.
Riley was shocked by her confirmation. "I thought it was forbidden."
"Not unless you're taking Art History," Buffy explained. "Which I'm not."
A bell rang in the distance. Buffy checked her watch then gathered up her basket of books. "We have to get to class. Perhaps we'll see you some time?"
She walked out before he had a chance to reply. Willow and Oz quickly followed.
"What was that about?" Willow asked her.
Buffy looked around cautiously, then lowered her tone so no one else would hear what she said. "I'll tell you later, okay?" She sorted out her books into a more sturdy pile. "I have Introduction to Literature, I'll see you guys at lunch."

Lunch time found six members of the Scooby gang gathered around the trunk of a big tree which stood in one of the garden areas of the campus. The eldest of them sat with his back against the trunk, his soulmate in his arms, resting herself upon his lap as they shared the large lunch box which rested on hers. To the left of them were the other couple of the group, while to the right were once the third couple but now no more, having splitting up during the summer.
"There's a wiccan group established," Willow remarked after finishing the recap on her Chemistry class. "I'm gonna check it out later in the week."
"Searching for recruits?" Cordelia queried with a smile.
Willow nodded. "There's gotta be at least one true wiccan, this being Sunnydale and all."
"Anyone found anything else?" The slayer asked.
"No," Cordelia replied, while the others shook their heads.
"It's a pretty typical university," Angel added.
"That's what they said about Sunnydale High to my Mom," Buffy remarked. "And we all know how that worked out."
"Speaking of your Mom," Willow began, "how's she coping with you and Angel living together?"
"We're having dinner with her at the mansion tonight," Buffy replied. "But I think she's okay with it so far. She totally gave us her blessing before the Prom."
"The Bronze ready for opening tonight?" Oz asked Xander.
"All set," its new owner answered. "Dingoes ready?"
"We've passed the stage where we used to suck," Oz assured him.
"In that case I better go and check the sound system," Xander remarked abruptly, looking up.
"Later guys."

"Later Xand," Buffy returned.

"Hi," said a voice a few seconds later.

All looked up at the shadow, but only Willow spoke in reply. "Hey Riley."

The teaching assistant stood nervously before them, his confidence suddenly gone from his mind. "I was wondering if you need someone to show you where Psych is gonna be?"

"Thanks, Riley," Buffy began, "but we took a tour of the campus during one of the open days. Plus Angel is going to show us."

Riley tried not to appear crestfallen. "Oh, well see you in class then."

The slayer watched him go, then turned back to the others. "So, final judgement on Giles' lesson. Remember he will giving a pop quiz on said opinion later on. And he's likely to judge any hesitation as lack of enjoyment."

"It was actually very interesting," Cordelia replied. "I didn't think I would enjoy having demon research as a class as well, but he's really cleaned up his teaching style."

Angel nodded. "I've talked to a few of my students who take the class and they all say that its very interesting. And it's been well received by the faculty."

"It's certainly helped with the slaying," Buffy agreed. "I feel like I have the knowledge to face any demon who crosses my path."

Little did she know how much one day those words would be tested.

And discounted in face of the horrifying truth.

Afternoon called everyone back to their classes. As promised Angel showed Buffy, Willow and Oz where room one hundred and five was, seeing them to the door with the gold painted three digit number on, before walking to his own room for his remaining lectures of the day.

The trio walked into the lecture hall, found some seats in the middle row and sat down. Buffy took out her notebook and placed it on the little wooden platform attached to one side of the chair, her eyes on the front of the room, fixing her gaze on where Riley was sorting out papers at the desk.

Silently she watched him, but without any real interest as to what he was doing, or what he might be thinking concerning herself. Then a woman in a business suit came into the room, and she readied herself for the lecture.

Riley handed some papers to the woman, who came to stand in front of her desk. "Ok," she began, looking at them all. "This is Psych 105, 'Introduction to Psychology,' I'm Professor Walsh. Those of you who fall under my good graces will come to know me as Maggie. Those of you who don't will come to know me by the name my TA's use, and think I don't know about, 'The Evil Bitch Monster of Death.' Make no mistake, I run a hard class, I assign a lot of work, I talk fast and I expect you to keep up. If you're looking to coast I recommend 'Geology 101,' that's where the football players are. Any questions?" There was hardly any pause. "Good. Then we'll begin."

Buffy gripped her pen in her hand, placed it before the first line of her writing pad, and listened to
the lecture, entering herself into college life. As the professor continued to teach, she found her interest in the course growing. Originally she had taken Psychology to fill the science requirement for her freshman year, and because Willow had persuaded her to keep her and Oz company, but she had never realised how much the subject would appeal to her until now. Determining the nature and method behind a person's thoughts, feelings and actions could prove essential to defeating some vampires, she realised, particularly the older ones like those of Angel's generation and beyond. If she decided to pursue the course for a degree, it could give a her a flexible working career too, it occurred to her.

She had no idea what else Professor Walsh held in store for her.

And at the moment, neither did Maggie.

As evening advanced into night, the lights of the Mansion at 1902 Crawford Street cast their rays out on to the almost deserted street which bordered the grounds on which the Frank Lloyd Wright style house was situated.

Inside the house itself, three people sat in the dinning room, one just rising from his chair to take away the empty plates of the desert course, leaving mother and daughter alone for the moment.

Joyce Summers watched Angel walk into the kitchen, then turned to her daughter with a searching gaze. "So," she began, "are you happy?"

Buffy smiled at her mother as she replied, "couldn't be happier. He's wonderful, Mom. It's wonderful. I'm so glad I said yes. How are you coping?"

"Its a little weird," Joyce admitted, "but I'm getting there. I'm glad we still get to see each other at least once a week. And your calls every night are very welcome."

"Good," Buffy smiled. "Now, if you ever feel the loneliness getting to you, I don't mind if you, you know, re-enter the dating scene."

Joyce chuckled. "You've gotten over Ted then?"

"Yes, providing me and Angel are allowed to vet them," Buffy remarked with a grin. "Seriously, if they make you happy, then we're fine. Its only fair that I should give you that just as you have given it to me. I'm very glad you like him."

"Me too," Joyce replied. "I didn't want to lose you when I had just come to know who you really are."

Buffy smiled, then Angel walked back in and conversation turned to other things until Joyce decided to leave.

The slayer saw her mother to her car, then watched as the vehicle drove up Crawford Street, then turned and faded into the night. Silently, she surveyed the night around her, slayer senses alive, as they detected something far away. Barely a second later she relaxed, as she recognised the deceptively mild vampire warning.

Since Angel had gained half of his redemption, Buffy had learned that his aura, the part of him that told a slayer he was a vampire, had changed. It had become lighter, more subtle, giving out a deceptive distance when often the reality was in fact much nearer.

Now Buffy leaned back against his chest as his arms came around her. With what had become a
habit since the ascension, he bent his head and dealt a kiss to the little scar which covered her lightly tanned skin above her jugular.

"You still feel guilty, don't you?" She asked him when he had rested his head upon her hair.

"I can't help it," Angel confessed softly.

She turned round in his arms, her eyes gazing into his. "Well, we're even then. I still feel guilty about sending you to hell."

"You did what you had to do to save the world," Angel said. "You shouldn't feel guilty." His gaze fell from her in shame, and guilt. "What I did was different."

Buffy sighed, bringing one of her hands to his chin, the slight pressure of her touch calling his soulful eyes back to her own. "Angel, we're not having this debate again. You refused, remember? I had to punch you and bring out those pesky but vital survival instincts. So forget the guilt, okay?"

"Even though that scar now marks you to other vamps as mine?" He asked her.

"It does?" Her eyes widened in surprise, then she smiled. "Cool. Next time I meet one, it will be doubly afraid of me."

"You're really okay with this, aren't you?" He sought to confirm, just as surprised by her reaction to this new piece of information.

"Really," Buffy assured him. "Now stop brooding over it."

He smirked slightly at her orders. "Yes, ma'am."

Buffy smiled at his good humour thus restored. "Now, let's go inside, it's cold here."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, causing her to laugh. It was the kind of laughter which he had come to know since they first slept together, intimate and seductive, and the sound turned him on now just as much as it had the first time he heard it, in his apartment near the Bronze, almost two years ago. He looked into her eyes as he led her inside, and smiled back at her, a smile which promised how good the rest of the night was going to be.

As Angel took her hand and led her to their bedroom, Buffy knew that the next time he kissed the scar covering her jugular, it would not be because he felt guilty about drinking blood from her. It would be because the mark claimed her as his to the rest of the vampire underworld, and that knowledge made her wish that the scar would never fade away.

"The place looks great, Xander."

Xander smiled as he watched his friends grazed around the new interior decor of the nightclub. The dark theme had been changed for a more lighter look, with light camel covered furnishings and a mixture of tan shaded lights.

"Thanks," he replied in the wake of the compliments. "Cor helped."

"And he actually listened to my advice. Amazing," the fashion queen remarked, though inwardly touched as opposed to surprised.

"Dingoes are here," Oz called out as he and the rest of the members of Dingoes Ate My Baby arrived. "Where do we set up?"
"I'll show you," Xander replied, as the door opened to admit the first stream of consumers.

Angel and Buffy joined the rest of the Scooby gang, including the new professor of Irish Literature; Doyle, at their usual gathering place in the nightclub; a long corner sofa with a coffee table set against the wall.

Buffy snuggled into the arms of his warm embrace, then uttered a groan as out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Riley coming up.

"You wanna a dance?" She asked her soulmate.

"Sure." Angel rose, took her hand and led her out on to the dance floor.

Riley watched the couple for a while, a million and one thoughts passing through his head, all waiting for him to connect them together. Then the pager attached to the belt clips on his jeans beeped, meaning he had to go, for he had other, more important duties to attend to.

Outside in the dead of night, on the large campus of Sunnydale University, a vampire stalked the grounds, looking for a living and breathing, full-blooded human being of a target to drain the life out of.

Suddenly he felt an electric shock travel through his undead chest. He looked down and saw the source; a pair of wires were attached to his clothes. He was stunned, he had no idea that vampire could be controlled like this, or that the slayer who stalked his brethren upon this hellmouth possessed such a weapon. But that was all he had time to realise, before blacking out and falling upon the ground.

Then a group of people clothed in black camouflage gathered around him, and collected him up, taking him away.

The End.
To Be Continued In
Scorned Plague.
The Freshman

**Author's Note:** I have changed very little in this episode, aside from extending the length and the beginning and end scenes, the latter of which resembles the original episode which welcomed Anya; *The Wish*. I have also used some dialogue from that episode in other scenes. As for *Living Conditions* the episode might show up later on in this series. *Enjoy.*

*Scorned Plague.*

She was not herself. Buffy knew that for certain. Nothing else could be possible, for she had no recollection of dying her hair black and acquiring new green eye contacts into the bargain. Yet the reflection which faced her in the mirror felt as though it belonged to her, the source from a deep feeling penetrating the inner recesses of her mind. However, as she stared into the mirror, she experienced what felt then as an unusual sensation of separation from herself.

An out of body state which could be put down to stress, lack of sleep, food, fluids, or all of the above. Despite this her thoughts possessed enough presence of mind to allow herself to identify her current surroundings, where they received another surprise; she was in a nightclub.

The Bronze, to be precise, she silently concluded as she recognised the mocha and latè furnishings which now adorned the seating areas, their light shades a contrast to the darkness that surrounded the mirror she was standing before. Just as with herself, she also felt a separation with these surroundings too, for a part of her was sure she had just fallen asleep in her boyfriend's arms a few minutes ago.

As opposed to the boyfriend she was watching now, via the reversed reflection of the nightclub which the mirror gave her, as he kissed another girl. The view before her seemed to operate on a different time from reality, slowing down into almost a freezing frame, stilled as if paused by her mind. She felt her eyes unable to move into taking another view of the room, they were fixed on either the visible sadness on her face, or the couple embracing on the dance floor behind her.

He was nothing like Angel. Not even close. Instead of dark brown hair and eyes facing her in the mirror behind her altered reflection, it was blond and blue, there could not be a greater contrast between the two men, even if one discounted the vampirism. Above all, Angel would never cheat on her. Despite all her insecurity during the early months of their relationship, they had come so far since his return from hell to render any uncertainty concerning his faithfulness meaningless. Yet, for some unknown reason, she could not focus on that. Instead all she could focus on, was the extreme emotions rising from deep within her, desolate sadness and a white hot rage that was building up and up inside her mind, as she silently watched the kiss go on and on, intensifying every second, until the turmoil hidden behind her sorrowful face overwhelmed everything else.

He was cheating on her. Her boyfriend was cheating on her. How dare he? After all they had been through, how could he throw it all away for another?

"Its a disgrace, isn't it?" A voice remarked suddenly.

Buffy turned her head and saw another girl suddenly standing beside her, about the same age, with hazel brown hair and eyes, a gemstone encircled by gold chained around her neck. Her companions sudden arrival felt both unnatural and yet normal, as if she had just never noticed that she wasn't alone in her grief until now.
"How dare he?" the girl added, echoing Buffy's thoughts.

Turning round, Buffy felt her gaze drawn to the unusual necklace around her companion's neck, she almost felt unable to look anywhere else.

"That's pretty, is it Gucci?" she found herself asking.

Her companion glanced at the gemstone then back at her. "Um... no. It's an actual old thing, sort of a, um... good luck charm my dad gave me." She indicated the scene they were trying to avoid. "Where do men get their nerve, eh?"

"You know, that's just what I was thinking," Buffy heard herself say.

The words felt right as she verbalised them, along with the sentiment behind them her tone, but at the same time Buffy felt as if they had been forced from her mouth.

Her companion nodded in understanding. "I bet you'd like to teach him a lesson."

Buffy found herself nodding back. "I would."

The girl reached behind her neck and unfastened the clasp of her pendant before handing it to her. "Here. I think you need this more than I do right now. You can by the way."

"I can what?" Buffy asked.

"Teach him a lesson."

Her anger and sadness competing within her denied Buffy from preventing herself asking, "how would I do that?"

"It's very simple," her companion replied. "All you do is say I wish and follow it up with the perfect revenge."

"Alright." Buffy paused, watching the boyfriend, thinking. "I wish his skin could be burned off him. Alive."

The girl smiled. "Done," she said, her tone some octaves deeper, almost masculine. Her face changed, skin thinning, cheek muscles disappearing into shredded shards.

Buffy felt her gaze turned back to the boyfriend.

Just in time to see him burned alive.

She woke up with a swallowed scream, and spent the next few minutes trying to calm the rising panic within herself until the emotion died away. Breathing slow, deep and evenly, she remained in bed, glancing a few times at the sleeping form next to her, assuring herself of his identity, of the brown hair she saw resting on the pillows, that he was still alive, even breathing a little, as he had been known to do ever since the Powers That Be granted him half of his humanity through Doyle on Graduation day.

When the panic within her lowered to a more acceptable level, Buffy forced herself to reflect on the dream she had just experienced. Ever since she had been called to her destiny as a vampire slayer she had been haunted by dreams, visions of evils to come which always touched her deeply, but never was she struck so completely as she felt now. The one thing she could not get over was that it had felt so real. If she had put her hand out, she could believe that it would be burned by the flames
which had surrounded the burning boy. She could still feel some of the emotional turmoil that she felt in the dream, from the moment she witnessed the boy cheating on her to the moment he burst into flames. Before she could stop the movement, she felt her hand attempt to clasp the skin which covered the upper part of her chest below her neck, as if the necklace that the companion in her dream had given her still existed in the real world. When her hand pinched her skin, causing momentary pain, Buffy did not know whether to feel relieved or horrified that the gemstone wasn’t there.

Flinching once more at the thought of it, she slipped out of bed and walked downstairs, passing through the double height living room and dining room, to the kitchen, determined to find something which would shake the feelings caused by this disturbing dream away. Yet, as she went through the motions of making herself a soothing warm drink, she also found herself possessing that out of body feeling once more, along with the bleak conviction that the dream would soon prove a grim reality.

Angel found her there ten minutes later, leaning the front of her body against the cabinets, nestling a ceramic mug between her hands, with a concerned thoughtful expression clouding her features, after the alarm had woken him up to the fact that he was alone in bed.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, wrapping his arms around her waist.

Buffy instantly smiled, as she felt herself connect with reality once more, simply by the touch of his body against hers, the smell of him and the sound of him, all within close proximity. She lowered her mug to the granite work top and let her hands leave the heat which emanated from the warm drink to touch the slight warmth within his hands, another product of his new half-human state. "Nothing now." She sighed and leaned back into him.

He bent his head and kissed her neck, following up with another to her lips after she turned round in his arms. Silently his gaze conveyed to her the unspoken wish for her confidence, along with the assurance that he would treat what ever was bothering her with the serious thought it warranted. Her immediate reply was equally silent but eloquent as she returned his gaze, conveying her assurance that any doubt of his response being anything other than positive never crossed her mind, but it was not until he had reluctantly parted from her in order to prepare their breakfast that she spoke.

"I had a really weird dream," She remarked. "I was someone else, in the Bronze, watching my boyfriend cheating on me."

"Definitely a dream," Angel assured her, as he served their breakfast on to the table in the centre of the kitchen. "I would never cheat on you."

"I know that," she replied, taking his hand and kissing the partner to the claddagh ring which he had given back to her that rested on his third finger, the metal heart signalling that he was hers for all the world to see. "Anyway, this girl comes up to me, offers her sympathy and revulsion on men in general, and then asks me to make a wish." she paused, taking a sip of her drink. "I had no control over what I was saying. I wished for him to be burned alive. She says 'done,' and then he burns alive. It felt so real and downright disturbing."

"I'm not surprised," Angel commented. "I don't remember the last slayer oriented dream you had being that vivid."

"Neither do I," Buffy agreed. "I'll tell Giles about it after class, maybe he can find out enough info to prepare us for this girl before she comes." She drained her drink and smiled at him. "So, what did you dream?"
Angel recognised the invitation in her tone and returned the smile. "Oh, nothing much, just recalling last night. What happened before I went to sleep."

"Interesting," Buffy mused. "And what did happen?"

He smirked at her. "I'm insulted you don't remember."

Buffy's smile turned seductive. "Did I say that?"

"I could show you again if you like," he offered huskily, his tone full of promise.

Her voice was warm as she replied, getting up to put her empty plate in the sink, laying her hand on his shoulder. "I'd more than like, but we don't have time."

"True," he said with regret, and they shared a long look between them before getting ready to leave.

Other courses apart from Mythology which she had decided to take at UC Sunnydale occupied Buffy from the moment she and Angel arrived on campus, resulting in an unavoidable delay before she conveys the details of her horrific dream to her watcher. There was a deeper emphasis on attendance here in comparison to what she had felt at high school, a greater commitment from herself as well; not just to be seen doing well, but to actually do that well. Slaying was no longer the overwhelming burdening destiny from which she had to escape, even though she felt said escape was impossible. Instead it was now something with which to juggle alongside another, normal career, just as she had during high school. She realised now that the more she chose to benefit from her education, the better she would be able to manage that delicate yet necessary balance in her life.

Just an hour before lunch she crossed the wide expanse of campus, other students doing the same around her, as they moved to their next classes. Her journey took her past the area devoted to the residence halls, the frat and the sorority houses, all architecturally styled to resemble all stages of Sunnydale's existence. As usual she dealt each of the buildings and their surrounding grounds no more than a barely passing glance, not expecting to find anything out of the ordinary about them today.

Then she came to a halt, as the old architecture clashed with something that was all too frighteningly modern. The narrow band of yellow and black plastic ribbons, fastened to thin metal stakes which were sunk into the grass and the white cars blazoned with blue stripes and the colour crest of Sunnydale, all symbols of a typical crime scene.

Slayer came senses alive, causing Buffy to silently join the small congregation of students that, despite the many attempts by lecturers and police officers to direct them away into other parts of the university campus, were grouped in front of the yellow and black plastic ribbon which crossed the sidewalk before the building in which the crime scene was located, separating the frat house from the lecture centres and other residential halls. Carefully she navigated her way through the gaps in the crowd of persons to the front where she would be able to gain a better perspective of the situation.

And she was just in time. A pair of Sunnydale's not so finest were carrying a stretcher out of the entrance, the body bag lying on top not completely zipped, affording all of those with a good perspective in the crowd some clue as to what had happened to warrant the forensics and the long arm of the law. The students gasped, Buffy following suit, as even she could not have expected the
sight which was on display, despite the dream she experienced last night, which now looked to be a grim warning of future events.

It was the boy in her dream. Despite the trauma which death visited on the remains, she was accustomed to divining what they would have looked like alive, using the extreme contrasts from each state to draw her conclusions. And, just as she had wished and witnessed in her dream, his skin was completely burned from his body.

And there was not just one. Buffy counted at least five body bags before she carefully retreated back through the crowd, taking in who else was watching the scene, as well as making sure that no one was observing her. When she had reached the back of the student spectators once more, she slipped her hand into her pocket and drew out her cell phone, a recent acquisition and necessity since the summer. Pressing the second number on her speed dial, she put the device to her ear, her gaze travelling between the watching crowd and police officers as she waited for the receiver on the other end of the line to be picked up.

"Rupert Giles," a voice answered a few seconds later.

"It's me," Buffy replied, careful to keep her voice matter of fact and audible only to him. "We have a situation."

"Where?"

"One of the frat houses. Kappa Gamma."

"How many?"

"Five, so far, with the distinct possibility of more." Buffy paused, then added, "Finest are still going over it."

"We'll meet there after classes at the end of the day," Giles decided.

"Agreed," Buffy replied before ending the call. She folded the phone with a click, then slipped it back into the pocket of her long skirt. Taking a final look around, she noticed Riley Finn in the crowd, before turning her back and walking to her next class.

The sky was preparing to turn into darker shades of blue scratched with vivid pink by the time the slayer returned to the frat house of Kappa Gamma. Sunnydale Police had long since gone, along with the crowd, interest in the scene having died as soon as there were no more bodies to be brought out or suspects to be arrested.

So there was no one to notice her carefully pealing back the yellow and black plastic ribbon which was struck halfway across the porch door, before stepping inside.

Most of the Scooby gang were already there and each paid her a silent acknowledgement as they noticed her arrival. Cordelia smiled at her as she took a pair of latex gloves from her, then joined her and Doyle in examining and collecting samples from the various stains on the floor. Nearby Willow and Oz had a laptop and mini lab set up, in order to test the samples there rather than having the normal forensics notice that evidence was missing. This was another part of the necessary routine which they developed during the summer, as they realised that they would no longer have as much undetected freedom within the campus as they did within the High school, that the possibility of their actions being noticed here were greater than on the building which was once above the hellmouth.
She was not the last to arrive, Xander entering the room fifteen minutes later, having turned the nightclub over to the charge of his deputy manager before arriving on campus. He nodded at her in silent greeting before going over to where Giles, Jenny and Angel were with the occult reference volumes which they took from the watcher's apartment to refer to at the crime scene. The watcher silently handed him a book, then returned to his own.

The campus outside was almost shrouded in darkness when all of them ceased in their research, gathering around one of the seating areas to air and form conclusions.

"Anyone seen this before?" Doyle asked.


"I concur," Giles agreed, while the others glanced at them in puzzlement.

"Who's Anyanka?" Buffy asked her boyfriend.

"She's a demon," Angel replied. "A patron one, if you will, of scorned women."

Giles picked up the thread of explanation. "There are references to her in every culture. She's said to have existed for centuries."

"Angelus encountered her back in 1850," Angel added. "Or rather, her work. In similar circumstances to this, actually. Only the bodies were still on display when I -he arrived."

"She's a powerful vengeance demon," Giles concluded, as he opened one of the many ancient texts beside him, rustling pages until he found what he wanted. Then he slid the book forward, pointing with his hand to the engraving.

Buffy only needed to take one glance. "That was the girl in my dream," she remarked. "but how? She must be hundreds of years old."

"Like all demons she's immortal," her watcher replied. "Her spells are as limitless as human imagination. She will give you whatever you wish for."

"Including the desire for a cheating boyfriend to be burned alive," Buffy mused.

Giles took off his glasses and began to clean them as he asked. "have any of the victims names been released yet?"

"One," Xander replied, taking a piece of paper out of his pocket. "Parker Abrams."

"Well at least there's one death which won't be regretted," Cordelia remarked.

"Who is Parker Abrams?" Jenny asked.

"One of womaniser frat boys," Oz explained.

"He'll date a girl long enough to get her to sleep with him, then dump her," Cordelia replied. "And fortunately, I don't know this from experience."

"Well, whatever his crime, justice should never be this bloody or vengeful." Giles began, putting his glasses back on. "We have to deal with Anyanka, before this gets any worse. Now, we have no way of predicting where she will strike next, so I suggest we stakeout the other frat houses tonight."
"How do you destroy her?" Buffy asked.

"You can't actually kill her, she's immortal, but you can destroy her power centre." He picked up the book once more and flicked a few pages. "This is the most reliable drawing we have." It was another engraving, this time of an amulet, one which Buffy remembered the woman in her dream fastening around her neck before her deadly wish was granted.

"She is very dangerous," Giles added in warning, "so I want all of you in pairs and your mobiles on."

"Well, I'm sure when my drama teacher suggested that we explore a men's psyche, this was not what she had in mind," Sunnydale High's former cheerleader remarked in a half whisper as she sat down on the floor of the hallway of the first floor of one the frat houses, mindful of the sleeping students located in each room.

"You could try and look on the bright side 'Delia," Doyle said as he joined her having chosen to partner her on surveillance that night.

Cordelia regarded him with incredulity. "There's a bright side to spying on frat houses to protect cheating guys from the patron demon of scorned women?"

"You have a point," Doyle conceded. He glanced around, then took in a deep breath before opening the bag he had brought. "I know its hardly romantic either, but....."

Cordelia turned to see him laying out some candles and two plates wrapped in tin foil. She gasped in surprise. "Doyle, what is this?"

"'Delia, will you have dinner with me?" He asked her.

She smiled at him, all other thoughts forgotten. "I'd love to," she softly replied, before moving to be opposite him around their 'floor table."

Around them the doors of the sleeping frat members remained closed, undisturbed by the candle light. Night had long since set in on the town which held the hellmouth, all of its populous soundly asleep in their beds; except for the ten members of the Scooby gang, paired off in the five untouched frat houses on the campus, quietly alert and ready for any trouble. All had long become used to the nocturnal hours of their work since the summer, the Mayor's Ascension serving as a reminder to be more equipped and more prepared for the evil which regularly visited the town.

In the largest of the frat houses, Buffy and Angel sat out the night, as the two most powerful warriors of the group. Giles had instructed them to remain focused on their objective before they left, and the first few minutes were spent in pleasant nostalgia, as they recalled old patrols long ago, in the times when they had no idea of the curse over his soul, or what else was to come to try and break them apart.

The slayer's watch had just struck midnight, and they were beginning to believe that one night of revenge was enough, when the first movement was heard. Initially it seemed to be nothing more than a rustling of sheets from one of the bedrooms, but then there was a flash of light and a figure materialised in the hallway before the chosen warriors.

Buffy and Angel leapt up from the floor, nostalgia forgotten as they encountered Anyanka for the first time. The former took a stake out of her sleeve; the sturdiest one she owned, and stepped into a fighting stance.
"Oh, you must be the slayer," Anyanka remarked, coming to a halt before her. Her features were in human form, and her attire was that of a typical college student. "Not troubled by my human appearance? That's new."

"I'm not your average slayer," Buffy replied. "Now, how about you stopping this?"

"Stopping what?" Anyanka smiled. "No, I'm not stupid, I know what you mean. But I can't. I have a duty to womankind. Even you might need my help one day."

"I think that's unlikely." Buffy stepped forward, invading her personal space. "Now, I suggest you leave. Before I make you." She struck, aiming for the necklace which chained the demon's neck, but it was useless.

Anyanka chuckled and with a flash disappeared.

"You didn't tell us she could teleport," Buffy remarked to her watcher the next morning. They had all gathered together at his apartment before classes that day, his living room having become the traditional meeting place for research and anything slayer related since the High school library was destroyed.

"I didn't know," Giles replied as he set the tea service down before them on the coffee table in front of the sofas. "References to Anyanka's powers are sometimes unreliable, exaggerated and often sketchy at best."

"Well, four more students were eviscerated last night," Xander replied, dropping the newspaper on the table they were seated around as he entered. "Which brings the total death count up to twelve."

The slayer peered at the grim headline accompanied by the equally grim image on the front page of the broadsheet and then glanced around the group. "Suggestions? I don't think we should stakeout the frat houses again, she'll be prepared for that."

"Why not just summon her?" her mother asked as she had been part of the surveillance which took place the night before, Buffy bringing her up to speed during her regular nightly phone calls after Joyce finished working at the museum.

"That could be done," Giles agreed, before rising from his chair and turning to the bookshelves stacked full of the occult reference he had saved from the high school before he gathered dynamite and blew the building up. "I remember seeing such a spell somewhere."

"We could perform a holding spell as well," Willow suggested. "Prevent her from teleporting as soon as she realises that its a trap."

"Agreed," Buffy decided. "We'll do it tonight. Where do you think would be the best place to summon her?"

"Any place where can control what happens," Giles replied. "Perhaps your place?"

Buffy glanced at Angel who nodded before rising from their seats. "We'll see you all there," she proposed.

One by one the rest of the slayerettes followed their destined warriors out of the apartment to their vehicles and eventually the university campus.
The remaining hours of daylight were observed with various imaginations, each unique to every member of the slayerettes who possessed them, as they tried to focus on what occupations usually took up their minds on any given day, mindful however of what ritual awaited them that night, and contemplative concerning all possible outcomes.

At the mansion on Crawford Street they soon gathered, assembling in the double height living room where once Acathla was briefly unleashed, and the glove of Myhnegon was used to deadly effect. Since then both Angel and Buffy had done a lot to furnish the room with contrasting ornaments and furniture, in an effort to distract anyone who visited remembering those events, but the slayer could not deny indulging in a brief moment of weakness by dwelling on her memories of those times, as she gazed at the tilted floor of the large room, cleared to prevent possible damages, hoping that this ritual would not cause as much damage as the last two which had taken place here.

Giles placed a big golden goblet on the floor, to which he put in water, herb's and enchanted powers, the necessary mixture required for the ritual.

The Scooby gang deployed themselves at various points around the room, ready to rush forward if the slayer and watcher required backup.

Giles picked up a small branch from one of the bushels of herb's and dropped it into the goblet before he opened the leather bound volume which contained the ritual.

"Oh, Anyanka," he chanted, reading from the required passage, "I beseech thee, in the name of all women scorned," he paused to add more herb's to the now small fire within the golden goblet, "come before me."

Silence greeted the end of his sentence as everyone held their breath, waiting for the vengeance demon to appear as requested. For a moment all became convinced that the ritual had not succeeded until their convictions were proved wrong as Anyanka emerged out of the dark recess under the stairs which led to the first floor.

"Do you have any idea what I do to a man who uses that spell to summon me?" She asked them.

"Hopefully not burn their skin off them," Xander attempted to joke.

The comment backfired as Anyanka raised her threatening glare in his direction, causing him to flinch and take a step back to ward off confrontation.

Willow met Jenny's glance and together they began chanting the containment spell, the murmur of their voices barely audible, designed so the demon would not notice her escape was gone before she tried to use it.

"I dreamt of you last night," Buffy remarked.

Anyanka turned her gaze to the slayer. "Fascinating. I had no idea a vampire slayer possessed the imagination to dream."

"You think we're just girls who can kill?" Buffy countered. "I am much more than what I appear to be, and I think we can say the same of you."

"True," Anyanka conceded. "You could say we both grant wishes."

"Except yours are a lot more horrific than mine," Buffy replied.

"You call justice horrific?" Anyanka countered. "Greater crimes are visited on humankind daily."
At least I use my power for righteousness."

"Is it righteousness to inflict death on men just because they've scorned a woman?" Buffy asked her. "Shouldn't justice be just?"

"Whose to argue my justice isn't?" Anyanka queried.

"We are," Buffy replied, gesturing at herself and her friends.

The vengeance demon took in the sight of everyone in the room before she replied. "You really think you can fight me?"

"I'm not afraid of you," Buffy replied. "Your only power lies in the wishing."

Suddenly she felt the wind knocked from her as Anyanka leapt across the room and grabbed her neck, pressing her body against the wall.

"Wrong!" Anyanka cried. "This is the real world now, not your dreams."

The slayerettes rushed forward to rescue Buffy, but the demon directed her free hand back at them threateningly.

"Move and she suffers the same fate as those frat boys you seem to care so much about," she said. "I don't usually kill women but tonight I will make an exception."

"I'm still not afraid of you," Buffy replied, her hands wrestling themselves free from the small space between their bodies, one moving to grab her opponents hand which gripped her neck, the other going for the source of the demon's powers. With one satisfying snap she pulled the gemstone free, tossing it to her friends.

"No!" Anyanka cried, letting go of the slayer as one of the men caught her jewel.

Buffy turned round in time to grab the girl and prevent her from interfering with Angel as he caught the necklace in his hand, before using his vampire strength to crush the gemstone within his fist.

A bright green light resonated from the jewel as it was smashed into thousands of pieces, falling from Angel's hand like grains of sand upon the marble floor. Across the room its' owner lost her demonic appearance, crumbling visibly as Buffy let go of her, all resistance to her powerless fate at an end.

The End.

To Be Continued In
The Harsh Light Of Day.
The Harsh Light of Day

Author's Note: Some of the dialogue is taken from the original episode, as well as the main plot. Here I wanted to combine elements of THLOD with In The Dark;- the Ats sequel. Enjoy.

The Harsh Light of Day.

"Do you mind?"

"Why should I mind?" He paused to show her a genuine smile. "I think its great. I'm really happy for you."

"Oh." The former cheerleader and Homecoming Queen sat back in the mocha coloured soft furnishing with a somewhat disappointed air. "Could you not just be a little angry? I had a whole defence prepared."

The owner of the soft furnishings chuckled and leant against the firm back cushions. "I'm sorry, Cor, really I am. But I'm not jealous. Maybe a few months ago, I would have been, but not now. You're happy, aren't you?"

Cordelia smiled now too. "Yeah. I really am."

"Then so am I." Xander looked up as he saw a slight reflection of someone appear in the coffee table between them. Not only were the transparent tables helpful in detecting vampire clientele, they were also a good way of seeing who was listening into conversations as well. "Hey, I hope you're treating her right," he remarked by way of greeting to the newcomer to their area of the nightclub.

"She won't let have it any other way," Doyle said as he joined them on furnishings. "Then again, neither would I."

"So you're really okay with this, Xander?" Cordelia asked him one final time.

"Okay with what?" A voice asked. The trio looked up to see that the rest of the Scooby gang had joined them.

"I really am okay," Xander replied. Then he looked up at the slayer. "See for yourself," he added with a smile.

Buffy sat down, Angel and Willow joining her, placing their drinks on the table, then glanced at Cordelia and Doyle, to see that their hands were joined in the traditional relationship way. "When did this happen?" She asked with a smile.

"During that stakeout of the frat houses," Cordelia replied. "The most unusual date I'd ever had," she added. "But very romantic."

"We Irish fellows have a way of making anything romantic, don't we Angel?" Doyle said, lacing his voice rich with the dialect of his home country.

"If you say so," Angel replied back, wrapping an arm around his own girlfriend.

It was about as ordinary as night gets in the town on the hellmouth, and the Scooby gang were
relaxing after a hard day of lectures and an evening patrol. In the Bronze business was the same as it always had been, despite shifting to the freshman generation of clientele. On the stage the headline band for the night were just winding up their last song.

The final member of freshman in the guardians of the hellmouth came up as Dingoes Ate My Baby picked up their equipment and prepared to depart.

"Ready to load up and go?" He asked his girlfriend.

Willow finished her drink, stood up, and paid a temporary farewell to the slayerettes, then followed Oz outside. "I'm gonna miss you."

Oz turned from packing up the truck to take her in his arms. "Me too. Take care."

"And you."

"Willow, hi," a voice said then.

The wiccan turned round in surprise. "Harmony, hey. I haven't seen you since -"

"Since graduation. Big snake, huh?"

"Yeah. So, how was your summer vacation?"

"Well I was gonna go to France. But I didn't. I was dying to see the stores."

"Yeah, and the museums," Willow added.

"Museums?" Harmony queried.

"Yeah, I heard they have them. You know, just a rumour you pick up on the streets."

Harmony laughed. "You were always so funny, Willow. You haven't changed a bit."

"No, you neither."

Harmony suddenly smiled. "Oh, maybe a little," then the fangs and forehead ridges appeared and she grabbed Willow's neck.

Barely a second later, Oz brandished a mike stand at the ex-cordette and a cross, causing the vampire to retreat.

"Back off, Harmony," Willow remarked, holding a hand over the bite wound in her neck.

Harmony appeared relatively nonplussed. "Okay, fine. Hide behind your boyfriend. But I have a boyfriend too. And he's gonna be mad that you were mean to me."

Fortunately for the guardians the Bronze had obligingly emptied itself of guests and staff by the time the couple walked back inside. Instantly the alarm was raised and the chosen warriors leapt out of their seats to help the werewolf and wiccan into the light, while the owner of the nightclub fetched the First Aid kit from behind the bar.

"What happened?" Buffy asked.
"Remember Harmony?" Oz replied.

"She's back from her summer vacation," Willow added, her tone hissing a little as Xander applied the antiseptic. "And she's a little bit different."

"She's taken to a new diet," Oz finished.

"Harmony. A vampire?" Cordelia shook her head, but not in disbelief. "She must be dying without a reflection."

"She just made me so mad. 'My boyfriends gonna beat you up.'"

"'My boyfriend?'' Echoed Buffy.

"Well, if you believe her. She always lied about stuff like that. 'Oh, he goes to another school. You wouldn't know him.'"

"Well," Oz began, slightly calmer now, "Devon dated her for a while, but she was too flaky for him. Which, stop and marvel at the concept."

"Guy dating Harmony dead," the slayer mused. "Must be like, the most tolerant guy in the world."

While the slayerettes discussed the new arrival in town, Harmony returned to her crypt and greeted her boyfriend. "Hi baby. I'm back."

He turned, taking off his protective equipment as he did so, revealing the white bleached blond hair. For the moment he ignored his girlfriend, turning to the table where a lackey was waiting with some blueprints. "It's definitely the crypt right?" He asked. "I'm not keen on tunnelling into someone's septic tank."

"It's the crypt," the lackey replied, a more intelligent one than usual. "The radar soundings are clear. The walls are thinnest here at the bottom. We'll have to tunnel underneath. More work but I'm sure -" he trailed off as his head was slammed down to connect with the surface of the table.

"You'd better be more than sure," his boss remarked. "'Cause I'd hate to have to hurt you."

The lackey nodded. "I swear, I swear."

Harmony meanwhile, seeing that her verbal greeting had not succeeded, tried the physical approach, by putting her body against him. "How's my little Blondie bear?"

"Harm, does this look like a good time?"

"Are you gonna kill Willow tonight? Cause I want you to say, 'This is for messing with my sweet girl.' And then, you know." She mimed the bite upon his shoulder.

Her boyfriend grabbed her by the waist. "And why do I need to do that?"

"She and her boyfriend attacked me."

"And was that because you tried to eat her?" He shook his head. "Nobody knows I'm here. And I'm not killing the slayer's best friend because that would tend to announce my presence. And we're too bloody close. Now, Sod Off! Go eat something, I've got work to do."

Harmony turned to the 'meal' that was trained up against the walls of the crypts and grimaced.
"This one tastes funny. Take me out to eat."

"He's perfectly fresh."

"I think I had a math class with him last year and I didn't like him that much then either."

"Harm!"

"I want to go to a party."

Spike almost growled in annoyance and slammed his fists into the table, making his lackey jump. Then he walked over to Harmony, and pushed her against the wall. Unlike the lackey however, Harmony did not jump, preferring to wiggle against him and adopt a coy smile. "Oh. Right here, baby. In front of Bernie."

"You'd like that wouldn't you?" Spike replied.

"Maybe I would. After a party."

"Tomorrow. I'll take you somewhere nice."

Buffy wasn't sure what had caused her to open her eyes. The master bedroom suite of the Mansion on Crawford Street was on the first floor, covering the night garden, one entrance leading out to a balcony landing which partly overhung the double height living room and dining room, the other to a large ensuite bathroom which was directly above the kitchen. Despite this the suite was well insulated against sound, a by product of Frank Lloyd Wright inspired architecture. She turned as she quietly sat up, careful not to disturb Angel whose vampire enhanced hearing was better than her slayer audio range. Stretching out those senses now, she let her instincts acclimatise themselves to the silence within her immediate surroundings, before glancing to her right to check the time. The hour for the alarm was ten minutes away, she saw, before rising to get dressed.

When she reached the galleried hallway, she could discern the reason for her waking instincts, prone to unnecessary alarm as they seemed to be have been, for the had forgotten that she and Angel currently had a house guest, in the form of Anyanka. Since the destruction of her necklace, the now former vengeance demon was staying at the Mansion until she could adjust to a new life in this world. At the moment, this new life was entering the discovery phase, Buffy believed, for the young woman was sitting on one of the sofas in the living room, thoroughly absorbed in a morning soap opera.

"Anya?" Buffy queried as she came close enough to descry the young woman's tears. "What's wrong?"

"This woman is scorned and I can't help her," Anya replied.

Buffy took a glance at the television long enough to identify the programme then turned back to her house guest. "Anya, this is a soap opera, this woman's acting."

"I know that," Anya sniffed. "Just because I'm over eleven hundred years old doesn't mean the twenty-first century is a foreign country to me. I'm crying because the writers of the show don't believe that there is someone out there who can help her. Or at least there was."

Buffy took a seat next to her. "There is life outside the vengeance gig, you know."

"I know there is," Anya replied. "But what would you do if the vampire slayer destiny was taken
"I don't know," Buffy answered honestly. "But I would probably end up being just an ordinary college girl." She shrugged off the question, inwardly surprised by the irony that now she had accepted her destiny she would feel lost without it. "Okay, and I can't believe I'm suggesting this, but can't you ask for it back?"

"No," Anya replied. "D'Hoffryn, my boss, would ask me to explain how I lost it in the first place, and he would be too disgusted that a souled vampire destroyed it to let me have it back."

"Can you earn it again?" Buffy asked her.

"That would be a problem," Anya replied.

"Why?" Buffy queried, curious.

"Let's just say I had to do a live audition for the first time, and a repeat performance would involve you coming after me again."

"Oh," Buffy replied. "Well, I know being ordinary may seem boring, but we could help set you up for college. You know, id and stuff."

Anya looked at her. "Really?"

"Yeah," Buffy assured her. "I mean we did destroy your talisman, its the least we can do. We sorted out that for Angel."

"I did wonder how he managed to acquire this house," Anya remarked.

"Ah, this he found when he lost his soul briefly last year," Buffy replied, a part of her inwardly shivering at the memory of that event. Despite those traumatic times, she loved living here with Angel, and between the two of them they had furnished the rooms where she and Angelus had fought beyond recognition of those dark summer days.

"So," she asked her guest, "are you interested?"

"I think I could be," Anya replied.

"I'll talk to Willow and Oz," Buffy remarked, before rising from her seat. "Do you fancy some breakfast?" She asked her.

"Yeah," Anya replied, rising from her seat as well and following her into the kitchen.

It was in this room where Angel found them, comfortably talking and eating, falling into silence to smile at him as he wandered into the room, dressed in his business suit ready for a day of lecturing.

"Should my ears be burning?" He joked as the two of them looked at him before he leaneded down where the slayer was sitting to kiss her neck in greeting.

"Not unless you've taken your talisman off," Buffy remarked, smiling at him. "Relax, honey, no scorned women plots of vengeance here. Me and Anya are just getting to know each other."

"I've decided to become a college girl," Anya informed him.

"That's good," Angel replied. "What classes are you gonna take?"
"I was thinking about drama," Anya replied. "But I don't know about the rest."

"I'll sort out my course prospectus for you to borrow," Buffy proposed. "And there's a party at Wolf House tonight. You could come with us and learn the social side of College."

"Sounds good," Anya decided.

Night came, and as the darkness closed in upon Boca del Inferno, the slayer and her friends conducted their nightly patrol of the city, via the party at Wolfhouse. Sure enough, they soon found who they were looking for.

"There," Angel said, looking in the direction with a smile. Buffy turned to stand in front of him and smiled as well. "Well I'll be. Spike and Harmony."

"Buffy, hi," the ex-cordette remarked in greeting. "What a cute outfit. Last year."

"Well this is interesting," Spike observed. "You two still together? Last I heard, you were in hell."

"And you with Harmony," Angel said, ignoring him. "What'd you do? lose a bet?"

"Hey," Harmony rejoined, while Spike threw the 'takeout' they had been supporting back into the crowd.

"Actually, how we met. It's a funny story," he said then he leapt over the couch and took off.

Buffy took out her walkie-talkie. "Guys, its Spike," she announced before running outside after them.

"What's the matter Spike?" She asked when she had caught up with him, "Dru dump you again?"
She returned his backhanded strike with two punches, both of which he managed to block, before missing out on the punch to his face.

"Maybe I left her," he pointed out before striking back.

"She left him for a fungus demon," Harmony said as she came up to the two of them. "That's all he talks about most days."

Spike meanwhile had thrown his last punch. "Harm! We are going. It isn't time yet."

"Yeah, but as soon as we have the Gem of Amarra, you're gonna be sorr-," she was cut off as Spike growled in frustration and grabbed her by the waist. The odd couple then departed, leaving Buffy wondering.

"Yeah, Spike with Harmony. If you can believe it."

It was barely half an hour later, and the Scoobies were back at their HQ, the slayer relaying to Giles and the rest about her and Angel's encounter with them.

"I couldn't figure out why he ran away but Harmony said something. Why they were here. They were looking for the Gem of Amarra."
Angel gasped while Giles queried further. "The gem of Amarra. Are you sure?"

Buffy nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"It's not real," Angel remarked while the watcher went over to his bookshelves, more stacked than usual since the entire occult section from Sunnydale High had been moved into them before the school was destroyed.

"It's the vampire equivalent of the Holy Grail," Giles continued, "the source of some enormous power, references concerning the item were as usual conveniently vague." He paused to study the leatherbound volume in his hands. "Oh, here it is, yes. There was a great deal of vampiric interest in locating it during the 10th century. Questing vampires combed the earth, but no one ever found anything. It was concluded that it never existed."

"Well, Spike seems to think it exists," Buffy remarked. "And he's looking in Sunnydale."

"Time to do do some research," Giles proposed. "And I thank you all for assembling so promptly to help me out."

Slayer and slayerettes groaned at the research trap which they had unwittingly walked into before obeying the watcher's request and selecting books from which to begin.

Meanwhile, their resident villain was climbing into his newly open burial site with a lantern to illuminate the darkness. He looked around and saw an ornate necklace around the neck of a skeleton, which contained a large green gemstone. Excitement filled his mind and expression as he gazed upon his holy grail.

"It's real," he murmured, awed by the sight.

"Ooh, pretty," Harmony remarked as she came inside. "Can I take stuff?"

"Take whatever you want I don't care," Spike answered without even looking in her direction. Silently, almost reverently he stroked the gemstone. Then he pulled it off the skeleton and put it about his neck.

"So is it doing it?" Harmony asked. "Do you feel it? I mean, you don't look different, if you were wondering. I thought maybe you'd look taller or glow or something." She turned back to the rest of the jewels.

Spike took hold of a cross, only to cry out in pain as it burned his skin, leaving a dark red bruise on his open palm.

His girlfriend turned at his growl of pain, but was unaffected. "You should put some butter on that. But, hey, maybe it's worth money, anyway. That would be something. Then we could go to France, I always wanted to go to France and stay in a chateau and you could take me shopping -" She trailed off abruptly as Spike struck her with a piece of wood.

To their mutual surprise, and his temporary disgust, she did not turn into ashes.

"I can't believe you just did that." She started to punch him, but he grabbed her hands, noticing one of the rings.

"That's my gem," he remarked, catching sight of the green jewel encased within a ring of gold.
"Fine if that's all that matters to you. Take it, and get out." She took it off her finger and threw it to him.

Spike caught it with a smile. "That's a good idea. I think I'll go wait outside."

"Okay," the guitarist of the group began, "either I'm borrowing all your albums or I'm moving in."

The owner of said records merely turned the page of the book he was studying and said, "Oz, there are more important things than records right now. Like the impending disaster, for example."

"Found something?" Willow queried.

"A paragraph here. It refers to the Gem of Amarra as 'residing in the valley of the sun.' In other words, Sunnydale. It seems the gem may exist after all, in Sunnydale in a sealed underground crypt."

"More important than this one?" Oz asked, holding it up.

"Well I suppose an argument could be made for that one," Giles allowed.

"Whoa," Xander exclaimed at that moment, as he unveiled his discovery to the rest of the research committee. "Giles has a TV. Everybody, Giles has a TV. He's shallow like us."

"I got to admit, I'm a little disappointed," Oz said as he put the record down.

"Well maybe it doesn't work," Willow said hopefully. "Like a piece of art."

In reply Xander turned the set on. Colour pictures and the current news showed, leaving Willow and the rest open-mouthed in shock.

"Public television," Giles merely observed. "Come on everyone we have vital work to do. Watching television is not going to help us right now."

The television however, had other ideas. "Near the UC Sunnydale campus. Officials attribute the unusual occurrence to weakening of the supporting topsoil nearby. City work crews denied any tunnelling has been done in the area....."


Buffy and Angel put down theirs. "We're on it," she said before dashing out of the door, her soulmate following.

It did not take long to find him. But then bleached white hair with forehead ridges and fangs tend to stand out. Or at least, that was what the screaming students all silently agreed before running for cover.

"This is nice," Spike said aloud. "Birds singing, squirrels making lots of rotten little squirrels. Sun beaming down in a nice, nonfatal way. It's very exciting, I can't wait to see if I freckle."

"You don't, thankfully, " Angel replied.

His grandchilde turned round in shock to see him in the sunlight as well. "Bloody hell."
"No, not bloody. Just plain ordinary dust," Buffy said as she struck him from behind, before taking out her stake.

Spike was unprepared, but even that did not affect his new found invulnerability. He turned round and pushed her to the floor. Buffy kicked him in the crotch, then shoved the stake through his chest.

The vampire merely laughed. "Oh, do it again. It tickles. You know, in a good way." He withdrew the stake and handed it back to the slayer.

Who watched with Angel in surprise as the wound healed.

"The Gem of Amarra," Spike said, holding up the hand which it adorned. "Official sponsor, of my killing you."

He threw another punch, causing Buffy to drop to the floor, kneeling to block it. Spike applied some of his new found strength and sent her into a pole, before punching her in the stomach.

Angel moved to intervene, but then retreated reluctantly to the sidelines when Buffy rose back up. He hated being a spectator, but this time it was necessary. Spike was not stupid. Sooner or later he would spot the charmed medallion that his grandsire was wearing and that would be that. Half of his humanity did not protect him from turning into dust. He could only intervene if Buffy was in danger. That was what they had agreed before advancing upon the battlefield.

Buffy meanwhile tried to kick Spike, but he merely blocked her and threw her against the pole once more. He pressed her against it, but she grabbed him by the throat and began to strangle him. Spike threw her off, and she landed on the floor with a roll, to then punch him in the stomach, which sent him spinning to the ground.

Spike leapt up and struck back, but the slayer blocked him, throwing him with a roundhouse, then another, sending him rolling over a nearby bench.

She jumped upon it, sent a kick to his chest, but Spike blocked and reached up, sending her crashing into the table.

"Oh, Angel, I think your little bitch needs some help," Spike remarked with a cruel smile.

Angel did nothing but return the gesture, as his soulmate grabbed Spike from behind, taking hold of the arm which had the hand that wore the ring.

"Take it off me this way, we both burn," Spike said to her.

"Really?" Buffy queried. "Let's see," she yanked the ring off.

Spike growled as his face contorted in pain. His body began to smoke, and immediately he ran off for nearest place of shelter from the once more mortally harming sunny rays.

Buffy bent over, breathing heavily, and Angel rushed to her side.

"Do you want me to go after him?" He asked her.

His girlfriend shook her head. "Leave him be. There are other things in this universe that can catch him now."

"I like it," Willow remarked.
"It does sparkle beautifully," Anya agreed. "Do you think we could make some more?"

"That would require a goldsmith," Xander pointed out. "And a knowledge of how to melt and mold metal. And how to cut jewels."

"You're right that's too much hard work," Anya agreed. "We just need a spell. Or a carefully worded wish."

The ring was lying on Giles' dining table, under the gaze of the rest of the Scooby gang who were all taking a close look at it.

"It's small," Oz observed.

"It's also very dangerous," Giles pointed out. "And we're destroying it."

"No we're not," the slayer remarked.

"Buffy, any vampire that get his hands on this....." Giles trailed off as he realised. "Oh. Well you've earned definitely," he added, looking at the new owner.

Angel shook his head, his eyes moving from the ring to those of his beloved. "I don't really need it, do I?"

Buffy merely picked the ring off the table and handed it to him. "Give it a try and see," she said, watching him as he tentatively slid the ring on to one of his fingers, a part of her already realising his eventual resolution, however unconsciously, as she caught the uncertain expression eclipsed in his dark eyes.

Later that same night, Buffy opened her eyes to find the space next to her empty. Instead of panicking, as she had done the last time she had woken up to discover this state of affairs, she rolled over and took in the rest of the bedroom. Then she gathered up the silk sheet around her naked body and walked over to the window bay.

Her boyfriend stood with one hand on the top frame, gazing at the small golden object which lay upon the stone window sill. Buffy came to stand beside him, looked at the ring, then to his thoughtful face. "You're gonna destroy it, aren't you?"

He came out of his trance, and turned to face her. "You mad?" He asked her.

She shook her head. "No. I just want to know why."

"If I put this on, I become a target for every vamp with big ideas. This," he pointed to the small golden medallion resting upon his hairless chest, contrasted with the black silk of his towelling robe, "none of them know about, and it protects me in much the same way. I know the Gem would make me invulnerable, at least until my redemption is complete, but all it takes is one moment of carelessness and its gone. I'd rather not take the risk."

"I understand," Buffy said, agreeing with him. "Why did you think I would be mad?"

"Because you gave it to me as a gift."

"Yes, because I knew you were the best person to decide whether the Gem continues to exist or not. With the thought that whatever you decided, I would and I do, understand. Angel, it doesn't matter to me whether you have the ring or not. You're still the same guy I fell in love with."
"The medallion was different. That only protects against the sunlight. But this..."

"I know, and I understand, believe me."

"Thank you," Angel, leant forward and kissed her softly. Then he took the marble ornament which he had been holding, and hit the ring with the bottom, smashing the holy grail completely.

There was silence for a moment, as the couple gazed at the spot where the ring had once been. Nothing, not even a speck of gold remained.

Then Angel looked up, and noticed what his soulmate was wearing. Silently he stepped forward and took her in his arms.

Buffy smiled up at him and let go of the silken sheet. It fell apart, falling to the floor as her boyfriend wrapped her in his arms and kissed her once again.

_The End_

_To Be Continued In Fear, Itself._
Author's Note: Very little of this story has been changed from the original episode, so most of the dialogue will be familiar. I have changed some scenes to include those characters who have not left, and dropped others which interfere with the future. Enjoy.

Fear, Itself.

"What do you think?" Xander asked.

The group stared forward. A quietness descended upon them.

Xander held up the knife in his hand and sighed. "I don't know, I was going for ferocious, scary, but it's coming out more dryly sardonic."

"It does appear to be mocking you with its eye holes," Willow agreed

"The nose hole seems sad and full of self-loathing," Oz added.

Xander turned the harmless Jack-o'-lantern around to show the face to those opposite. "Angel, what do you think?"

"Wouldn't like to meet it on dark night," Angel announced in a deadpan serious voice.

"You know, it's getting freaky you two being friendly with each other," his girlfriend commented from her position on the sofa bed. A Swiss army knife was in her hand, stuck part way in another hollowed out pumpkin.

"I swear I don't know how it happened," Xander joked back. "How's yours?"

Buffy turned her pumpkin, making all smile as they took in the slashes above the eyes.

"Do you think 'it vamps' counts as a pun?" Cordelia asked.

"Okay," Xander began as he stood up and walked to the other end of the living room of the apartment he shared with Willow, Cordelia and Oz, "I've got a treat for tomorrow night's second annual Halloween screening. People, prepare to have your spines tingled, your gooses bumped by the terrifying," he took the video out of the bag, his tone changing to one of disbelief, "Fantasia. Fantasia?"

Oz thought for a moment, then remarked, "maybe it's because of all the horrific things we've seen, but hippos wearing tutus just don't unnerve me the way they used to."

"Phantasm. It was supposed to be 'Phantasm.' Stupid video store!"

"I thought we were doing the alph delt thing?" Cordelia sought to confirm.

"What thing?" Xander asked.


"It actually borders on fun," Oz assured them. "You have to go through the scary house maze to get to the party. Which is usually worth getting to. Those guys go all out."
"As witnessed last Friday," Willow remarked.

"Very true," her boyfriend agreed.

"There is a party? The Bronze is gonna suffer yet another profit loss."

"We might as well check it out. Halloween's gonna be quiet, hellmouth wise," Buffy pointed out.

"That's just jinxed it," Cordelia remarked, but without any mean intent. "Now we're gonna get costume possessed again."

"Costume possessed?" Doyle queried.

"Two years ago, an old friend of Giles' showed up and cast this spell. We all turned into our costumes," Willow explained.

"And on that note," Buffy began as she stood up, "me and Angel ought to patrol and see if any vamps fancy making play tonight."

"Hey, nothing happened last year," Oz recalled.

"You're right," Xander realised. "Let's not jinx that comment."

"See you guys tomorrow."

Once outside, Angel and Buffy linked hands and made their way across the campus to Crawford Street.

"So what are you gonna wear?" Buffy asked him.

"I have to wear something?" Angel queried.

"It's a costume party. Don't worry, Mum's making mine."

"I'll think of something. It'll be all right for a professor to come?"

"Well, being costumes, no one will notice."

"True," Angel mused, then stillled and abruptly let go of her hand.

Buffy got out her stake. "Let the games begin."

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"I've got the basics down - levitation, charms, glamours. I just feel like I've plateaued wicca-wise."

The slayer nodded to her friend as she picked up her lunch selection. "What's the next level?" She asked.

"Transmutation, conjuring, bringing forth something from nothing. Gets pretty close to the primal forces. A little scary."

"What does Jenny say?" Buffy asked, speaking of their group's main authority on witchcraft; Jenny Calendar-Giles.

"That its up to me whether I move to the next level. Then again, what is college for if not
experimenting? You know, maybe I can handle it. I'll know when I've reached my limit."

"Wine coolers?" Oz asked as he came up to them.

"Magic," Buffy clarified.

"Oh, you didn't encourage her, did you?"

Willow glanced at him in surprise. "Where is supportive boyfriend guy?"

"He's picking up your dry cleaning, but he told me to tell you that he's afraid you're gonna get hurt."


"I'm with you on the reference, but I won't lie about the fact that I worry. I know what it's like to have power you can't control. I mean, every time I start to," he lowered his voice, aware that normal freshmen were around, "wolf-out, I touch something deep, dark. It's not fun. But just know that what ever you decide, I back your play."

"See? Concerned boy, sweet boy." Buffy smiled.

Willow followed suit. "I kinda like him - worrying anyway."

They moved to the table, where Cordelia, Anya, Xander, Doyle and Angel were waiting for them.

"Oh, Jenny said we have to stop by her and Giles' place before we go. Apparently he's decided to go all out on Halloween, and indulge in the festivities," Willow recalled as they sat down.

"Giles celebrating Halloween. I wonder who he'll be?" Buffy mused.

"Happy Halloween!"

A unison of silence followed the greeting. Finally, the slayer chose to be the first one to air what they were all thinking. "Oh, my, God."

Giles stood before them, a giant bowl of sweets in his hands, a large, garish hat and matching poncho upon him. "It's a sombrero."

"And it's on your head," Oz remarked.

"It seemed festive," Giles replied as he stood back to let them inside. "Jenny's just finishing up. Look, look!" He reached up to turn on a small Frankenstein near his head. The toy sounded classic robotic sounds. "It's alive!"

"Well, I gotta say, its weird, you relaxed on Halloween," Cordelia commented as they all came in.

"I convinced him," Jenny remarked as she came down, clothed in traditional gypsy gear. "Halloween is the day evil takes off, and last year was quiet. When are you all getting ready?"

"Oh, we need to hand in Psych assignments first," Buffy explained. "Figured it wouldn't be appropriate giving them to Walsh in costume."

"Good point," Jenny agreed. "She doesn't seem to have much of sense of humour."
That was indeed true, Buffy mused as she entered room for Psychology 101 with Willow and Oz after they had said goodbyes to Giles and Jenny.

"Excuse me, Professor Walsh? We came to hand in our assignments."

"I don't give credit for early, but thank you," Profess Walsh said as her TA took the papers.

"We got them out of the way before the party tonight," Willow explained.

"The one at Alpha Delta," Riley Finn added. "Halloween. When the ghosts and goblins come out."

"That's actually a misnomer," Buffy informed them.

"Well, I didn't mean real ones," Riley added.

"And what are you doing?"

"Well, I'm going to sit here and grade papers."

"Scary," Oz mused deadpanned.

"Very," Riley replied.

"Okay, watch your step, boys," one of frat members remarked as Oz and Xander came in, a large speaker in their arms. "Paint's still wet in a few spots."

"Thanks for the loan, man. Our sound system sucks."

Oz merely shrugged. "Mi Casio es su Casio."

Xander gestured to the pentagram the frat boy was painting on the floor. "Well, that's an interesting little design. What does it mean?"

"No clue. I got it out of this book. There is a lot of really cool stuff about..."

Xander saw some grapes in a bowl and picked one out. "Ooh, grapes! Wow, peeled. You guys know how to spoil your guests."

"Eyeballs, man. Blindfold chicks and have them stick their hands in the bowl and tell them it's eyeballs. They love that."

"And here I was wasting time buying them flowers and complimenting them on their shoes. So, you go through the whole house of horrors downstairs and it ends up here. Sweet. You fratly guys have a nice setup."

"Hey, mighty, mighty Alpha Delts. You should think about pledging."

"Xander is owner of The Bronze," Oz informed them.

The frat guys sat up and blinked. Then one stood and shook Xander's hand. "Loved the redesign."

"Thanks," Xander acknowledged.

Scary noises started to sound. "Cranking," one of the frat boys pronounced.

Xander glanced at Oz, and saw him frown. "Sensing a disturbance in the Force, master?"
Oz pulled out a pocket knife. "The left speaker is crackling a little bit."

"And you feel stabbing it is the proper solution?"

"I'm just going to trim the wire. It might be a short." He bent down at the back, and began to cut. "Ah!"

"Oz?"

"Cut myself. It's okay." He shook his hand, some of the blood dripping down on the painted symbol on the floorboards. The pentagram shimmered, then returned to its natural state. No one noticed as a previously rubber spider turned real and began to crawl across the wood.

"Thanks again for doing this."

Joyce Summers took the red cape out of her sewing machine and handed it to her daughter. "I'm just glad I could find it. There. Try it now. I let down the hem and loosened it a little around the hood."

"Oh, it feels better." She looked up. "Oh, no. Someone is getting nostalgic face."

"I'm sorry. I'm thinking about the little girl who wore that. What is it? Five? Six years ago."

"Yeah, Little Red Riding Hood was the cutting edge in costumes."

Her Mom laughed. "Your father loved to take you out."

"He was such a pain! 12 years old and I can't go trick-or-treating by myself?"

"He just wanted to keep you safe."

"No, he wanted the candy. I was just the beard."

"Oh, that's not true actually. The candy was for me. Your father loved spending time with you."

She paused remembering. "So, what is Angel going as?"

"I don't know, he said it was a surprise. Should be interesting."

"Why is Halloween day off for evil?" Joyce queried as Buffy tied her cape.

"Giles said that evil doesn't hold with the tradition, it snubs it," Buffy answered as she sat down to wait for Angel. "I remember Angel being very surprised when I showed up in my costume two years ago. Of course then we had Ethan Rayne and all that fun." She paused, as a knock on door sounded. She smiled, jumped up and went to open the door. "Hey. Halloween deja-vu."

Angel smiled at her as he came in, clothed in the male fashion of the time she had picked out two years ago, looking just as handsome as if he was wearing the tux from the Prom only a few months ago. "I thought as Jenny was going with her origins, I could go with mine. What do you think, my lady?" He performed a formal bow.

Buffy attempted a curtsy in her short dress. "Very swoonworthy."

"I hope you both have a good time," Joyce remarked as she came up to see them.

"Normal Halloween fun," Buffy agreed.
Little did they know, the Powers were not listening.

Meanwhile, at the Frat house of Alpha Delta, things were well on the way to becoming a spooky, worthy of the Hellmouth, Halloween party.

"Okay, Rach, what's in the next one?" A frat asked in a ominous tone as they toured the mystery glass bowl.

"You guys are sick!" The blindfolded girl commented.

"Here, give me your hand."

She squeezed the grapes in the bowl. "This is gross."

"Eyeballs, Rachel, they're eyeballs! Muahaha!"

She giggled and took off her blindfold.

Only to find real eyeballs in her hand.

Let the games begin.

"Hey, Red. What you got in the basket, little girl?"

"Weapons," Buffy replied seriously.

"Oh," Xander said.

"Just in case," Angel remarked.

"Like the tux, Xander," Buffy added.

"The name's Bond. James Bond," Xander replied in a deep tone. "Insurance, you know, in case we get turned into our costumes again. I'm going for cool, secret agent guy."

"I hate to break it to you, but you'll probably end up cool head waiter guy," Cordelia informed him as she appeared.

"As long as I'm cool and wield some kind of power." He looked at her. "Let me guess; Moneypenny?"

"No, I was going for film star," she replied, her costume looking like it had stepped off the red carpet.

"Will," Buffy greeted as she came up. "Medieval Will."

"Hail, ye olde vareletty thou," Xander added.

"I'm Joan of Arc. I figured we had a lot in common, seeing as how she had that close relationship with God."

"And you are?" Xander asked Oz. Oz merely put aside his jacket to reveal a name tag with the word GOD upon it. "Of course. I wish I'd thought of that before I put down my deposit. I could have been God."
"Blasphemer," Oz joked.

They turned to walk down the path. Suddenly a group of masked green guys crept out of the bushes in front of them. They rose up to their full height, took a look at them all and walked on.

"Nice costumes," Cordelia commented as they left. "Very stealthy."

"What are they supposed to be?" Willow wondered aloud.

"NATO?" Oz decided.

"Oh, yeah, I, ah, invited Anya to join us, but she's having some trouble finding a scary costume, so she's just going to meet us there," Xander recalled.

"What about Doyle?" Angel asked Cordelia.

"Right here," replied the man himself, making them all jump.

"What is that?" His girlfriend asked, looking at the blue spikes on his face.

"Oh, I forgot to show this to you, didn't I? It's my Bracken face."

"Oh," Cordelia reached out and carefully touched the spikes. "It kind of suits you actually."

"Thanks."

They reached the front door.

"Let the horrors begin," Oz declared.

Inside the Frat house, things had worsened.

"God, help me!" A boy screamed running down a corridor, as chaos of Halloween toys turning real took over the house.

He fell down the main staircase to land in a heap at the bottom.

Meanwhile a deep voice bellowed, its sound echoing throughout the house. "Release me!"

"The joint's not jumping. Where is everybody?" Xander wondered out loud as they entered the empty Entrance Hall of the Frat house. Mechanical laughter came from one of the one-eyed heads sitting on punch bowls. A sign with the word 'DETOUR' was placed above it.

"Follow the signs," Oz remarked.

Angel glanced at the severed head. "Terrifying. If I were Abbott and Costello this would be fairly traumatic."

Willow walked through into the next bit of the hall. "Uh, ah! Cobweb!" She shook it off herself. "Okay that part was realistic."

"Frat boys aren't too obsessive with their cleaning. Might not be decoration per se," Oz warned them.

Xander jumped then as a fake skeleton with a long silver kitchen knife came out of a cupboard by
him. "I wasn't scared, I was in the spirit."

"And we'll back you up on that," Cordelia assured him. "Even if they question us separately," she added, before glancing at her shoulder and screaming as a spider crawled upon it. "Uh, get it off!"

Doyle reached out and brushed it away. "It's gone."

"Okay, that is not sanitary!"

"Yeah," the slayer agreed, "lets get to the party part of the party."

They turned a corner. Oz halted, puzzled. "I thought this led to..." he trailed off as everyone noticed the stain on the floor before them.

"What is it?" Willow asked.

Angel crouched down and put his finger on it, then up to his nose to confirm his suspicions. "Blood. Real blood."

"Okay, actual creeps have been given," Xander decided. "Bravo, frat boys!"

"Shh!" Buffy requested. "Do you hear something? Like a squeaking noise?"

"Oh, it's these rented shoes, patent leather. I asked the guy to..."

"No, no," Willow disagreed, "I wait. It's something else. I hear it, too. Something like..."

At once, they all looked up to the ceiling. To find it covered in black. The squeaking got louder. Then bats struck.

Instinctively they ducked, hands reaching out to flick them away. Then Buffy heard a growl and looked to see her boyfriend's vamped face, which caused the bats to fly away.

"Bats fear vampires," Angel explained.

"Now realising why they're connected to the myth," Buffy said, glancing around them. "Where did they go?"

The room was devoid of bats. Except for one on the carpet. Oz reached out.

His girlfriend cautioned him. "No, Oz, don't it might be..."

"Rubber," he finished, picking it up. "It's made of rubber."

"What the hell is going on here?" The slayer wondered.

"Look, maybe it's nothing," Xander said hopefully. "Maybe it's just a neat trick. You know, something done with wires or..."

A rumbling voice interrupted him. "Release me!"

"Or it might be something else," Cordelia corrected.

Meanwhile, a former vengeance demon was walking up to the door in a large pink bunny suit.
That is, the wall where the door once stood.

"Where is the door?" Anya asked out loud. She knocked on the wall. "Hey! Hello!" She sighed at receiving no answer and stepped back out on to the street.

Suddenly a scream sounded, making her turn up to look at the house. She could see a girl screaming in one of the upper window's.

"Help me! Help me!"

Then the window was abruptly bricked up.

"Xander!" Anya quietly uttered in fear, before going for help.

Meanwhile, back in the Frat House, the rest of the Slayerettes continued to walk around the ground floor.

"Where are the stairs?" Xander asked.

"Where is the door?" Willow followed up.

"This is the way we came in, right?" Buffy sought to confirm. "We just went in a circle?"

At that moment the sound effects went off.

"Thank the lord!" Cordelia commented to Oz who had reached for one of the switches to silence the house. "You're welcome."

"I think we ought to get out of here," Angel remarked.

"My turn," Xander remarked. "Does anyone hear that?"

"Do you hear something?" Buffy asked.

"Like I said," Xander added, "sounds like a hissing."

Buffy put her basket down. "It's like a 'ssss' noise."

"I thought the word hissing kind of covered that nicely."

The slayer opened the closet door nearby. Inside was a boy shaking. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Chaz," Oz remarked in greeting as he crouched down to him.

Chaz continued to shiver and shake. "I didn't know."

"What's happening?" Oz asked.

"It ah..."

"What is it?" Cordelia asked impatiently.

"It's alive. It's alive."

Behind them a previously plastic skeleton slowly raised the knife it held in its bony hand.
"What's alive?" Buffy asked.

"He's in shock," Xander pronounced.

"Chaz, what happened here?" The slayer pressed.

Chaz looked up, then screamed in pure terror. Buffy felt something strike her, and Angel rapidly grabbed the murderous skeleton, throwing it off her to the floor.

Where it turned plastic.

After looking at it for a second, he turned back to his soulmate. "Are you okay?"

"I think the cape took most of it," Buffy replied, taking it off.

"Cowering in a closet is starting to seem like a reasonable plan," Oz mused.

"What closet?" Cordelia asked, pointing out the now suddenly blank wall.

"I'm gonna make my way upstairs and see if there are any people up there," Buffy decided. "You guys find a way out of the house and use it."

"You're telling us to run away and leave you behind?" Willow queried in surprise.

Her friend pulled out her crossbow. "We need help. We need the only person that can make sense of what's happening."

At Oakpark Street, Apartment 523B was playing host to some trick or treat children and a parent as a large pink bunny rushed up.

"Xander is in trouble. We've got to do something, right now!"

"Anya," Giles greeted, surprised at both her appearance and costume.

Jenny turned to the kids and helped to usher them to the next address.

"Are you listening? Xander is trapped!"

"Where is Buffy and the others?" Giles asked her as they all walked into the living room.

"They're trapped, too, but we've got to save Xander!"

Giles took of his sombrero and sat down. "Slow down. I need you to be more specific."

"Uhm, ah, we were supposed to meet at this house, and I got there and there was no door where a door should be. And then I see this girl standing in a window, and then poof! She's gone."

"She vanished from the window?" Jenny asked.

"No, the window vanished from the house."

"Hmm," Giles mused. "Matter and reality distortion." He got up to get a book from his library. "Like a summoning spell's temporal flux."

"What?" Anya queried.
"Hmm? Oh, never mind. I just need to get some - supplies together. I wouldn't worry about Xander. At least he's amongst friends."

"It's a simple incantation, a guiding spell for travellers when they become lost or disoriented."

"And how does it work?" The slayer asked.

"It conjures an emissary from the beyond that lights the way."

" Conjuring, Willow, I don't mean to be negative, but you haven't tried this level of power yet. And given the current situation, it might turn into something else."

"Will," Xander began, "Buffy does have a point, we...."

"Xander?" Buffy asked, as she looked around. "Xander, where did you go?"

"Funny how you still haven't lost your sense of inappropriate humour." She turned and appeared to look through him. "Buffy, knock it off. Skit's over. I'm right here."

"I'll go and look for him," Angel volunteered.

"Look for me? I right here!" Xander cried out following him round the corner.

Only to find an empty corridor.

"Buffy, I understand the concern. I still think we should give it a try."

"Willow, something is happening," Oz suddenly remarked.

She turned to face him. "Oh, no."

"I'm changing."

"But but you can't! There is no moon tonight."

"I have to get away," Oz decided.

"Oz, I don't think its a wise idea for us to split up," Buffy began.

"No, we need to find something to restrain you," his girlfriend added, "like a rope or chains, or something."

"There is no time!"

Willow reached out but he scratched at her hand then ran off.

"And then there were four," Cordelia said as they looked around the empty corridor once more.

"Okay, Aradia, Goddess of the lost, the path is murky, the woods are dense, darkness pervades, I beseech thee, bring the light."

A green ball of light appeared before the remaining four.

"Woah! I did it! I did you. Hi! - Right, you're waiting for instructions. Lead us to Oz. Wait! We
should try to find the people trapped upstairs first. But even if I get them we still need to find a way out of the house. Okay, here is what we should do."

"Willow," Buffy began.

"What," She looked up to see that the one green ball had multiplied into a plague of balls flying around them.

"Run!" Doyle decided.

The four split off in different directions.

Outside the house, Anya and Giles stood, the latter with an open book in one hand, the other feeling the wall where the door had once been.

"Well?" Anya asked.

"We're gonna have to create a door." Giles closed the book and walked over to the bag he had laid on the floor.

"Create a door. You can do that?" Anya remarked.

There was a mechanical growl of machinery as Giles stood up, a chain-saw in his hands. "I can."

Buffy halted from her running and opened her eyes. To find herself upstairs in the main party room. Grateful to see that the whirling green balls had gone, she walked down the room, seeing shaking and cowering college students all around her. One boy looked very familiar. "Oz?"

He looked up as Willow came towards them, yelling. "get them off me! Get them off me! Get'em off! Get'em off!"

He stood up and took his girlfriend's hands. "Willow, Willow, it's okay. It's okay. We're okay." He pulled her into his arms.

The slayer shook her head. "We're not okay. We need to get out of here."

"I'd offer my opinion," a voice began, "but you jerks aren't gonna hear it anyway. Not that 'didn't go to college' boy has anything important to say. I might as well hang out my new best friend; bleeding dummy head, for all you dorks care."

"Xander?"

He stood up in relief. "You you heard that? You you can see me? Good. Oh, God, good!"

Angel emerged, visibly shaken. "Everyone okay?"

Buffy turned to him. "What happened to you?"

"You don't want to know. I don't even want to recall."

"The house separated us. It wanted to scare us," Oz mused.

"But - we got away," Cordelia added as she and Doyle arrived.
"No," Buffy realised. We were brought here. We all got so scared that we ended up here. Why?"

Xander pointed at the pentagram and drawings on the floor. "I saw them painting that. They were copying it out of that!" He added, pointing to the book on the floor.

Willow picked it up and looked at the text. "I think it's Gaelic." She handed it over to Doyle and Angel. "Can you two translate?"

"Release me! Release me!" A voice rumbled again.

"Okay, the icon's called the Mark of Gachnar," Angel announced. "This is a summoning spell. Somehow the beginning of the spell must have been triggered. Gachnar is trying to manifest itself, to come into being."

"How?" His soulmate asked him.

"It feeds on fear," Doyle added.

"Our fears are manifesting it," the slayer concluded. "We're feeding it. We need to stop."

"If we close our eyes and say it's a dream," Xander closed his eyes then rapidly opened them, "it'll stab us to death!"

"Release me!"

"Okay, so our fears are feeding it, we get everyone out of here.." Cordelia began to suggest, just as the walls started to shake. "Lets go!"

Xander rushed to the door. He opened it to reveal... "Giles? Everyone, it's Giles! With a chain-saw. Glad you could make it."

"The walls closed up behind us," Giles offered in explanation as he walked over to them.

Angel handed him the book. "Gachnar, of course. It's presence infects the reality of the house, but it's not managed to achieve full manifestation. We can not allow this to come into being."

"But if it does I can fight it, right?"

Giles showed her the illustration. "Buffy, this is Gachnar."

"I don't want to fight that. So, we break the spell."

Giles began flicking through the book. "The summoning spell for Gachnar can be shut down in one of two ways. Destroying the mark of Gachnar," read aloud, as his slayer walked over and put her foot through the floorboard, "Is not one of them and will in fact immediately bring forth the fear demon itself."

The floor rumbled and smoke arose out of the hole. The demon of Gachnar appeared before them.

"This is Gachnar?" Buffy queried peering down and the little demon standing on the floor in the middle of the their group circle.

"Big overture. Little show," Xander remarked.

"I am the dark lord of nightmares! The bringer of terror! Tremble before me. Fear me!" Gachnar replied.
"He's no cute!" Willow mused.

"Tremble!"

Xander bend down towards it. "Who's a little fear demon? Come on! Who's a little fear demon!"

"Don't taunt the fear demon," Giles admonished him.

"Why, can he hurt me?"

"No, it's just tacky. Be that as it may, Buffy, when it comes to slaying..."

"Size doesn't matter?"

"They're all going to abandon you, you know," Gachnar threatened her.

"Yeah, yeah," the slayer remarked, as she slayed it; with a blow of her foot.

"Some quality treats here, Giles," Oz remarked.

The group had all returned to Giles and Jenny's place and were now finishing the sweets.

"Uhm, this is much better," the slayer declared in the arms of her boyfriend. "There is no problem that can not be solved with chocolate."

"That's your scary costume?" Xander asked Anya.

"Bunnies frighten me."

"Oh, bloody hell," Giles suddenly commented as he glanced at the book passage concerning Gachnar. "The inscription!"

"What's the matter?" Jenny asked him.

Giles showed her the page. "I should have translated the Gaelic inscription under the illustration of Gachnar."

"What's it say?"

"Actual size." He shrugged and then chuckled, before closing the book.

_The End_

_To Be Continued In_

_The One With The Scooby Meeting._
The One With the Scooby Meeting

Author's note: The opening scenes are the same as my first attempt at this episode, but after Giles has his Irish tea, there are some extra scenes which I wrote especially to extend the episode, and to prepare the way for the new version of the next episode. There is some dialogue taken from Beer Bad, which will apply to the new version of Wild At Heart. Enjoy.

The one with the scooby meeting.

Rupert Giles took off his glasses and applied a handkerchief to the lenses once more. He had hoped that this ritual motion would somehow calm the scene of perpetual chaos which seemed to taking over the living room of his and his wife's apartment, but unfortunately, this would not be the case. With a sigh he restored the glasses to the resting place upon his face and surveyed the sight before him.

By the armchair, the owner of The Bronze, and the former vengeance demon Anyanka were arguing, over what Giles still had no idea, even though the dispute had been going on ever since they arrived, and showed no signs of reaching a cease fire, let alone a compromise. On the sofa not far from them, but completely oblivious to the fight, were another couple quarrelling- at least Giles presumed Xander and Anya were a couple, after witnessing her concern for him on Halloween- Cordelia and Doyle. This fight Giles could identify the cause of; whether or not the latter could drink the bottle of whiskey a visiting professor had given him.

At the other end of the sofa, sat the musician of the group, completely oblivious to everyone else, strumming out a new composition on his guitar. His girlfriend and resident witch in training, was resting her head against his knees as she focused on the ability to float a wooden stake. And as for the other professor of the group, he was sitting in the other armchair, his arms around the neck of the slayer, in a makeout session that Giles had become convinced was trying to break a world record.

Tonight marked the end of another week on the hellmouth, and the weekly Scooby meeting was- according to his wristwatch -supposed to have started half an hour ago. So far, all that the members of said gang had contributed to the meeting, was to turn up.

Looking to the heavens, Giles took a deep breath and placed the tray of tea he had just made on the low lying table in the eye of the storm of chaos in his living room. Then he stepped back and prepared to strike.

"When you've quite finished," he uttered in his most sternest tone. He blinked, and saw that the scene was unchanged. "WHEN, you've quite FINISHED!"

This time, the effect was instantaneous. The quarrellers ceased their disputes, the musician stopped making music, and the witch looked up, causing the stake to drop to the table with a loud clatter.

"Thank you," Giles remarked gratefully. "Now, could we please conclude things as quickly as possible, Jenny is suffering tonight." He glanced at all of them as they silently nodded in reply, until he came to the armchair, and realised that not all of them had been listening.

Buffy and Angel were still making out. With a sigh Giles walked over to them and coughed loudly near the slayer's ear. With a start they broke apart, blushing furiously.

"Now that I have everyone's attention," Giles began once more, "I repeat, that I would like this
meeting to be concluded as quickly as possible, as Jenny is suffering tonight." He paused as another flush of water could be heard from the bathroom, and all looked towards the door with guilty faces as the resident expectant gypsy of the group returned to the second bedroom of the apartment.

"Right," Giles began when everyone had turned back to him, "let's begin. I declare this week's meeting of the Scooby gang in session." He sat down and a sip of tea, hoping its usually soothing effects would quickly kick in. "Anything to report, Buffy?" He turned the slayer.

"Nothing much," Buffy replied, her skin returning to its usual colour. "Just the one vamp requesting dusting this week."

"Really?" Giles mused, without need for confirmation. "Interesting." He paused in thought. "Has the death ratio lessened recently?"

"No, its normal," the slayer answered.

"And no demons? No, of course not," Giles answered for himself, as he remembered that the meeting would have occurred earlier in the week if there had been. "Well this is most unusual."

"Its not that unusual," Anya countered.

"Isn't it?" Giles queried.

"Not at all. Every town has its quiet weeks."

"Anya," Xander began, "this is the hellmouth. A quiet week for us is usually a warning for an upcoming apocalypse."

"Really?" The former vengeance demon sought to confirm. "Well I wish you'd told me sooner, I've just finished unpacking."

"So sorry to cause you delays in getting out of here," Xander sarcastically countered. And their fight began again.

Giles ran a hand through his hair and glanced at Buffy, his expression silently pleading for assistance. The slayer nodded and reached out with her hand to grip Xander's arm tightly. When the pain registered in her friend's brain, he stopped and guiltily turned back to Giles.

"Has anyone else anything to report?" Giles asked.

There was a blissful moment of silence as the gang glanced at one another and searched their memories concerning the past week. The watcher put a hand to his temples and gently massaged them, hoping to prevent the headache he knew would come tonight.

After a few minutes of thought, all present shook their heads. Nothing else of a supernatural nature had occurred this week.

"Shouldn't that wrap things up then, Giles?" Buffy asked, seeing the stress in her watcher's face.

"Its still unusual," Giles replied. "This is the hellmouth after all. Normally it averages about five to ten vampires a week. To have only one...." he trailed off in thought.

The living room slipped into silence again as the watcher remained deep in thought. Buffy silently turned to her boyfriend again, and Angel surrendered to the temptation of kissing her once more.
Doyle glanced at Cordelia to see her distracted and took the opportunity to raise the bottle in his hand to his mouth once more, only to be caught as the first drop slid down his throat. Willow raised her stake once more, and Oz returned to scribbling the notes down on the paper before him as he strummed.

By the time Giles came out of his thoughts, Xander and Anya had reverted to their quarrelling, and the living room had turned into chaos once more. Inwardly sighing, he rose from his chair and made his way down the passageway by the kitchen to check on his wife.

Jenny was lying on the bed, thumbing through one of the ancient volumes which adorned most of the bookshelves in the apartment. She looked up at her husband's entrance.

"How are you doing?" Giles asked her softly, cautiously taking a place on the bed, making sure not to rock it.

"So, so," Jenny replied, reaching out to take his hand. "It'll end soon. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. So I'm searching to see if there's a natural albeit mystical prevention." She smiled at him. "How's it going out there?"

Giles groaned. "I'm beginning to wonder that if this is how surrogate parenting feels, how real fatherhood won't feel worse."

"Well, look at this way; it will be years before our son is a teenager," Jenny reminded him consolingly.

Her husband smiled and kissed her hand. "Our daughter," he corrected.

"Son," Jenny countered, firmly. "I did a reading, remember?"

"Yeah, I'm still not sure we should rely on the supernatural to tell us though."

"Well, its all we have until the scan next week."

"True," Giles conceded, before leaning forward to kiss her lips. "Do you need anything?" he asked when he had reluctantly withdrawn.

"No, I'm fine," Jenny assured him. "You better get back to them. They'll be wondering where you went."

"I don't think there's any possibility of that," Giles remarked. "When I left them, Buffy and Angel were competing in the makeout Olympics, Willow was floating a stake, Oz writing a song, Xander and Anya quarrelling, and Cordelia was trying to wrestle a whiskey bottle from Doyle. I don't think they've even noticed I'm not in the room any more."

Anything to report?" Jenny asked him.

"No, only one vampire all week apparently. If it had not been marking assignments for all professors this week, I would have assumed that they were too busy 'distracting' each other to worry about staking."

"Low vampire average has become the norm lately," Jenny recalled.

"I know, and there's nothing we can do about that yet," Giles added absently.

"Is Joyce in there?" His wife asked him after a moment.
"No, she's working late at the museum, a new shipment arrived this afternoon and she's got to catalogue it. I'll check in with her later, see if there's any artefact which should be not be sold." He turned to his wife. "Looking for advice?"

"Yeah."

"I'll ask Buffy if she can pass on the message before she and Angel leave," Giles promised, just as the chaos in his living room upped a decibel, causing him to sigh. "I better get back out there."

He turned and exchanged another kiss with his wife before walking back into the living room. Silently he surveyed the scene, noting its similarity to the one he had first encountered when he had returned from making the tea, except a little more chaotic. Stepping forward, he set about to get their attention once more.

Deftly, he took the bottle out of Doyle and Cordelia's wrestling hands and set it down on his writing desk. Then he picked up the floating stake, and unplugged Oz's synthesiser. Then he walked over to Xander and Anya and calmly separated them, before doing the same to Buffy and Angel.

"Right, I declare this meeting of the Scooby gang over," he said when they were all looking at him, albeit sheepishly once more. "You can all go home."

The gang glanced at him, then at each other, then without a word rose up from their seats. Silently they packed up their stuff and made their farewells.

"Sorry Giles," Buffy apologised as she and Angel followed the rest of the gang out into the night. "I'll try to make sure we're all a lot calmer next time."

"I'll hold you to that," Giles said with a smile.

"How's Jenny?" Angel inquired.

"Her nausea seems to have subsided for another night," Giles replied. "Buffy, could you see if your mother has any suggestions?"

"Sure, I'll get her to call you tonight," Buffy promised. "Looking forward to fatherhood?"

"I was, until tonight," Giles said with a smile to show that it was a joke.

"Well, I know you'll be brilliant at it," Buffy said. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Giles returned, before closing the door upon the night.

The apartment was bathed in silence once more. Giles turned round and smiled as he saw something still standing on his desk. He walked over to it and picked the object up, before heading into kitchen to make himself some 'Irish' tea.

After the meeting, Willow and Oz returned to the Bronze, the latter going to fetch drinks whilst the former found an empty table. Xander and Anya had followed them, Xander because he needed to make sure the bar manager he had hired was working out, and Anya because she was still quarrelling with Xander over something, the nature of which Willow was puzzled about. Another thing she was also puzzled about was Oz' absence from Psych that morning. For a while now he had been more stoic than usual if such a thing was possible, choosing to spend time strumming his guitar or rehearsing at the Bronze. Willow felt neglected, and confused, concerned that their
relationship was frizzling out. Her old inner demons were haunting her; intelligence verses coolness. There were divisions in college between these groups, she discovered, and she feared that while Oz managed to bridge the divide on a regular basis, she was not so fortunately talented, her abilities belonging to the more occult elements of college life.

"Hey," Oz greeted her with at that moment, as he set two drinks down before them. "You got a table."

"I had to kill a man," Willow uttered jokingly.

"Well, it's a really good table," Oz complimented in kind. He sat down next to her, his eyes on the stage where the club's musical act for the night was warming up.

"I copied out my notes for Psych since you were so elsewhere this morning," Willow remarked, hoping to gain his attention.

"Thanks," Oz answered, but in a distracted tone.

"It's really pretty simple stuff," Willow continued. "You know, just...." she trailed off as she sensed a lack of interest. "What's the matter?"

Oz shrugged. "I dunno. I feel it's nothing."

Lights abruptly lit up the lead vocalist on the stage, who put the microphone to her mouth and began to sing. The words held a haunting melody to them, strangely hypnotic, calling everyone who was in the nightclub to listen.

Willow glanced at her companion, who was similarly entranced. Turning to the stage, she took a proper look at the singer, puzzled as to why everyone, particularly her boyfriend, were attracted to what she was carolling. The vocalist appeared to stare back at their table, or rather the man sitting at it who was staring at her.

This observation did not endear the song or the artist behind it to her, and Willow tried to wrestle Oz's attention away from the stage. "We could go back to your place. I could make you soup."

"No," Oz replied. "That's okay I'm fine. Thanks."

"Do you know her?" Willow asked him.

"Veruca?" Oz replied, answering indirectly that he knew enough of her to know her name, if nothing else. "No. I know their drummer. He's cool. I've never heard them play."

"Oh," Willow murmured, inwardly wondering if that was really why Oz was so fascinated by the artist's song. It was hard to deny that she and Veruca were not radically different from each other, and that Veruca held more interests with Oz, music the most obvious and important one. She had thought their activities over the summer with the slayerettes would deepen the relationship between her and Oz, as he became more involved in helping the slayer with the potential problems she would face on campus. Before he was a member of the group because she was, his skills unknown and therefore not required. During their final year of high school and the following summer his talents had become known to the group, and as a result he had become more involved, but now Willow was worried that this involvement had not strengthened the ties between them as much as she had hoped it would. She began to worry that the only thing keeping Oz with her was the calm acceptance of his werewolf state three nights a month. If he found someone else who did not fear that side of him, she could lose him altogether.
Buffy and Angel returned to the Mansion on Crawford street, their need for each other sobered somewhat by Giles' concern over Jenny and their general behaviour during the meeting, along with that of their friends. After their wedding in the summer the two newly employed professors of mythology and computer sciences at Sunnydale UCA settled into married life happily, deciding to start a family despite the dangers from the hellmouth, and the occasional adolescent troubles they faced from the slayer and her friends. Now her watcher- for despite their decision to quit the Council over their refusal to cure Angel when he was shot by Faith, Buffy still viewed him as such, -was trying to balance his commitments to her, his students and the prospect of fatherhood. She could see why he was stressed out tonight, and they had not exactly helped.

"Do you think we ought to lessen the weekly meetings?" Buffy asked Angel as they walked inside the mansion into the double height living area.

"Might be wise," Angel agreed. "At least until Jenny is over her evening sickness. There is little point in a meeting when there are no new demons or vampires stalking the hellmouth."

"True," Buffy agreed. "I still have my nightly patrols which warn us of anything coming, as does Xander's side job."

"I think that's what he and Anya were fighting about this evening," Angel remarked from his seat beside her on the sofas.

"His job? I didn't realise they were seriously involved already," Buffy commented. "She's only been demon-less three weeks."

"I heard her asking him where he went most nights," Angel explained.

"Oh," Buffy uttered. "I thought you were preoccupied with my lips."

"I was," Angel replied with a smile which proved contagious. "There was also that brief moment when you were talking to Giles before we left. I caught the tail end of their argument on the way out. He has a talent for picking the unattainable doesn't he?"

Buffy frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Well, first you, then the most popular girl in school, now a former vengeance demon," Angel cited.

"Well, he never actually had me, but I see what you mean," Buffy replied. "I hope it works out for him this time."

"Me too," Angel replied, causing Buffy to smile at him. "What?"

"It's just nice to see that the two of you have overcome your dislike of each other," she explained.

"That dislike was born out of jealousy," Angel reminded her. "We wanted your heart. Now, he's accepted that you and I love each other, he's moved on to becoming my friend rather than my enemy. It is still weird sometimes, I'll admit."

Buffy manoeuvred herself on to his lap, causing his hands to wrap themselves around her, caressing her back through her clothes. "Enough talking," she murmured, her tone reminiscent on the time when they had spent the night making out as opposed to hunting the Texan vampire siblings as
they promised Giles. That night was over a year ago, when he was unknowingly crippled by a happiness clause in his curse, and they had no knowledge of the dreadful summer which was to come when they achieved that perfect moment. Now time had passed, his curse was rendered unbreakable, and half of his humanity had been received in return for how much he had done to save the world. And they kisses could lead to places beyond, without the fear that his soul would be lost.

Angel slid his hands to the fastenings of her clothes as their mouths opened to let their tongues engage in the traditional duel of foreplay. Buffy arched her back as he reversed the zip of her skirt, before shifting her hips in a sinuous dance over him, her hands moving from the fastenings of his shirt to the metal clasp of his trousers. He groaned when her hands slipped inside to stroke and caress, and returned the favour by letting his explore the expanse of soft skin underneath her top. Tenderly he slid them up her sides until they reached her bra, which he deftly unclasped before gliding his fingers underneath the confines to caress her now unrestrained breasts. Her nipples hardened under his touch, while sinuous dance intensified, until he was forced to seek satisfaction. Abruptly he stripped her of shirt and bra, tossing the garments to the floor, then his hands glided down her waist until they reached her skirt, whereupon he moved them to the place where her thighs rested upon him, seeking to remove her pants. Obligingly Buffy slowed her dance, raising her butt so he glide the garment down her body, until she had to stand up and toss the pants away with a flick of her foot. Reluctantly they tore their lips from each other before she rose to briefly tower above him, smiling as the evidence of his desire strained towards her, then all thought was forgotten as he pulled her back down and swiftly entered her.

"Where is our relationship going?" Anya asked Xander as they left the Bronze.

Xander abruptly halted in shock. "Our what? Our who?"

"Relationship," Anya repeated. "What kind do we have. And what is it progressing toward?"

"I ... Uh ... We have a relationship? Is this what our fight was about during the meeting?" Xander felt at loss.

"Yeah," Anya replied. "And yes, we have a relationship. We went to the party at Alpha Delta House."

"Yeah," Xander conceded. "On our one and only date. And the whole, you used to be a man killing demon thing. Which to be fair, is as much my issue as it is yours."

"I can't stop thinking about you," Anya admitted. "Sometimes in my dreams, you're all naked."

"Really," Xander mused, trying appear cool. "You know if I'm in the checkout line at the Wal-Mart I've had the same one."

"So I can assume a standing Friday night date and a mutual recognition as the Alpha Delta party night as our dating anniversary," Anya remarked. "I mean there are some parts of that night I would like to forget, but we were on a date."

"Anya," Xander turned to her. "Slow down there. In fact, come to a screeching halt. See these things kind of have to develop on their own."

His companion frowned. "Okay. How?"

Now it was his turn to display some confusion. "I don't know. I just - happens."
Anya nodded before continuing to reveal her line of thought. "So, as you obviously don't want a relationship with me and I can't get you out of my mind, I think the only solution is sexual intercourse."

Xander halted in the midst of his walking again. "What?"

"Sexual intercourse," Anya replied. "We have intercourse, at point the matter is brought to a conclusion with both parties satisfied and able to move on with their separate lives and interests. To sum up, I think it's a workable plan."

"So, the crux of this plan is?" Xander sought to confirm.

Anya rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Sexual intercourse. I've said it like a dozen times."

"Uh, huh," Xander exhaled. "Just working through a little hysterical deafness here."

"I think it's the secret to getting you out of my mind," his companion continued. "Putting you behind me. Behind me figuratively. I'm thinking face to face for the actual event itself."

"Ah, right," Xander uttered, searching for the right words. "It's just we hardly know each other. I mean I like you. And you have a certain directness that I admire. But sexual intercourse - what you're talking about, well - and I'm actually turning into a woman as I say this - but it's about expressing something. And accepting consequences."

"Oh, I have condoms," she informed him readily. "Some are black."

"That's... that's very considerate," Xander allowed, as the image of them together started to conquer his more rational thought processes.

"I like you," Anya confessed. "You're funny, and you're nicely shaped. And frankly, it's ludicrous to have these interlocking bodies and not... interlock."

"So where do you suggest this takes place?" Xander asked her.

"I thought your place," Anya replied. "My landlady believes I am an innocent and would prefer me to remain that way."

"Okay," Xander agreed before leading the way.

"So, I'm over you now," Anya decided as she rose from the bed after the event.

Xander's arms halted mid-journey in a quest to embrace her. "Um, Ok."

To his surprise she turned on him with a glare. "Okay?!"

"Yeah..." he answered slowly, inwardly wondering if he had just unwitting unleashed her desire for vengeance once more.

"How is that okay?" Anya asked him.

He sat up before her. "I was trying to accept your wishes, be considerate."

"Oh," Anya exhaled, her anger dropping. "My wishes are that this continues."

Xander looked at her surprised. "Really?"
"Yes," she confirmed. "I thought interlocking would help me get you out of my mind, but actually it has only worsened matters."

"So you think we need to interlock more?" He asked her.

Anya smiled. "Yes."

"Okay then," Xander decided before pulling her into his arms to interlock some more.

The next morning, Buffy spent the morning with her angel before the couple parted on the campus for their separate classes of the day. On her way she met up with her best friend, who seemed preoccupied and sad, a stark contrast from herself.

"Will, what's wrong?" she asked her.

"My name's Veruca," Willow mimicked mockingly. "I'm in a band. I'm Oz, I'm in a band too. Oh, and this is Willow. Oh, how fun and creepy. Groovy. Buffy, have you heard of this Veruca chick? Dresses like Faith, voice like an albatross."

"Can't say that I have," Buffy replied. "Was last night really that bad?"

"No, just Oz seemed fascinated with her. Wouldn't take his eyes off the stage."

"Have you asked him about her?" Buffy inquired.

"Yeah, he says that he's never met her."

"Well why don't you tell him how you feel?" Buffy suggested.

"It won't come off as me sounding pathetic?" Willow queried.

"Oz is a guy, Will," Buffy reminded her. "Granted, he's more reserved than most of them, but he's still like them. He probably hasn't noticed how much attention he's paying. I think if you tell him, it'll soon change."

"I'll try," Willow decided. "Meet for lunch?"

Buffy nodded as the bell rang for first class. "See you then."

"Is my drinking really that much of a problem for you?" Doyle asked his companion as they ate their lunch together in his lecture room.

"No," Cordelia replied. "I just worry that you use it as Bracken medication and for when you have your visions."

"Well, I do," he admitted. "But that's obvious.""And I think you have a dependency on it which could prove dangerous," she added.

"My demon half can handle it, Delia," Doyle assured her.

"How do you know that?" Cordelia asked him. "Have you researched into the dual aspect of your
"heritage?"

"No. Have you?" He countered.

"No," she replied. "But I've seen the affects of alcohol abuse every time I spent the night at Xander's place. And I don't want it with you. I care too much about you for that."

He smiled, touched at her care. "I promise that I'll try and lessen my intake."

"Oh, you'll do more than try," she remarked, before leaning forward to kiss him.

"I don't suppose that display was a demonstration of a reward system which you had in mind for this promise?" he asked her.

"It might be," Cordelia mused. "If you fulfil your promise."

Doyle smiled. "This could prove an interesting arrangement."

"I'm glad you think so," she replied.

She kissed him again, deepening the embrace and lengthening the touch of their mouths until they were oblivious to any outside sounds; the distant echo of chattering students, professors, animals, demons for whom sunlight was not a potential injury. Oblivious to the more immediate sounds outside the deserted lecture room, footsteps producing vibrations along the floor as they wandered the halls of the campus building, some walking pass without so much as a glance, others occasionally pausing briefly to witness one of the scandals on campus before attending to their more important concerns. Oblivious to the person who stopped and pushed the doors opens, entering the lecture room and calling out to them in order to make her presence known.

"You two planning on joining the rest of us?" Buffy asked with a grin.

Reluctantly Cordelia and Doyle parted to glare halfheartedly at the slayer, before gathering their stuff together, rising from their chairs and following their leader and friend out into the glorious sunshine.

_The End._

_To Be Continued In_

_A Full Moon Rose High._
Author's note: Some of the dialogue has been taken from the original episode, but major plot changes have been made, to make this a much darker story. I have quoted heavily from the Call of the Wild, and I have made a reference to the scene in Season Three where Willow reads the novel to Oz, which I never wrote, so just pretend that happened between episodes. Enjoy.

A Full Moon Rose High.

"Far more potent were the memories of his heredity that gave things he had never seen before a seeming familiarity; the instincts (which were but the memories of his ancestors become habits) which had lapsed in later days, and still later, in him, quickened and became alive again."

Who has Won to Mastership, Chapter 4, pg. 61
The Call Of The Wild by Jack London. (1876-1916.)

Oz laid the book aside as he attempted to return to tuning his guitar, but the words continued to haunt him. For some reason he felt compelled to study this work every time the three nights where the moon brought out the werewolf in him arrived. He knew Willow read the book to him once, when he used the cage in the Library of Sunnydale High as a place to contain his wild animal until the moon entered it's regular cycle once more.

Whether he had been aware of the words on a human level, or an animal level, or even perhaps a combination of both intelligence's, remained to be determined, but the author's words touched his mind, possessing a power of over him that he rarely felt anything else did, almost as if they understood him better than he did himself.

Amongst the passages concerning the tale of Buck's ownership by various masters until the dog was unable to escape the call of the wild, Oz found a truth in London's insights that caused him to question the emotions he experienced when he let the werewolf inside of him reign free. He felt the struggle between his human and animal natures steadily increase each time the trilogy of nights arrived upon the horizon, causing him to question if he had as much control over the monster inside of him as he and the slayerettes believed.

Since the destruction of the high school he had been forced to find a new secure location in which to spend those three nights; an underground cavernous ruinous crypt, located in one of the countless graveyards which littered Boca del Inferno. He, Angel and Xander had worked on the cage during the summer, a bonding exercise which together with the other preparation required of the slayerettes to prepare for life on the college campus, brought a deeper understanding and respect on the nature of the demon within some of the men who fought along side the slayer.

Oz could see similarities between Angel and himself, in the duality of their natures; the constant inner struggle of vampire or werewolf against the human soul. It was something a part of him had recognised during the spring when Angel lost his soul, when he had just acquired the werewolf trait, thanks to his cousin Jordy. He could also see the strength of Buffy in her determination to understand both sides of her boyfriend, to empathise instead of fearing the demon inside.

This same bravery existed in his own girlfriend, he knew, for it was why Willow had been the first to decide to try calling forth Angel's soul from the afterlife and place it in sovereignty over the
demon who ruled his undead body once more. However, there was where the difference between Angel's duality and his lay. For when the demon inside him came out to play, it ruled over his human soul for three nights, rendering any control over his animal tendencies useless.

Oz knew that this undeniable fact still possessed the ability to frighten his girlfriend, and indeed any other member of the Slayerettes. This was why he had chosen the location of the crypt, deep in one of the countless graveyards which littered the hellmouth, to hide himself away, almost like a dark and unnatural family secret.

Like Angel, Oz realised that he still had a long way to go in accepting the wolf inside him. As vampires recalled every aspect of the life of the human whose body they half raised from the dead, so did Oz remember what occurred during the nights when a full moon rose high and bade his werewolf to come out and play. Some of the urges he experienced during that time he revolted against, embarrassed and ashamed that they existed inside him, the flip side to his reticent, intelligent nature.

He was painfully aware of the resources which Willow and the others had to resort to when he escaped from his cages, which was why he had been so determined to make this one as secure as possible. Yet still he felt the crypt was vulnerable to penetration and escape, even before he endured the requisite nights behind the metal bars he, Angel and Xander had fashioned over the once natural opening within the underground tomb.

At times he wondered if perhaps it would be better for him to be put to sleep while the wolf reigned over him, but then he reconsidered, believing that ignorance would not help his ability to understand or need to accept the beast.

Which was where he envied Angel. For the souled vampire seemed to be having an easier time of accepting his inner demon, even though the man himself still argued that two hundred and forty-four years had not brought him close to understanding the vampire who warred with his soul.

In comparison Oz was still in the infancy of experiencing his inner werewolf, so perhaps understanding was still too much to ask at this point, yet nevertheless he felt the need to do so, for lately he could not help but feel that time would soon turn against him, and take the matter out of his hands entirely.

This was why he felt the need to read The Call of the Wild, not just because it was night before the cycle would begin again, but because he was unable to escape the feeling that fate would soon intervene between himself and his werewolf, with deadly consequences.

At the same time, across campus, the slayer had little idea of the steadily increasing inner turmoil which one of her friends was going through. This was through no fault of her own, for the friend in question had yet to make public any of his private concerns, and at the moment, she had a more pressing one which required her sole focus.

She ran through the typical tableau of student body which occupied the campus grounds come nightfall, strangely unnoticed by any of them that her athleticism was not mere display or training for sports, but a battle for survival. Her pursuer went equally unnoticed, scant minutes behind her, his forehead ridges and fangs visible without any concern for disguise or caution. He was sure of his prey's now inevitable end, and felt certain he would feast on the blood of his victory soon.

When the girl came to an abrupt halt in a more secluded part of the college campus, the vampire
was understandably slow to realise that the prey before him was not just another hapless co-ed facing death at his hands, but the feared hunter and killer of his kind; the chosen one, the slayer.

"Thanks for the relocate," Buffy remarked, causing the vampire's gleeful expression to slowly evolve into one of shock. "I perform better without an audience."

Before the acceptance that his walking corpse was about to be restored to its natural state was even begun by the vampire, he received the first blow from the slayer. His instincts immediately caused him to respond, but the element of surprise had succeeded in causing the battle to be an uneven one, as well as short.

"You were thinking, what, a little helpless co-ed before bed?" Buffy asked rhetorically as she continued to pound into him. "You know very well, you eat this late..." she paused to thrust her stake into his chest, "you're gonna get heartburn. Get it? Heartburn?"

Unhappily for her wit, the vampire was beyond verbal response at this point, as his body and demon reacted to the death which the wooden stake had rendered upon them. Silently his flesh transformed into dust, followed by his bones, until nothing remained of the walking corpse except ashes in the grass.

"That's it?" Buffy queried incredulously aloud. "That's all I get? One lame-ass vamp with no appreciation for my painstakingly thought-out puns." She glanced upwards towards the heavens above, the realm of the Powers that Be. "I don't think the forces of darkness are even trying. I mean, you could make a little effort here, you know? Give me something to work with."

She walked away from the kill site, venting her frustration in a more silent manner, in an effort to calm herself before meeting with the slayerettes at the Bronze as she was due to do, unaware that the Powers that Be had decided to answer her idle wishes, in the form of an old and familiar slayer of slayers; otherwise known as Spike.

"Watch your mouth, little girl," he remarked as he watched her walking away, still angry at his loss of the Gem of Amarra by her hands only three weeks ago. "You should know better than to tempt the fates that way. 'Cause the big bad is back, And this time, it's... Urrgh! Aaaahhh!"

His threat went unheard and unappreciated, as the full power behind his words was rendered weak and dragged into the darkness of unconscious, courtesy of a sudden electrocution performed on his undead body, as figures in dark clothing pounced on his corpse like members of a wolf herd, dragging their prize away into the shadows of the college campus.

"The Bronze is more fun this year, isn't it?" Willow remarked to her best friend when she arrived and joined the rest of the group in what since Xander's ownership of the nightclub had became their hang out booth beside the dancefloor.

Buffy now nodded in agreement before replying verbally to her best friend's inquiry. "Cause of the gloating factor alone, you know? We're all about college now. We've got heady discourse."

"Yeah," Oz agreed. "Curfew-free nights of Mom and popless hootenanny."


"As long as that's all you do," Anya remarked.

"Right," Buffy uttered, not bothering to hide her amusement caused by Xander's words. "So if
college is so great, what are we doing here and why is it more fun?"

"Because the Bronze is nice and familiar," Willow replied. "It's like a big comfy blanky."

Oz turned to her with mild surprise. "I was under the impression that I was your big comfy blanky."

Willow smiled at his query before explaining. "Aw, you're my person blanky. This is my place blanky. You know, with all the shock of the new, it's nice to have one place that you can come back to where everything's predictable."

"Hello," a distinctly British voice remarked suddenly, the innocuous greeting serving to cause a certain degree of alarm amongst the slayerettes.

"Giles, trouble?" Buffy asked, sitting upright from her previous position of recline against her boyfriend, who had like wised straightened his tall body to prepare himself for lending assistance.

"Oh, no, Buffy, don't get up," her watcher forestalled her. "No. Nothing like that. No, I just, you know, I thought I'd drop by. Uh, latte anyone? On me?"

"So much for your predictable blanky theory, Will," Buffy remarked.

Giles seated himself in the spare chair Doyle recruited from a nearby table. "Splendid. Well, it's ages since I've been to a gig."

Everyone glanced at him with the same look teenagers usually display whenever an adult tries to appeal to their definition of cool.

"Well, don't look that way," Giles replied uncertainly. "I'm...I'm...I'm down with the new music. And I have the albums to prove it."

"Yes, but it's your cutting edge 8-tracks that keep you ahead of the scene," Cordelia remarked.

"Don't scoff, gang," Oz defended the watcher as best he could, "I've seen Giles' collection. He was an animal in his day."

"Thank you," Giles returned.

"Hey, why not?" Buffy agreed. "If the Stones can still keep rolling, why can't Giles?"

"Exactly," Giles smiled at her acceptance.

"I think it's brave that you're here," Willow added.

Giles frowned. "Well, thank you, all. You've made me feel right at home."

"Isn't home that empty place you're trying to escape?" Xander reminded him.

"Oh, yeah," Giles recalled. "Jenny has her adult-ed class tonight."

"How's her evening sickness?" Buffy asked him.

"Slowly disappearing," Giles replied. "Thank Joyce for us if you see her sometime before we do."

Buffy nodded, her eyes turning from her watcher to her best friend, who had abruptly stillled, as the music assigned to play at the Bronze tonight emerged from the bowels of the dressing area on to the stage.
"Veruca's playing tonight," Willow murmured, her gaze turning from the stage to observe her boyfriend nervously.

"Yeah," Oz replied, aware of her sudden uncertainty, just as he was aware of the contrasting stare from the woman who headlined the band known as Shy, standing before the microphone on the stage before them. "Every Wednesday. I told you."

Their mutual fascination for one another was another reason why Oz had felt the need to understand the strain of the primitive inside him, for reasons he was barely aware of, let alone able to explain. Every night he saw them perform he was unable to escape the impression that Veruca was singing to him, her deep voice a siren song of seduction, calling on him to understand her prowess and respond.

Buffy was well aware of her friend's insecurities concerning Veruca and tried now to distract Oz as much as she could. "So, Oz, what about dingoes? When are you guys here again?"

Somehow he managed to answer. "Oh, we're up next Friday."

Willow did not have to look at him to know that his eyes were still fixed on the stage. She took his hand and squeezed it, trying to command his attention as she asked him something full of unconscious undertones. "They're good, aren't they?"

"Nothing special," Oz murmured, his words a complete contradiction to the impression his focus was conveying.

"Yeah," Willow agreed, anxious to seize upon his words and use them to secure him once more. "She's quell Fiona. Colour me bored."

"Really?" Giles queried, oblivious to the tension which had surfaced within the group. "I think she's rather remarkable. Such presence for someone her age."

Buffy resisted the urge to leap from the arms of her soulmate and give her watcher a slap upside his head, for his choice of words were anything but sensitive to what her best friend was feeling right now. However, she could not deny that they held a ring of truth. There was a presence about Veruca, but one akin to the feeling she experienced whenever she sensed a vampire was near; what she had felt when she first encountered Angel, before having any idea of what he would come to mean to her. That artist was a threat to Willow and Oz, Buffy was sure, and what destruction she would wield with her brush strokes remained to be seen.

A night of watching Shy perform at the Bronze ended the way all other nights usually ended, Oz seeking the comfort and safeness in the arms of his girlfriend in his bedroom at the house they shared with Cordelia and Xander off campus. He was fully aware of the siren song he had experienced, Veruca's body language during her performance made her intentions abundantly clear, but he did not feel the attraction which she desired. He was still fascinated, curious even, but usually revolted that she was making a move on a man who was not available.

"Mm... It's in the sandblaster," Willow murmured aloud at that moment, rousing him from his preoccupying thoughts. "Uh..."

He rolled over to gaze at her form, gently placing his arms around her as he attempted to call her from the nightmare she was experiencing. "What's in the sandblaster, Will? It's a dream. Come back to me."

Willow's eyes were still closed, but her mouth formed a smile as she continued to murmur.
"Mmm... Hmm... All Gemini's to the raspberry hats."

Oz smiled now too. "Now you're faking."

She opened her eyes. "Am not. Just a little," she confessed as she turned to face him.

"Morning," he greeted.

"Morning," she returned in kind.

"Bad dream?" He inquired gently.

"I guess," Willow agreed. Her eyes raked over his face and form, acknowledging their nearness, and her small smile grew a little wider. "But the waking up part makes up for it."

Tenderly Oz reached out to move a strand of red hair from her forehead, his fingers tapping the skin. "It's always so busy in there."

"Not always," Willow replied, everything within her secure and blissfully happily in the knowledge that the man before her loved and desired her now as much as she did him. "A few things shut my brain up completely."

Oz wrapped his arms around her. "Anything I can help you with?"

"I gotta get to class right now, but tonight for sure," Willow replied reluctantly, a part of her rebelling against the good girl persona, tempting her with the idea of being late to class for once in her life.

Her boyfriend frowned at her lack of recollection with regards to the night, before rapidly brushing the discomfort away. "I don't know about tonight, unless the extreme Jerry Garcia look turns you on."

Willow looked at him confused. "Huh?"

"Night before the full moon," he reminded her.

"Oh, that's right," Willow blushed at her faulty memory. "And I have a thing. There's this wicca group on campus I wanted to check out. They have orientation on the three nights you're wolfy. And it's probably totally silly, but..."

He shook his head. "No. Go. Show them how it's done."

"Are you sure?" Willow asked him. "You can lock yourself up? It's only this one month. After orientation, they meet on different nights."

"I'll be fine," he assured her, quelling the familiar uncertainty within his soul.

"Ok," Willow uttered, noticing nothing of his inner anxiety displayed upon his stoic face. "As long as you don't mind."

He held her in his arms for a moment longer. "The only thing I mind is being away from you for 3 nights," he uttered softly before kissing her.

As the sun climbed over the heavens, blazing a trail behind for the things which either shielded themselves or displayed to its celestial light, the slayer and her best friend found themselves in
Psychology class, under the severe gaze and direction of Professor Walsh, who was in a rare mild mannered mood that lecture.

"Ms. Summers," she said as she handed the student in question her assignment, "I want you to prepare to lead a discussion group next class. On the paper topic. That was smart work."

Surprised and touched, Buffy looked her teacher curiously. "What do I have to do?"

"If you have any questions, bring them up with one of the T.A.’s," Walsh instructed before turning to the other students.

Buffy returned to her best friend, who had already received her assignment, and was waiting for her at the threshold of the lecture room doors.

"Are you ok?" Willow asked her. "How'd you do?"

The slayer smiled and held up her paper, displaying the mark of distinction for her companion to see.

Willow beamed. "This is good. I mean, this is excellent." Suddenly she mocked frowned. "You did better than me. This is so unfair! You made me jealous of you academically. Buffy!" She hugged her.

"I know," Buffy smiled as they separated to wander the halls. "Can you believe it?"

"Wow," Willow mused. "I guess professor Walsh isn't so ogrey after all."

"And she wants me to lead a discussion group next class," Buffy added, before realising the implications which lay behind that mark of praise. "That means more work, right?" She sighed. "Shouldn't she have a better reward system? You know, like a cookie or a toy surprise like at the dentist?"

Willow's reaction was different. "She wants you to lead a discussion group? Ok. Jealous again. Jealous, jealous,... ok. I'm back. Hey, I'm meeting Oz at the cafe. You wanna come? I'll buy you that celebratory cookie."

Buffy nodded. "Great. I'm T.A. bound right now, and then I will catch up with you guys."

"Cool," Willow replied. "Oh, unless Riley is still trying to chat you up."

"Yeah, it's getting really annoying," Buffy sighed. "I try to stay polite, but its not like he hasn't seen my boyfriend, or heard about him."

Willow nodded. "Scandal of the uni; student dates professor."

"I'm not the only one," Buffy protested, "Doyle and Cordy are in the same boat now. Anyway, I'm reduced to talking about what I need, then bringing up Angel into the end of the discussion as much as possible."

"Want me to come with you for moral support?" Willow offered.

"Nah, I can handle him," Buffy replied. "But if I'm not with you before the bell you have my permission to page me. That'll aid the great escape."

"I'll meet you at the end of the tunnel," Willow promised before they parted.
Oz wandered through the cafe, navigating students and the odd member of the teaching faculty in his quest for an empty table. Unfortunately there none to be had, forcing him to scan the eating student body for known faces who might give him space. Then something called to his senses, an irresistible and distinct silent howl from the depths of the forest. He knew the source before his eyes even fixed upon the location. Stubbornly he quelled the impulse inside him to join her, even though she held the only empty table in the place, with the impression that she had been waiting for him, even though she could have no idea that he would be entering the eatery.

Veruca looked up at him, noting his hesitation, ignoring and misunderstanding it. "What are you gonna do, sit on the ground?" She mocked.

"My girlfriend's coming," Oz replied, the implication clear.

She shrugged, unconcerned. "There's room."

Reluctantly he sat down, his eyes unable to escape the sight of her rather large hamburger and basket of fries. "Big lunch?"

"I like to eat," Veruca replied. "I hate chicks who are like, 'does it have dressing on it?'"

Oz nodded. "Agreed. You guys were tight last night."

Again she shrugged. "I guess. The set's starting to come together, but the amps still sound dirty to me."

"What are you using?" He asked her, glad of a safe topic. "50 Or 120?"

"Hey," a voice remarked, one he knew well and loved, enough to realise the insecurity which possessed its tone right now. He stopped talking, as the already old tension grew around the table once more. "Hey."

Once more Veruca was oblivious, either by design or reality. "Hey."

"You wanna sit down?" Oz asked Willow, trying desperately to sound causal, and aware that he was probably failing. "So you should be using a 50. And Blue Voodoo, not your best bet, unless you dig the distort."

Willow found her seat, a part of her wishing she had surrendered to her first impulse to flee the scene, and resorted to her usual method whenever she felt uncomfortable. Babble. "Music talk, huh? Cool. I love to listen to Oz talk about the biz."

Veruca ignored her. "What do you like again? I know you told me."

"There's a couple good ones," Oz replied. "The Johnson Mil..."

The singer shook her head. "My number one is Redbone."

Oz looked at her incredulously. "Number one? No. I gotta go with Hound Dog."

Willow heard the name and leapt at the chance to sound like she understood what they were talking about. "Me, too. That's a great song. I mean, Elvis, what a guy."

Bemused, Veruca smiled at her. "You a big Elvis fan?"
Failing to see the humour, Willow nodded. "The biggest. Well, I mean, after Dingoes, of course."

"We're actually talking amps," Oz explained, inwardly ashamed at how he had embarrassed her. "But it's easy to get confused, the names they give them."

"Oh," Willow uttered, lost. "Ha ha," she attempted unconvincingly.

Her boyfriend knew that she was beyond being unable to pick up on the energy and tension between him and Veruca. Anxious to reach some clarity himself on the issue, he did what he usually did when faced with an uncomfortable situation. "You know, I gotta bail. Um, I'll call you later."

Veruca and Willow stared at each other, their differences evident and uncomfortable for both of them, causing her to rise from her chair as well. "I should go, too. Good shirt."

Willow feelings of embarrassment and foolishness increased tenfold. She glanced down at her pink and fuzzy top, wishing she had not picked that particular item of clothing to wear that morning, but before her mind could move on to the other feelings she had experienced just now, her loneliness was abruptly lessened.

"Check out the rapid exits," Buffy remarked brightly, trying to cheer her best friend up from an encounter she knew would be difficult. "Was it me?"

"Me," Willow replied with a sigh as her best friend sat down. "I don't speak Musicianese. How come you didn't tell me I look like a crazy birthday cake in this shirt?"

Buffy frowned. "I thought that was the point."

"He thinks she's sexy," Willow continued. "He gets this blushy thing going on behind his ears. That's for me only."

The slayer reached across and took her hand. "It doesn't mean anything. So Oz checks out another girl. He loves you."

"I know," Willow replied uncertainly. "I know. And I don't wanna be the kind of girl who freaks every time my boyfriend notices somebody else. I mean, I have wrong feelings about other guys sometimes, but I feel guilty, and I flog and punish."

"Exactly," Buffy agreed. "I'm sure Oz is flogging and punishing himself. This is sounding wrong before I even finish. Look, I promise you, in a couple of days, it's gonna be like 'Veruca who?'"

"You think?" Willow asked her hopefully.

She nodded. "Absolutely. Oz just isn't the type to stray. Not tonight anyways. He'll be locked in a cage."

"I was thinking about that," Willow remarked, her expression altering to one of less bleak proportions.

"How so?" Buffy asked.

"You know how me and Jenny conjured an enchantment on a charm for Angel to enjoy the sunlight without going poof?" Willow began, waiting for her friend to nod before she continued, "well, I was wondering if the same thing could be possible for Oz. Enchant something of his so he doesn't go wolfy."
"That's a great idea," Buffy agreed. "Why don't we go and ask Jenny if she knows of a spell we could use or adapt. Do you have something of Oz's that he wears?"

"No, but I'm sure I could find something," Willow replied, before they rose from the table to exit the cafe, briefly pausing to buy the celebratory cookie on the way.

Deep in the forest a call was sounding, and as often as he heard this call, mysteriously thrilling and luring, he felt compelled to turn his back upon the fire and the beaten earth around it, and to plunge into the forest...(1)

Even before the hour of sunset was due, Oz felt the strain of the primitive within alive and active, stalking his mind as a predator hunts his prey, waiting for the inevitable moment of vulnerability within which he could bite at the human soul in the rule of the body he hungered for and reign supreme once more. He called on his willpower to contain the beast until classes were over and he could head for the safety of the crypt, and secure himself behind the cage he with others had fashioned to imprison the werewolf the night of the full moon and the two nights surrounding it.

A combination lock secured the door of the cage, the gap between the bars wide enough for Oz to put his human arm through and ensure release when the daylights returned to hellmouth once more. Usually he felt embarrassed having company with him, even Willow's, ashamed of the howling beast which the phases of the moon reduced him to, but tonight he found the once welcomed aloneness disturbing and unsettling. Trying to convince himself that the feeling was a by product of the prospect of unleashing the werewolf, he started to undress, knowing the tearing effect his inner demon usual had on his clothing.

The full moon rose high into the sky, bathing the land with its’ ghostly hue, calling the wolf forth from him. Enraged against the secured surroundings barring him from having any satisfaction during these eyes, the werewolf hurled himself again and again the bars of his cage, until the hinge which fastened one side of the door surrendered to the damage caused by the repeated impact and flew apart.

Werewolf rushed out of the prison then up the stairs and out of the crypt, his determination for freedom an undeniable urge deep inside him. Strains of the primitive were alive and active, but he retained his wildness and his wiliness, causing him to seek the forests away from the roads and houses of an innocent populous. Attracted by the smells and sounds his paws pounded the ground until he reached the large gathering of buildings which were the college campus.

He saw halted as he caught sight of a human, walking on the smooth yet hard surface beside the shrubbery enclosed grass upon which he ran. His movements, however slight, caused the bushes to rustle and shudder, causing the human to turn and occasionally halt, convinced that something was stalking them.

"Hello?" They called nervously out into the darkness.

A werewolf was incapable of speech so could not reply. He could snarl and howl, however, and these noises he used as he strove to gain pace on the now running human, before leaping out infront of them to declare their presence.

Screams rose from the human, a terrible sound, but not unfamiliar to the beast who hunted them. The werewolf dodged the offending leather briefcase which was tossed at him in a vain attempt to prevent his pursuit, before increasing his pace once more as the prey disappeared around a corner.
"God..." the human uttered as they encountered another horrifying sight, realising that there were two of these fearsome beasts in existence. Survival instincts alive and active, they leapt for the bushes, just as the monsters rose from the ground to attack.

But the human was no longer the prey, nor indeed was the desire to hunt holding any sovereignty over the werewolves. Instead the blood lust gave way to a more combative stance, the desire for supremacy, to show the other who was king.

As the human ran for the hills, they continued to lay into each other, tearing and nipping at the flesh and fur before them, until the moonlit hours gave way to the dawn.

Oz woke to find himself naked in a part of campus secluded undergrowth. Terrified he rapidly took in his surroundings, the fear within him lessening as he encountered no evidence of any life, human or animal having been destroyed, only for the emotion to return with a vengeance as he encountered the naked human form next to him.

He froze as his mind raced through the cloudy recollections of the night before, now returning to haunt his human soul, assuring him that contrary to first impressions, he had not spent the night with this woman lying next to him. Now, he had to make sure that his companion was fully aware of this too, and her secrecy was gained.

"That was, um..." he struggled for the words.

"Some night," Veruca answered him, unconcerned with her unclothed state and his.

"So it appears," Oz remarked.

"Right," Veruca added, "you don't remember. It's like that at first, but then little bits and pieces will start coming back to you."

"I do remember," Oz replied, surprising her. "And I know we didn't.... couple." He strove to establish other facts. "So you're A..."

"Werewolf groupie," she finished. "Nobody else gets it done for me."

Oz frowned. "What?"

"Kidding," Veruca replied. "You know what I am. You've known since the first time you saw me. Now, you... Need... To relax."

"Not a possibility," Oz replied.

"So what do you want to do?" Veruca asked him.

Oz chose not to answer her, rising from the ground and heading for civilisation, hoping no one else was up at this early hour to notice two naked students stealing clothes from the Laundromat.

"God! The kids in the dorm need fashion 101 in a big way," Veruca remarked, disgusted at the underwear she was forced to 'borrow.' She glanced at her companion and found him in a similar desperate state. "Or we could start right here at home."

"Not making a statement," Oz informed her. "Just wanna get back to my place, figure out why we
got out of our cages."

Now it was time for her to become surprised, even incredulous. "You have a cage?"

Oz frowned at her, his horror inwardly increasing. "Don't you?"

"Uh, yeah. Has a little wheel with a plastic ball and a cute little bell in it," she mocked. "God! Somebody's domesticated the hell out of you."

"It's my choice," Oz replied. "I don't wanna hurt anybody."

"Maybe," Veruca allowed. "Or maybe you just don't wanna admit what happened to you. Maybe you just wanna pretend like you're a regular guy."

Oz tried to ignore her prowling towards his personal space. "Well, I am. I'm only a wolf three nights a month."

"Or you're a wolf all the time and this human face is just your disguise," Veruca countered. "You ever think about that, Oz?"

Her face and form were closing in on him, threateningly. Oz backed away. "I'm going. I gotta check the paper, see if we did any damage last night."

"Oh, we did. But only to each other," Veruca replied. "I know some part of you remembers that. It doesn't take a full moon. We could do it again right here. See if you have the courage to go all the way this time."

"We are never going to," Oz replied. "This ends... Right now."

"I can help you, Oz," Veruca remarked seductively. "You're scared. I was, too. But then I accepted it. The animal, it's powerful, inside me all the time. Soon, you just start to feel sorry for everybody else because they don't know what it's like to be as alive as we are. As free."

"Free to kill people?" Oz countered. "I won't do that. I've seen others do that, and the damage it does, to people and to them. "You shouldn't either."

Veruca shook her head. "You don't understand. But you will. You'll see that we belong together."

"No," Oz replied. "I know where I belong."

Veruca watched him go. "See ya tonight."

Buffy heard the conversation taking place between Professor Walsh and Riley Finn as she wandered the halls that morning, seeking one or either of them concerning her forthcoming discussion group, but without any real focus on the words until they made an effort to include her in the talk.

"Two of them," Walsh could be heard saying as Buffy came to a halt before them. "It was unbelievable. The fact that I survived at all is a miracle."

"Excuse me. Ms. Walsh?" Buffy began, causing the professor to turn to her.

"I hope you're careful when you walk around campus after dark," Walsh remarked to Buffy. "I was attacked by wild dogs last night."
Slayer instincts became alive and active. "Wild dogs?"

Walsh nodded. "Two of them. Biggest things I've ever seen. The first one was- Well, for a moment, I thought it was a gorilla. Did you have a question, Buffy?"

Leading a Psychology discussion group was now the furthest thing from the slayer's mind. "No. No, I was just... Saying howdy."

Fortunately Walsh was oblivious to the retreat her pupil was now hurriedly making. "Fine. See you in class."

Buffy nodded, walking away from the professor and teaching assistant, careful to keep her pace as unconcerned and unhurried as possible until she was out of their sight. When she rounded the corner, her walk changed into a run, not stopping until she reached room one hundred and twelve, where Mythology was lectured.

Giles looked up from his desk at the hurried arrival, and instantly stopped working on whatever he was doing at his desk as he witnessed his slayer check that the hall was empty and then that the entrance was closed. "Buffy, what's wrong?"

"Professor Walsh was telling her TA that she got attacked by two wild dogs last night," Buffy replied as she stepped up to his desk.

Giles slipped into watcher mode, the implications inescapable to him as well. "Werewolves? Two of them?"

Buffy nodded. "That's my guess. Question is, who are they?"

"I think I can answer that," a voice remarked at that moment.

The slayer and her watcher jumped, then turned to the door.

Where Oz was standing with a very shocked Willow.

Giles was the first to contain his surprise. Forcing down any thoughts which contemplated worst case scenarios, he silently motioned for the two newcomers to join him and Buffy at the desk, making sure they took care to close the doors behind them, before he sat down and looked at Oz. "Explain. Everything. From the beginning."

"I changed as usual," Oz replied. "I remember hurling myself against the cage, but this time the hinge buckled and broke under the pressure. I got out. I ran about the campus, encountered Professor Walsh, and gave chase, and that's when I saw the other one." He paused, the recap becoming more difficult to voice aloud. "I attacked her and then chased her, and we ended up in the fields. When I woke, I recognised her."

"Veruca," Oz answered, his eyes never moving from hers. As soon as he saw the horror arise within her pupils, he sought to reassure her. "Will, I swear I never laid a finger or paw on her in that
way. I would never cheat on you."

"I know," Willow uttered, softly, the reply surprising herself, for until now she had never held such faith in that conviction. She met his amber stare of relief, then turned to her best friend and the watcher. "What do we do about this?"

Giles looked to Oz as he asked, "What is Veruca's attitude to the werewolf?"

"Total opposite of mine," Oz replied. "She thinks that its the greatest freedom. She's dangerous." He frowned. "Too dangerous."

"In that case there's only one solution," Buffy slowly replied, trying to quell the misgivings inside her, for they had always promised themselves that they would never use the discovery they made during the summer to their advantage. "I know it's not good, but at least she'll live."

Oz nodded, not liking the solution any more than the rest of them, but aware that they had no choice. "Do what you have to do."

The bell before first class began to sound, breaking the unsettling silence which had formed as the four contemplated the outcome their next actions would incur.

Giles stood up. "You all better get to class. I'll inform the rest before lunch."

"He walked to the centre of the open space and listened. It was the call, the many-noted call, sounding more luringly and compelling than ever before. And as never before, he was ready to obey. The last tie was broken. Man and the claims of man no longer bound him."(2)

Willow walked into Oz's room at the end of the day, to find him in the midst of packing a bundle of clothes into a suitcase. He looked up at her entrance, his face sad, but resolved.

"Hi," he greeted softly.

"What are you doing?" She asked him.

"I'm going," he replied simply.

"Now?" Willow asked him. "That's your solution?"

"That's my decision," he corrected.

"Don't I get any say in this?" Willow asked him.

Oz shook his head. "No. Veruca was right about something. The wolf is inside me all the time, and I don't know where that line is anymore between me and it. And until I figure out what that means, I shouldn't be around you... Or anybody."

Willow clasped his hand and freed the suitcase he was holding, letting the offending object drop to ground. "What if you had something with which to define that line?" she asked him softly.

He looked at her, his face betraying a facet of the turmoil he was experiencing for the first time. "What do you mean?"

"Remember when we sorted out Angel's false identity papers so he could enter gainful
employment?" Willow answered, her other retrieving something from the pocket of her skirt, hiding the object from view with her closed fist until she could lay the palm open before him, to reveal a delicate gold chain, with a familiar half moon attached to it. "Jenny and I enchanted this for you, as protection against the werewolf."

Oz tentatively reached out with his free hand to the chain resting upon her palm, fingering the half moon charm and the skin surrounding it. "This works like Angel's does?" He sought to confirm, barely able to believe that after his actions the night before she was still so generous and willing to give him this incredible gift.

Willow nodded. "The spell was the same in essentials, but Jenny and I adapted it to contain the wolf as oppose to the vampire. Of course the real proof is in testing it." She paused, summoning her courage, before adding, "I could make another, for Veruca, so we don't have to...." she let the sentence end there, unable to voice the true finish, the outcome of Veruca's fate bothering her as much as it bothered the other slayerettes when Giles informed them earlier that afternoon.

"No," Oz replied, "I don't think she would view the gift with the same emotions as I do. I think she would resent it."

"Whereas you?" Willow asked, hope rising despite her fear of impending desolation.

Oz took the chain from her open palm and placed it round his neck, gently letting go of her hand so he could put both of them behind his back to fasten the clasp. When the talisman was secure, he sought her hand once more, along with the other this time, as he prepared to lay her final fears aside.

"I view this gift as the most precious thing I have ever received in my life," he uttered huskily, "save your love." He closed his eyes as he pressed his forehead against hers, fearing her reply to his next question. "Do I still have that?"

"You always will," Willow reply. "Even if you still chose to go."

"I'll never leave," he promised her, before seeking the comfort he found in the act of pressing his lips to hers.

"He felt strangely numb. As though from a great distance, he was aware that he was being beaten. The last sensations of pain left him. He no longer felt anything, though very faintly he could hear the impact of the club upon his body. But it was no longer his body, it seemed so far away." (3)

A shrouded figure clothed entirely in black watched with an increasing sense of misgivings as others attired like him poked and prodded at the capture they had brought back for testing. They had sworn never to do this, never to surrender to this last resort, yet here they were, only hours ago, throwing away that decision in order to solve a problem to which there was only one other alternative.

The figure in black had fought just as everyone else did in the fierce debate which evolved from this proposal, suggesting the alternative, even though that too was rendered unthinkable. But this figure knew now, more than ever, that the alternative was an easier solution to live with than this. Perhaps that was why their leader had given the figure the task of disposal, knowing that their position in the pack raised them to the same level of ability as their leader and other members,
endowing the figure with the power and resolve to do what the others might perhaps shy from doing.

He waited until they had finished with her, until they ordered him and others to take her away to the containment block. Until he was the last to be with her as one by one the others returned to their duties, leaving him alone with her in the cage she feared.

Then he took care to disable the closed circuit surveillance, before disabling her and taking her body out into the depths of the forest, where a call still sounded.

*The End.*

*To Be Continued In*

*THE INITIATIVE.*

The Initiative

Author's note: When I came to re-examine this series, I didn't actually intend to rewrite my first draft of this episode, just extend it a little. However, after I wrote a new and better version of A Full Moon Rose High, I realised that this needed a different spin for the opening scene, which soon progressed into an entire fresh take on the episode. Some dialogue has been taken from the original, but a lot is new, rounding off the storyline created in A Full Moon Rose High, and revealing the mean theme of Season Four. It also has a slight cliffhanger ending. Enjoy.

THE INITIATIVE.

There were upsides and downsides to living a double life Xander came to realise. Of the former here were many he could name; it improved his standing with the Slayerettes, it brought more customers to his nightclub, it better prepared him for survival against the vampires and demons who roamed the hellmouth. Through his double life he gained access to the Sunnydale UCA from another avenue than that of just off-campus friend, and provided him with an excuse to live on said campus, allowing more of his profits earned from the Bronze to go towards his promise to help fund Cordelia's college education.

They may have split over the summer, but he was still her friend and he still cared about her too much to leave her in the lurch as her family had done since the IRS investigation. As for the downsides, the first was the secret, he lied to his new colleagues, to his boss and at the moment to his new girlfriend. The mere thought of Anya caused him to smile, even though he was going to be at odds with her sooner or later, no matter when he told her the truth, for they were frequently at odds with one another, over many things.

In a way this beginning was similar to the start of his relationship with Cordelia, but with Anya it had the added bonus of sex. He did not know why it felt so important to have a causal relationship right now, although if Anya were asked to assign a name to it, she would not use that word. Perhaps because everything else in his life was so serious, transitory and secretive, threatening on explosive when everything was discovered, probably apocalyptic. He needed something predictable, normal, to counterbalance the inevitable chaos. Something he could handle without thinking too much.

For his double life caused a great deal of thinking about, especially recently. Ever since the Veruca business, when they debated over their decision concerning what they should do with her, the one solution which they had resolved never to use, whatever the cost. As soon as the decision was made it left a sour taste in all of them, not just Willow, Oz and Buffy. Even now, barely a week later, he vividly recalled his friend shouting his name as he walked away from Giles and Jenny's apartment, asking him to come to a halt as she told him to do something for them. He hadn't asked her the obvious, for of course she knew what she was asking him to do.

And he was the only person who could, the only person who had the access right now, who could get in and out of the place without being questioned as to why. Thinking hadn't come into the deed either, a deliberate move on his part, for he knew one stray thought or emotion could cause him to hesitate, just as many would after the event. Oddly, the act felt of a darker nature to him than the ones which he had witnessed his new colleagues performing moments before. Guilt was a necessary and uncomfortable consequence of his double life, yet he found it more difficult to work through with every passing day.

He had never had a problem with dusting vampires, or helping to dust them, along with aiding to
kill the demons which they found themselves dealing with, not until he volunteered for this double life he was now leading. Before they were just anonymous monsters, who had either killed a member of Sunnydale's human populous, or were just a general major disturbance to life in his home town. Now he knew enough to identify the species, recall to mind their aims in life, their chosen prey, their genetic makeup. Since Veruca, he had the additional ugly bonus of putting a name to one of them, before making sure they were put out of the misery the slayerettes' decision caused them.

Make that two names. For a day or so before Veruca's wolfy nature became known, he had encountered another less than anonymous demon. One which before he would not have minded being poked and prodded, but now, he rebelled against immediately. The question however, was what do with the demon in question, for not only was he known, but he was also a known annoyance, presenting the slayerettes with another potentially difficult decision.

In hindsight, he probably could have avoided the whole can of worms in the first place, for he had been in charge of the group responsible for capturing him. He had been the one who delayed the group long enough to arrive at the scene after the slayer had finished dealing with one vampire, and the one who gave the order to fire. On reflection, he should have deliberately lost track of the demon in question, pretending to chalk up the mistake to his inexperience, but he had worked so hard to cultivate this level of trust within the group that he could not afford to even partially destroy his position right now.

He remembered arriving at the scene just as his best friend did, ducking cautiously below the horizon of the bush line which bordered the campus grass from the woods which surrounded the college as he saw her and the vamp who was following her come to a sudden halt in the empty clearing. As yet he had not fully identified the thing he and his group were trailing, causing him to wait for the slayer to finish her dusting before he scanned the area once more and confirmed that the findings were not just the vampire she had staked.

He also did not want to let on to her that he was there too, for it would put an even bigger spanner in the works of their operation that the one which this demon in question could potentially cause, as well as breaking her focus and concentration. In silence he watched her fight the vampire, admiring once more the gracefulness of her agility, her skill, her beauty. He loved her as a friend, a sister even, no longer as a boyfriend would. Last year taught him to accept that Angel was that, and he was going nowhere for some time.

So now he watched her purely as another slayer might, admiring how well she performed in fulfilling the destiny of the chosen one. He watched as she staked the vampire, then gazed up at the sky, asking aloud the Powers that Be to send her a vamp who possessed better appreciation for her witty puns than the one which she had just staked.

He remembered thinking as she left that her wish would be granted, as he watched the demon in question which he and his group had been stalking for most of the night, emerge into the sheltered openness which that area of campus provided, finally allowing him to identify his species, albeit unconsciously as far as the demon itself was concerned. He remembered giving the order to fire without even thinking about it, which in hindsight is precisely not what he should have done.

Most of all however, he remembered asking himself what they were going to do with the demon in question, when he informed Buffy and the others that the vampire from whom Billy Idol stole his fashion sense was back in town.

As for the source of Billy Idol's inspiration, the vampire in question had been unconscious, and therefore ignorant, not only of the identity of the people who captured him, but also his current
location and surroundings, ever since he was tasered. This allegedly blissful state had possessed him as he was taken from the place where he watched the slayer ask aloud the Powers that Be to send her a more witty demon than the one which she had just dusted, to the place hidden deep underground and unknown to all but a select few, then to the room, or rather containment cell, where his unconscious undead body was now slowly, ever so slowly, emerging from said stupor.

"Slayer..." he mumbled. "I'll kill you. Not so tough. I... Kill slayer."

And with that primitive, but devout vow voiced, he opened his eyes. Blinking until his pupils had adjusted to the light, he silently surveyed his surroundings with a sense of shock and rising anger. He was lying on a white floor, cold and ceramic to the touch, no visible joints to ease apart, with the distinct style of sanitary clinging to it, complete with the nauseating smell of bleach. The walls were also white, clean and free of joins, apart from the glass one in front of him.

Having established that he had no other injuries besides a loss as to how he arrived inside this prison, Spike rose up and walked to the glass door. He reached out with his hands and touched it. Barely a second later he jerked the hand back as he received an electric shock. Grimacing, he stepped forward cautiously to survey his surroundings.

To find other vampires and some demons in the same boat.

Xander stopped by the Mansion on Crawford street after his dark deed in the forest, not just to tell Buffy that he had done what she asked him to do, but to make her aware of the other problem which might need a similar solution.

"I thought we had got rid of him after the Amarra thing," Buffy said as she and Angel met with Xander in the double height living room.

"Evidently he doesn't think so," Xander replied, his tone laced with some of the frustration caused by his dark deed in the forest involving Veruca. "What are we gonna do about him?"

Buffy looked towards her boyfriend, whom she felt more qualified to answer the question, as he was Spike's grandsire. "I think we have no choice other than to make sure he escapes the facility. If he stays, he could recognise you, or Buffy when we reach that stage in the plan, which could potentially destroy everything we've spent the past summer planning."

"I agree," Buffy replied. "If you feel comfortable about doing that."

"More than what I had to do with Veruca," Xander admitted. "But what will we do once he's free? Do you think he'll just get out of Dodge?"

"Knowing Spike, he'll want revenge on whoever he thinks is responsible," Buffy replied, as Angel nodded in agreement. "We'll have to watch and wait."

A few minutes later, Spike was beginning to feel claustrophobic. He had paced the limits of the room countless times, and still found no solution as to how to free himself from this cage. His anger was rising with every turn, contemplating revenge on who he deemed responsible for holding him here, his imagined end for them more intricately gruesome with each new level of
anger attained inside him.

Suddenly a transparent gel packet fell to the floor as if from nowhere. Spike looked at it, identifying the contents instantly. His demon reminded him how long it had been since his hunger was sated, and this weakness was allowed to conquer him now absolutely. He dashed to spot and picked up the red sachet full of blood.

"Don't drink it," a voice said abruptly. "It's drugged."

Spike sniffed the packet to confirm that this was indeed the case, then threw it down in disgust. Silently he looked around to determine the source of the voice, before voicing his response.

"Thanks. And who are you, mate?"

"I'm a lab rat, just like the others," the vampire replied by way of introduction. "They're gonna kill us, you know."

"And how are they gonna do that?" Spike asked sceptically.

"They starve you," the vampire replied. "When you're ready to bite your own arm, they shoot out one of those packets. You drink, and the next thing, you're gone. And that's when they do the experiments."

"And, uh, they are?" Spike asked. "The government? Nazis? A major cosmetics company?"

"Who cares?" the vampire countered. "All I know is, one minute I'm running from the slayer, And the next thing, I'm here."

"The slayer!" Spike echoed, his anger returning full throttle. "I knew it!"

"Yeah," his faceless cell-mate confirmed, "she took apart my crew, and led me straight to these guys."

"She set me up, too," Spike realised, as his mind recalled the aftermath of his defeat in keeping the gem of Amarra; hiding out until the sun came down, stalking the slayer, until he was tasered and unconsciousness took him. "I always worried what would happen when that bitch got some funding. She's wised up a bit. Fine! I'll take her apart. I don't care how brilliant she is."

Xander heard the voice of one his fellow colleagues as he and his closest frat buddies came upon the briefing area, where all of them were summoned to convene a few minutes ago. He knew well who he was talking about, for the boy had no poker face, despite his double life, and he had been seen by Buffy and the slayerettes whenever they gathered on campus or at the Bronze. Hiding his amusement, for he knew better than his boss that he would never stand a chance with a girl like Buffy, he listened to the conversation, waiting for their ultimate boss to call them to order so the briefing could begin.

"The problem is," Riley continued to whine to his friends as they walked further into the complex, "what kind of girl is gonna go out with a guy who's acting all Joe Regular by day and then turns all demon-hunter by night?"

"Maybe a peculiar one," Graham suggested.

"Thank you, Graham," Riley replied. "You see, Forrest? You don't have to be so negative all the time." He turned then and instantly became business like as he caught sight of his impatient superior. "Didn't see you there, Ma'am."
"That was evident," Professor Walsh replied. "Now, as everybody's here, let's begin. We have a new hostile; number seventeen."

The video cameras above her flashed to the hostile in question, showing a white haired vampire pacing his cage. Xander watched the surveillance closely, wondering if Spike had figured out a plan of escape yet.

"As you can see this hostile is older than any of our other captures," Walsh continued. "This shall be our first chance to see the differences in age with regards to strength and endurance, testing the hypothesis that the older a vampire becomes, the harder they are to eliminate."

While the professor was speaking the vampire had glanced briefly in the direction of the camera, then walked over to where the packet of blood lay. He picked it up and turned with his back to the camera while he drank. Xander watched, half inkling the agenda behind that subtle glance at the camera, and the positioning of Spike as he appeared to consume the contents of the blood sachet.

By the time Professor Walsh had turned back to the camera, the vampire had collapsed to the floor unconscious. "Ah, now we can test him." She turned to a passing lab tech. "Go and fetch Hostile 17 for testing."

"Ma'am," Xander spoke up, "shouldn't one of us go with them? Being older, the hostile may be tricking us into believing that he is cooperating."

"That's a good point," the Professor acknowledged. "As you suggested it, Harris, you get to go. The rest of you, come with me."

Sure enough, as the lab technicians tried to get the allegedly unconscious vampire on to the gurney, said vampire woke up and proceeded to punch the living daylights out of them. Unprepared for this escape plan, it did not take long for either of the technicians to succumb to unconsciousness. When he had done with them, he turned to the commando, and halted his punch midway in total shock as he recognised him.

"You!?!" Spike growled. "I knew it! I knew the slayer was at the bottom of this. What the bloody hell is all of this?"

"Shut up, Spike," Xander uttered, looking about him and making sure there was no one else conscious or living around. "I'm here to help you, believe it or not."

"You're here to help me?" Spike echoed. "The slayer's not behind this?"

"Never in a million years," Xander replied. "Now, I don't know how much time I've got, so just shut up and listen. Go out into the corridor, turn right, and you'll find a door. Open it, and you'll find a passage which leads to one of the exits, which you will get you back on campus grounds. After that, it's up to you."

"Really?" Spike uttered. Then he threw his punch, knocking Xander to the floor. "Thanks, mate. I owe you one. And I know just the way to repay you."

He ran out of the cell, following the directions.

Xander opened his eyes and slowly got up from the floor. A deft twist of the device on his wrist and the imprison cell surveillance reverted to normal picture, editing his conversation with the Hostile. With deliberate slowness to exaggerate his injuries, he walked out of the cell and round the corner to the left, where no closed circuit surveillance cameras were positioned. Once out of sight
from any who might question his actions, he reached into his pocket and retrieved his cell phone.

"Its me," he began after the number he had dialled picked up, putting the device to his ear. "I just let him out of the base. He did think you were behind this until I explained." He paused for the reply. "Yeah, I'm on my way."

The first place Spike headed for was his old crypt, where he was amazed to find Harmony still playing house. He thought that after trying to stake her in disgust- which would have killed her had it not been for the gem of Ammar resting on her finger -that the girl would get the message that she was rebound from Drusilla. But then again, senseless as she was- at she had that similarity with Dru, although hers tended more to the asylum variety of insanity -she was useful for other things.

"Spike?" She turned round as she heard his entrance. "Spike, is that really you?"

He tried to affect a winning smile. "It's me, baby. Your man is...." Harmony slapped his face, causing a lengthy pause before the final word, "back."

"Bastard," she declared angrily. "You dumped me and staked me and hurt me and then left me."

"I know, sugar," Spike replied in what he hoped was a saccharine tone, "but you're forgetting one other thing I did." Deliberately he paused. "I missed you."

"Really?" Harmony asked hopefully.

Spike held out his arms for her, causing a smile in return.

"Oh." She cried, hugging him briefly. "Just don't ever do that to me again."

"Oh, never, my little foam latte," Spike vowed. "Your blondie bear is here to stay."

"Well, where have you been?" Harmony asked after he let go of her to explore the rest of the crypt. "No, wait. Don't tell me. I'm just glad you're back. And this time, it's for good, right?"

"Oh, forever and ever, mon petite creme brulee," Spike promised. "Get used to it. Big daddy's home. We're gonna go wherever you want, do whatever you want, kill whoever you want. Starting with the slayer. And after that, it's all you and me, my little mentholated pack of smokes."

Harmony frowned as she heard her boy's avowal to kill the slayer was aired aloud once more. "Spikey. Let's leave the slayer alone. You know she'll only slap you around, and I can do that."

"Relax, I'm not going to kill her," Spike replied. "No, I need to see her, warn her about the joint I've just been in."

"Joint?" Harmony echoed with another frown. "You smoking weed now?"

Spike refrained from rolling his eyes. "Joint as in prison. Didn't you wonder why I never called?"

"I just figured you were too into killing the slayer to worry about me," Harmony replied forlornly.

"I was captured, Harm, by these guys in black," Spike replied.

"I've heard rumours about them," Harmony revealed. "And you think the slayer's involved?"

"At first I did, but then Xander helped me escape, so now I'm wondering how much info I can wrangle from her about them. Then I'll kill her."
Harmony exhaled a noise of disgust. "That's it, I've had it. Slayer this, slayer that. You have to choose, Spike, Me or her. Which is it to be?"

Spike looked at her, wondering how long he should leave it before he walked out. About five seconds, he decided.

In one of the apartment complexes situated on the outskirts of the campus, Willow was getting ready to go to the Bronze with Oz. Since Veruca's departure, they had managed to close the distance between them which seemed to appear whenever Shy performed, or the band's lead vocal was around. Willow still regretted that they had to choose a fate for the female werewolf which they had resolved never to do, even now Xander had informed her what happened afterwards. There were moments when she wondered if her regret spawned from disgust at what Veruca had driven them to, or her sense of moral outrage concerning what lay behind the location of Veruca's 'disappearance.' But the decision had taken place, rendering the regret moot. She and Oz were recommitted to each other, and his own werewolf status was as resolved as Angel's before the souled vampire received half of his humanity. She smiled as she remembered his reaction to her gift, untainted by his decision to leave only moments before. After they had talked, she led him outside into a night lit by the full moon, watching as his body remained unchanged, showing the success of the talisman she and Jenny had enchanted. Even though it had been only two years since his last three night around the full moon as a human, he had told her that the break felt like a life time of a scar, now healed thanks to her magic. It was another sign of how much her wiccan skills had progressed, and Willow wondered what new heights of magic this would now lead to.

A knock on the door sounded, breaking her from her pleasant recollections.

"Come in," Willow uttered, thinking it was Oz who had yet to return from his last class. She looked up as the door shut and gasped, backing away towards the window, her nearest escape from the vampire she had just accidentally invited inside. "Spike! Wh-what do you want? Uh, a spell? I can do that."

She tried to run past him, but he threw her against the dresser.

"I'll give you a choice," he remarked as he pinned her between the piece of furniture and himself. "Now I'm gonna kill you. No choice in that. But... I can let you stay dead... Or... Bring you back, to be like me."

Neither choice was preferable to staying alive, so Willow offered another inducement, hoping he would change his mind. "I-I'll scream."

Spike merely grinned. "Bonus."

Grabbing her by her clothes, he lifted her off the floor and threw her on to the bed, before joining her there, looming over her as he pinned her atop the mattress, his lips seeming to drift slowly towards her neck. He changed his face, opened his mouth......

Then leapt back as a shot of pain darted through his nerves inside his head.

"Oww!" Spike sat at the edge of the bed, rubbing his forehead until some of the pain subsided. "What the hell just happened?!"

"You tried to bite me," Willow uttered nervously.

"That I did," Spike agreed. "Let me try again."
He pounced on her just as he finished speaking, his fangs moving to neck once more. Even before the elongated teeth touched her skin, the sharp pain travelled through his mind once more, causing him to leap away from her.

"Argh!" He cried, rubbing his forehead. "Is this something you lot stole from those guys in black? A vampire repelling device?"

Willow frowned. "What do you mean?"

Spike shook his head as the pain continued to fade away. "I don't understand. This sort of thing's never happened to me before."

"Maybe you were nervous," Willow suggested.

"I felt all right when I started. Let's try again." He leapt on her, only for the pain to return. "Ow! Oh! Ow! Damn it!"

Willow watched him as he rose from her bed to kick her dresser and began to pace the room, her mind searching for the right thing to say which would assure her survival without her blood being drained.

"Maybe you're trying too hard," she offered. "Doesn't this happen to every vampire?"

"Not to me, it doesn't!" Spike growled.

"It's me, isn't it?" Willow uttered softly.

Spike came to a halt and turned to her in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, you came here looking for Buffy, then settled," Willow replied. "You didn't want to bite me. I just happened to be around."

"Pifflle!" Spike cried. "I was gonna use you to get her attention."

Willow sat up on the bed. "'Exactly. I know I'm not the kind of girl vamps like to sink their teeth into. It's always like, 'ooh, you're like a sister to me,' or, 'oh, you're such a good friend.' I was your means to an end."

"Don't be ridiculous," Spike replied. "I'd bite you in a heartbeat."

Willow looked up at him. "Really?"

Spike shrugged as he sat on the bed next to her. "Thought about it."

"When?" Willow asked him, intrigued despite herself.

"Remember the year before last, you had on that fuzzy pink number with the lilac underneath?" He remarked.

"I never would have guessed," Willow replied, strangely touched by the odd compliment. "You played the bloodlust kinda cool."

Spike nodded in agreement. "Mmm. I hate being obvious. All fang-y and 'rrrr!' Takes the mystery out."

"But if you could...." Willow prompted.
He inclined his head toward her. "If I could, yeah."

Willow smiled. "You know, this doesn't make you any less terrifying."

Spike looked at her in disbelief. "I'll bet."

"I'm serious!" Willow protested. "You've always had that evil sort of look about you. Even without the vamp face."

"Hmm." Spike sighed. "I still can't believe this happened. I'm only a hundred and twenty-six." He turned to her. "I wonder if its inherited. Is Angel like this?"

"I don't think so," Willow uttered. "He was still able to last year. Buffy lives with him now at the mansion on Crawford Street. Why don't you ask him?"

Spike looked at her, surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah, I'm meant to be heading over there now. Why don't you come with me?"

"Okay," Spike agreed. "There's something I have to tell them anyway."

"Did anyone see you?" Buffy asked her friend.

Xander shook his head. "No, they were all too busy worrying about the escape of Spike to notice me slipping away."

"Did you clean the surveillance?" Giles asked.

"Yeah, its wiped," Xander assured them.

"You really think we can trust Spike?" Angel asked aloud.

"I don't think we've got a choice," his soulmate said as she sat down next to him. Angel nodded reluctantly, then put his arm around her shoulders.

"I agree," her watcher added from his place by the large stone fireplace which thanks to the double height of the living room ceiling, did not dominate the room they were meeting in. "This is an opportunity to find out what exactly they have done, and what it's limits are."

"And seeing what they do when something escapes," Buffy pointed out.

"And if the thing actually works," Anya added.

"It works alright," Cordelia asserted.

"You're sure?" Anya asked.

"Hey, a vampire committing suicide right in front of you is not something you tend to forget," Doyle remarked.

"Really?" Anya queried curiously.

"Yeah," Cordelia replied. "I've never seen a vampire who looked so happy to be confronted with a stake. He grabbed it off us and put it through his chest."

"Fair point," Anya conceded. "Certainly haven't seen that in my life time."
A knock sounded on the door.

"I'll get that," Jenny remarked, rising from her chair to walk to the door. She opened the device and froze as she saw who was with her fellow wiccan. "Hi.... Willow."

"Hey," Willow replied. "I've brought a friend," she added, placing her hand on Spike's back. The vampire himself remained silent, relying on his companion to assure his access into one of the slayer's houses. "He's requesting to speak to Buffy."

Jenny glanced at Buffy and Angel, waiting for them to nod before she spoke. "He can come in," She stood back to let them walk inside.

"Could have done so anyway," Spike muttered as he followed Willow inside.

"How?" Cordelia asked.

"Demons can enter any place other demons own," Angel explained.

"What do you want, Spike?" Buffy asked.

"Your help, and to tell you that......" he trailed off as his eyes settled on someone in combat gear. "What are you doing here?"

"Debriefing about your escape," Xander replied.

Spike stood stunned. Then he groaned. "Oh bloody hell. I was right. You guys have known about them from the beginning, haven't you?"

"William, welcome to the headquarters of Operation 314," his grandsire said.

_The End._

_To Be Continued In_

OPERATION 314.
Author's Note: I decided to do a Damages style of episode, flashing back between the events during the summer, and present Btvs time, to deal with how the Slayerettes find out about the Initiative, and what they do with Spike. Some dialogue has been taken from Pangs and Something Blue, but none of the elements for the main plots for episode have been included. Enjoy.

OPERATION 314.

Some time during the Summer Vacation......

"I have this dilemma."

Doyle turned to the former cheerleader of Sunnydale High. "What sort of dilemma?"

"I think me and Xander have reached a dead end. A fork in the road, where we need to go our separate ways."

"Shouldn't you be telling this to Xander, rather than me, Delia?" Doyle asked.

"At some point," Cordelia agreed. "But, and this is where its gets complicated. He's putting me through college."

Doyle halted mid walk by one of the many gravestones in Restfield, the area of patrol assigned to them by Buffy for that night. "That's why he brought the Bronze?"

"Yeah. When Dad had his little problem with IRS, Xander told me he would help me. The Bronze was his idea, and I couldn't say no."

"I don't think he'll stop funding your college if you break up with him," Doyle assured her. "Xander's not that vindictive. It's not like you're cheating on him or anything, are you?"

"No," Cordelia shook her head. "I'm gonna pay him back, eventually, providing I can find some sort of career, but I'm feeling guilty that I'm not doing anything in return for his helping me right now."

"You can't turn your relationship into that sort, Delia," Doyle pointed out.

"I wasn't thinking that," Cordelia protested. "I still care for him. Its so strange. We started off fighting with each other until we ended up kissing in storage rooms. We couldn't stand each other. But then it was like something flipped inside us, and suddenly we cared deeply. And now, I feel like we've plateaux. We're just friends who sleep with each other. I just don't know how to tell him."

"Maybe feels the same and he doesn't know how to tell you," Doyle offered.

"Perhaps," Cordelia allowed, her gaze abruptly switching from him to something behind him. "Er, vampire, three rows away."

"On it," Doyle replied, fishing the stake out of his jacket.

Together they crouched and quietly ran across the graveyard, reaching the undead demon just as
the corpse he was currently inhabiting turned to face them.

"Hey," he greeted them, eyeing the stakes in their hands. "You the slayer?"

"No, just another of her welcoming committee," Cordelia replied. "But, if you wanna meet her, we could just call her over. I'm sure she'd love a fight."

The vampire shook his head rather frantically. "No, no fighting please."

Doyle frowned, followed by his companion. "No on fights? I thought you vamps loved the pleasure of the combat."

"Normally a rousing cheerleader of that ethic," the vampire replied. "But lately, not so much. Just kill me, please."

"What, you asking us to dust you, now?" Cordelia queried.

"Dust, stake, slay, whatever phrase you feel comfortable with," the vampire replied. "Just, please, do it, I'm begging you. I can't live like any longer."

"If you're feeling that desperate, why don't you just wait for the sunrise?" Doyle asked, puzzled.

"Have you tried that?" The Vampire shot back. "Seen a vamp try it? Its not pretty, man, nor quick or painless. Burning at the stake would be preferable, or better still a burning stake put through the heart."

"Why do you wanna die so badly?" Cordelia asked.

"Haven't you heard about the new outfit that's after us?" The Vamp countered. "Black clothed commandos, with tazer guns?"

Cordelia and Doyle looked at him blankly.

"Doesn't matter, you soon will," he added. "Being captured by them is worse than the slayer, believe me."

"How can a vampire fear something more than the slayer?" Cordelia asked.

"Because at least the slayer just kills you," the vamp replied. "These guys, they take away the very ability for us to live. I was caught by them three weeks back. Somehow, I don't know how, I got out of their testing lab."

"Testing lab?" Doyle echoed, interrupting.

"Ain't no other phrase for it," the vampire added. "I was hungry, so I tried to feed on someone. But the second I got close, this pain lanced through my brain like a stake through the heart. I can't even hit anyone. I thought about trying the hospital, waiting for the donor run, but they got wise to that a long time ago. Anyway, I've told you all I know, now could you just stake me, please?"

"Pain?" Cordelia queried. "What sort of pain? And how is that possible?"

"Or forget it, I'll do it myself," the vampire said, grabbing a wooden implement off them and thrusting it straight through his heart.

As the remains slowly fell to the ground, Doyle turned to his companion. "I think we need to tell Buffy about this."
Cordelia nodded.

"He did it himself?" Buffy echoed, glancing at her soulmate, whose expression was equally mystified. "Why would a vamp wanna do that?"

"All he said was that these commando guys clothed in black caught him about three weeks ago," Cordelia recapped. "Then somehow, he escaped, and now everytime he tries to bite someone, he gets this pain lancing through his head."

"Commando guys? Well, that's a new one," Buffy remarked.

"Have you talked to Giles about them?" Angel asked.

"Yeah we swung by his and Jenny's on our way here," Doyle replied. "He hasn't a clue, other than that they're no demons that's for sure."

Angel glanced at Buffy who nodded. "We'll have to go and check that out."

True enough when their friends had left, Buffy and Angel gathered their patrol equipment together once more and patrolled the town, starting with Restfield and working through the rest of the graveyards until they hit upon the commandos three cemeteries later. Crouching down behind a convenient marble monument, they watched silently as a group of black clothed figures electrocuted one vampire before securing the beast from escaping their custody as they left the graveyard.

Giving them time to acquire a reasonable distant, the couple discreetly followed them until the commandos reached their headquarters, Lowell House on the campus of the university. Needless to say, they were stunned and they were not the first of the slayerettes to be so that night.

"What I don't get is how come I haven't seen these guys until now?" Buffy queried to the rest of the group after they had been summoned to her watcher's apartment. "I've lived here for three years, and these guys have managed to remain off my radar? What does that say about my skills as a slayer?"

"Nothing," Giles assured her. "These people are either new, or you haven't come across them before because this is the first time that you've been on their territory. Or rather they've crossed over to yours."

"So you're saying I've haven't noticed them before because they've stuck to the campus?" Buffy sought to confirm. "Well, that's a little comforting, I suppose. They're certainly not new though, Giles. From where me and Angel were watching this gig appeared to be well rehearsed and repeated frequently. It almost looked military."

"Makes sense," Willow remarked. "I mean, the Mayor knew, didn't he? And Snyder by the looks of things. They must have had some help before you arrived."

"The question is not why are they here, but what they are doing to the demons," Giles added. "From what Cordelia and Doyle reported, it sounds like they're treating them as nothing more than lab rats."

"That's inhuman," Angel uttered. "I know none of us are saints, but I don't think we deserve to be experimented on to the point of rendering our survival impossible."

"Angel's right," Xander agreed, surprising everyone. "We've come across enough demons in our
time to know that not all of them are bad. At least when you dust them, Buffy, they don't suffer."

"Agreed," Giles continued. "So what are we going to do about them?"

"What can we do?" Willow asked. "I don't see us suddenly being offered a job for them once we start college."

"No, we need an undercover operative," the watcher replied. "Someone they think they can trust, because he or she has the same military background."

"I'll do it," Xander offered.

"What?" Buffy, along with everyone else, looked at him with surprise.

"It's not like I don't still have that training from Halloween," Xander added. "I still remember most of that stuff, and Willow and Oz could hack me an in with their computer skills."

"It would be dangerous, Xand," Buffy pointed out. "We're in the dark here. And it could get even darker. You willing to take that sort of risk?"

"I am," her best friend replied.

"Then let's get started," Giles decided.

Back to Present day.....

"So," Buffy remarked as she reached for a stake, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't dust you right now."

From his position just in front of the entrance to the mansion, Spike affected his best charm.

"You'd miss me?"

Buffy smirked. "You really thought that one would work?"

Spike shrugged. "Thought it was worth a shot. What about Xander let me escape from that lab he found me in?"

"He let you escape because we asked him to," Angel informed him. "Not because we wanted to see you."

Spike growled in frustration, his patience and his hunger running thin. "Oh, damn it! look, I'm safe. I can't bite anyone. Willow, tell them what I did."

"You said you were gonna kill me, then Buffy," Willow remarked.

"Yes, bad," Spike agreed as he faced the slayer's glare, "but let's skip that part and get to the part where I couldn't bite you."

Willow nodded. "It's true. He had trouble performing."

"Yeah, well, it looks like they've done me for good," Spike added.

"What are you saying?" Buffy asked.

"I'm saying that Spike had a little trip to the vet and now he doesn't chase the other puppies
anymore," Spike replied. "I can't bite anything. I can't even hit people."

"So you haven't murdered anybody lately?" Buffy commented sarcastically, adding a fake bright smile to her face. "Let's be best pals."

"I've got information," Spike tried. "About the soldier boys you were fighting. Got the inside scoop. Come on, what have you got to be afraid of?"

Angel turned to his beloved. "What do you think?"

Buffy shrugged. "I'm willing to let him tell us what more he thinks he knows than Xander does. with certain conditions."

_________________________________________________________________________

Conditions included tying Spike to a chair before they begun a interrogation in the double height living room of the mansion on Crawford Street.


"You don't have any circulation," Buffy pointed out.

"Well, it pinches," Spike argued.

The slayer shrugged. "Get used to it. I have more important things to worry about."

Spike acquired an injured expression. "I came to you in friendship."

Buffy looked at him in disbelief.

"Well, alright, seething hatred," Spike admitted, "but I've got useful information, and I feel I'm being mistreated."

"So tell me everything you know," Buffy replied.

"I'm too hungry to remember everything," Spike protested.

"Then sit," Buffy replied, turning and walking to the open kitchen door. "How are things going in there?"

"Uh, how much butter goes in with these?" Anya asked.

"About half a stick and a quarter cup of brandy," Buffy replied.

"I wouldn't say no to a brandy," Spike remarked.

"Really, what else wouldn't you say no to?" Angel asked.

"A quarter cup of brandy and let it simmer," Buffy instructed before walking back into the double height living room which had become a temporary makeshift interrogation room, as none of them had decided yet whether to give Angel's grandchilde house room.

"Hey, when do I get fed?" Spike asked.
"After we've had thanksgiving dinner," Buffy informed him.

"You know what happens to vampires who don't get to feed?" Spike asked her.

Buffy turned to Angel. "I always wondered about that."

"Living skeletons, luv," Spike answered. "Like famine pictures from those dusty countries, only not half as funny."

"You can have gravy," Buffy allowed. "That has blood in it, right?"

Spike frowned. "Do you know what else has blood in it? Blood."

"Do I have to gag you?" Buffy asked him. "Because I am not gonna listen to you whine all the way through my dinner. It's gonna be a nice, quiet, civilised dinner."

"Civilised?" Spike echoed, scoffing. "Since when is Thanksgiving civilised? It's a celebration of destroying another race of human beings. All this namby-pamby boohooing about the bloody Indians makes me sick."

Buffy tried to inject. "Uh, the preferred term."

Spike cut her off. "You won. All right? You came in and you killed them and you took their land. That's what conquering nations do. It's what Caesar did, and he's not going around saying, 'I came, I conquered, I felt really bad about it.' The history of the world isn't people making friends. You had better weapons, and you massacred them. End of story. Eating a meal to celebrate each year it smacks of insulting the buggers."

"That's what I've been trying to say," Willow reminded her best friend.

Spike grinned at her. "Knew I could count on you, Red."

"Well, history aside," Buffy began, "thanksgiving to me is part of my childhood tradition, and I'm determined to enjoy tonight, whether you're here or not."

"I don't know why I bothered coming," Spike muttered.

"You'd prefer it back at the Initiative?" Xander asked him. "Because I can just as easily take you back there."

"Here," Joyce remarked as she walked in, handing the vampire a steaming mug with a straw. "Hot chocolate, with marshmallows."

"Thank you, Joyce," Spike remarked, taking a sip.

"Mom," Buffy groaned.

"Look, honey, tormenting him isn't going to make him co-operate," Joyce pointed out. "He'll just end up being more difficult. Besides, I'm not feeding him, am I?"

"True," Buffy agreed. "I need to go and supervise dinner."

"I'll join you," Xander added as he followed her through the dining room and into the large kitchen in the Crawford Mansion.

"So, I've think we can establish that the chip is inserted almost immediately after capture," Giles
mused from his place at the breakfast table. Scattered across the surface were notes from Xander's debriefing concerning a timetable as to when Spike was captured until his assisted escape the night before.

"Yeah, I still haven't found out exactly when they do that," Xander replied. "But I'm sure it involves Walsh and the labcoats, not us combat guys."

"Well, at least we can rule out the theory that they use some sort of weapon to do it," Giles decided. "And now with Spike, we have an ideal opportunity to test its limitations, if it has any, that is."

"Such as if it inhibits a vampire from attacking demons?" Buffy asked him.

"I still believe it has only one primary function," her watcher added. "To induce a Pavlovian pain response whenever the vampire comes into contact with living prey."

"I think that if they can create something which causes a vamp pain whenever he or she tries to bit someone, then they must be able to add other limits or allowances to it as well," Buffy argued. "What if the vamp finds someone unconscious, or dying, for example? Do we really think that the Initiative haven't prepared for that?"

"Buffy has a point," Xander agreed. "They put tracers in them after all. I'd be surprised if there wasn't anything else lurking within them."

Giles nodded before returning to the study the notes before him further. Silently he recalled the first time Xander had returned from the headquarters of the Initiative to give a briefing to the slayer and slayerettes. The young man had been disgusted at the sight of the experiments conducted on the vampires and demons, sickened to think that at one time he might have been indifferent to such a concept. The transformation from the boy Giles had first met to the man who stood before him now was remarkable.

"Such as?" He asked him now.

"I don't know, commands to modify their behaviour?" Xander suggested.

"You mean the chip could teach them not only that when you try to bite a human you get pain, but not to want to bite people at all?" Buffy sought to confirm.

"Yeah," Xander added. "They could even be turning them into soldiers or something, you know; cannon fodder."

"I don't which is worse," Giles murmured. "It seems the more we study the Initiative, the darker they become. Perhaps we should accelerate matters."

"You mean introduce them to Buffy sooner?" Angel queried. "How are we gonna explain that?"

"Hi, I gather you guys make vampires into harmless undead corpses," Buffy uttered a sarcastic tone. "'Oh, by the way, did I mention that I'm the vampire slayer?'" She shook her head. "No, we have to find an opening, else it all looks forced and false."

"They have to be able to trust her from the get go," Xander agreed. "Otherwise our groundwork during the summer is meaningless."

"You're right," Giles agreed. "I just don't like using the wait and see method on this occasion."
"Neither do I," Buffy replied. "But I don't think we have any other choice."

"Okay, change of subject," Angel announced after they had all taken a moment to gather their thoughts. "What are we doing with Spike? Aside from interrogating him."

"I think we'll have to keep an eye on him, even when we've got all we can out of him," Giles replied. "As much of an annoyance as he is, if we let him go, we run the risk of being discovered by the Initiative before we're ready for it."

"You think he would betray us?" Willow asked.

Angel nodded. "In heartbeat, if it's to his advantage. Spike does nothing selflessly." He paused, sighing at his demonic descendant. "The only reason he has turned to ask our help is for sanctuary and food."

"And board," Buffy added. "I don't think anyone in the vampire community will put him up."

"What about Harmony?" Cordelia asked. "Isn't she still around?"

"Last I heard from Willy, she's got herself an empowering manual," Buffy replied. "I don't think Spike will be able to win her over a third time, especially as she kicked him out before he went to see you, Will."

"So I guess we'll have to house him," Angel decided reluctantly.

"Thanks for volunteering us, honey," Buffy returned. "You really think we'll be able to move him someplace else?"

"We'll give him one of the guest bedrooms on the top floor."

"Okay," Buffy agreed. "But he's not getting a bed, not yet."

"So., you saw their faces but you can't describe them." Buffy concluded during the interrogation session the next day, after they removed the tracer from his chip with a magic potion, her irritation levels rising, while her tolerance for her guest decreased steadily. Already they had been forced to move their unwanted house guest into a guest ensuite bathroom on the third floor, complete with a television from the bedroom next door as his shouts during the night were loud enough to disturb her and Angel's sleep.

"Well, they were human," Spike confirmed. "Two eyes each, kind of in the middle."

"Uh huh," Buffy nodded. "And the lab?"

"Underground," Spike answered. "I came out through an air vent. I don't know exactly where. I'm done. Put the telly on."

"You've just told us nothing more than what Xander knows," Buffy remarked. "So no you are not done, not be a long shot."

Giles entered from the landing, carrying a mug with the motto 'kiss the librarian' written on the side, a novelty gift from him to Buffy and Angel when they moved in together.

"It's about time," Spike remarked. "Hope you got it warm enough."

The former watcher handed the mug to his slayer, who reluctantly placed it before the bleached
white blond vampire's mouth. Spike tilted his head to grab the straw, making a deliberate effort to irritate by sucking on the implement noisily.

"I don't know why you're so dainty all of a sudden," he commented between sucks as Buffy pulled an expression of disgust. "You've done this for Angel... or maybe you do it differently," he added, eyeing the scar on her neck.

Buffy pulled the mug away, leaving the straw sticking out of his mouth.

"Hey!" Spike cried. "Give it!"

"Okay, that's it," Buffy declared. "The invalid amnesiac routine is over. The kitchen is closed until you can tell me something useful about the commandos."

Spike affected a feared look. "I'm trying to remember. It was very traumatic."

The slayer put her hands to her hips. "How long are you going to pull this crap?"

"How long am I going to live once I tell you?" Spike countered.

Giles sighed and took his glasses off to clean. "Look, Spike, we have no intention of killing a harmless... uh, creature... but we have to know what's been done to you. We can't let you go until we're sure that you're... impotent,"

"Hey!" Spike interrupted, insulted.

"Sorry, poor choice of words," Giles apologised. "Until we're sure you're, you're..."

"Flaccid?" Buffy offered, grinning.

Spike glared at her. "You are one step away, missy."

The threat did not even cause her to blink. "Giles, help! He's going to scold me."

Annoyed at her sarcasm, Spike tried to free himself and grab her, but his chains were too secure for the attempt to look anything other than comical.

"You know what?" Buffy remarked. "I don't think you want us to let you go. Maybe we made it a little too comfy in here for ya."

"Comfy?" Spike echoed in disbelief. "I'm chained in a bathtub drinking pig's blood from a novelty mug. Doesn't rank huge in the Zagut's Guide."

"You want something nicer?" Buffy countered. She tilted her head to one side, exposing her neck to him. "Look at my poor neck?" she began in a seductive tone. "All bare and tender and exposed... all that blood just... pumping away..."

Giles groaned. "Oh, please."

Spike licked his lips. "Giles, make her stop."

The university professor ignored him and walked out into the bedroom, where Willow was studying a spell book. "If those two don't kill each other, I might lend a hand."

"What about a truth spell?" Willow suggested. "I'm not positive it would work on a vampire, but we could try. Make him fess up?"
"A truth spell, of course," Giles agreed, brightening. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"'Cause you had your hands full with the undead English Patient?" Willow offered, handing him the book for a consult.

Giles studied the incantation for a few minutes then nodded. "Yes. We'll have a go."

"Looks pretty simple," Willow added. "I'll stop by the magic shop tomorrow."

"Excellent," Giles declared.

"Alright. I'll be back in the morning with donuts and motherwort," Willow replied, before raising her voice to say farewell to her best friend. "Bye, Buffy!"

"Bye!" Buffy called out.

"How's it going?" Angel asked as he returned to the room.

"Buffy has been teasing him with her neck," Giles replied as he and Angel wandered into the bathroom.

"Don't worry, he's not getting it," Buffy assured her soulmate.

"I know, he'd have to get through me first, even if he could hurt you," Angel added.

"Hey, I'll have you know I can take you any time, mate," Spike declared.

"It would be interested to see if the chip works on half-vampires," Giles aloud.

"I'm game," Angel murmured with an almost Angelus quality.

"Half-Vampire?" Spike echoed. "No wonder this tastes off, unless you have been feeding off her, if that scar's anything to go by."

"FYI, that was to save his life before the summer," Buffy explained. "And this marks me as his, so fangs off."

"Oh, I never paid much attention to that vampire mark crap," Spike informed them. "Never was one to hold with traditions, me. Except when it came to killing slayers. Now Passions is on! Timmy's down the bloody well, and if you make me miss it, I'll..."

"You'll do what?" Giles queried. "Lick us to death?"

"I could make you have an accident with a carving knife," Spike remarked. "That'd give ya an open wound and then I'm sure this bugger in my head wouldn't go off."

"We better leave him be," Angel decided, positioning the cup so his grandchilde could drink from it without the mug falling to the floor. "Before he tries to test his theory."

"I suppose we shouldn't treat him so badly," Buffy allowed as they descended the stairs into the double height living room. "He did help me out when you lost your soul."

"Only to rescue Drusilla," Angel reminded her.

"True," Buffy conceded. "He does have that weird affinity with my Mom, though. She might be able to get something out of him."

"Willow suggested a truth spell," Giles revealed. "Which might work, although I am beginning to have my doubts as whether he does know anything more than Xander has found out. Short of learning what limits the chip inside him has, I don't know if he has anything useful to contribute."

"Aside from testing our patience and tolerance levels," Buffy added. "But what else could we do? We could hardly leave him there for the Initiative to interrogate. They might have learned about the slayer through him."

"How do we know that they don't know already?" Angel asked quietly.

Buffy stilled. "You're right," she whispered. "He's not the first vampire over a century old that they've captured and he certainly won't be the last."

"There's another thought which has just occurred to me as well," Giles said with a tone deadly softness, one he used whenever there was danger apparent. "What if that room called 314 which we have named our undercover operation with, hides a lab which is focused on the slayer?"

There was a long minute of silence which followed the airing of this thought, as the three adults considered the deadly consequences which could be behind it. What if their plan was destined to fail all along? What if the Initiative saw the slayer as a threat instead of an ally, which they had intended allowing them to believe, at least in the beginning. When they embarked on this idea of investigation the group of commandos which had caused a vampire to slay itself, information was all they had been interested in.

Who, what, why, where and when, were the words which begun the questions they needed answers to. But when Xander reported on what answers he had discovered, the dark nature of the knowledge ate away at them, forcing them to examining their moral codes, questioning whether what they did to demons was a better, kinder fate than that which the Initiative left them to. When they were forced to conclude that dusting was indeed an act of mercy, they vowed never to hand a demon or vampire over to the Initiative, even through force.

Until the incident with Veruca, they had kept that vow, believing, even then, that her actions justified theirs. Now, Buffy wondered, whether or not it was wise letting the Initiative keep everything they captured by themselves. True, Xander risked a great deal if they asked him to release all the captives, but was there any justification in letting them put chips inside vampires brain's which severely damaged their need to survive?

She turned to her watcher. "You were right, Giles, this wait and see plan is becoming less and less of a good idea. However, we don't have any choice. We just have to play it through, proceed how we originally decided to." she paused, before adding, "and if they do have something which they think can kill a slayer, I say let them try, because I'm not ready to die yet, not without one hell of a fight."

_The End_
_To Be Continued In_ WWP: RDH.
"It was a day like any other. Students attend classes, lectures dole out or request assignments, parents work and try not to worry about their kids. But while this student could see these normal everyday occurrences, she felt cut off from them. As they would continue, with or without her presence. She knew that something was wrong. What, she did not know.

It did not reveal itself until the last class of the day. She's sitting in class, when suddenly the change occurs. The other students, she can see them, but they can't see her. Time slows as her panic rises. She wonders what is happening to her, why today and what she did or did not do to cause this to occur. If it is happening to anyone else. She tries to attract their attention, even shouting, but no one, not even the professor, responds.

"She touches the desk, and then her books, and to her relief, they are still solid. She reaches into her bag and gets out a compact to see herself in a mirror. The clear piece of mirror stares back at her, a blank void of nothingness.

"A sense of despair comes over her, as she realises that no one else has noticed, no one else is experiencing this. She looks up at the clock above the blackboard, out a vain sense of trying to capture the last minute of her fading existence,... and that's when the vision ends."

Some moments of silence met the conclusion of Doyle's narration, as the rest of those present digested the information just received. The slayerettes had convened at Giles and Jenny's apartment after school, having received a message from Cordelia that Doyle had received a vision from the Powers that Be. After they all arrived at the apartment, the half-Bracken was asked to recall the vision as much as he possibly could, despite the pain his human half endured as a after-effect of the vision. For the first time since Doyle's arrival in Sunnydale, he had received a vision which was unrelated to anything else they were investigating. A cry for help on behalf of a stranger.

"Could you describe her?" Angel asked then, a sketchbook resting upon his lap, a pencil in his hand, poised for drawing.

Doyle nodded. "She has dark blond hair, brown eyes. A freshman I believe, the books she has are all titled Introduction to, etc."

"Did you see the time or the date?" Questioned the slayer.

"Saw the date and time. That was weird. When she looks up at the clock, it changes to one of those which say the date as well." Doyle paused and closed his eyes, calling back the vision in his mind, focusing on the last few seconds, concentrating on the clock, attempting to length the glimpse he received so he could define the numbers. "About thirty-seven hours from now," he recalled, opening his eyes in shock as he realised.

"You can see her books, so can you get her name?" Willow asked from her place by the laptop, which she had opened up the moment she and Oz arrived, so if there was website which could prove useful to providing a key to the vision, it would be immediately available.
Doyle closed his eyes again, his mind focusing this time on the personal belongings of the girl, searching for the registration card which every pupil was required to carry. "Its Tara; T A R A..... McClaye. Clay with an e. Scottish prefix."

"Thanks," Oz acknowledged for his girlfriend who accessed the database of Sunnydale UCA, searching for the personnel files belonging to that name.

Giles and Jenny's apartment settled into silence for a while, broken only by the clicking of mouse buttons and keyboard, and the scratching of pencil on paper, as Angel composed the sketch of the girl, to Doyle's description. His talent for art, usually something which his demon used to torment his victims, was now used a resource for his soul as well, a force for good, suitable revenge on the demon which his soul contained within his body. After ten minutes Angel turned round his sketchbook and showed it to Doyle.

The Irish Lit Professor nodded. "Yeah, that's her."

Angel turned the pad back around so he could stare at the finished article without the critical artist.

"She looks familiar," he remarked thoughtfully.

"Well, we have thirty-seven hours to save a girl from turning invisible," Buffy grimly announced, startling those who were unfamiliar with the first case of invisibility which came to Sunnydale, four years ago.

"Invisible?" Doyle queried.

"About four years ago we had to stop an invisible girl from terrorising the High school," Buffy began. "Marcie Ross was her name. She wanted to be popular, one of the Cordettes, but she was frozen out for trying to hard, and the loneliness turned upon her, using the hellmouth to make her invisible. She decided to go after Cordelia in revenge, and anyone else who stood in her way."

"When was that?" Angel asked her, puzzled at never having heard this story, despite knowing Buffy, her watcher and her friends back then.

"When you pulled myself, Xander and Willow out of the High school basement before we succumbed to the effects of suffocation," Giles reminded him.

"Marcie lured us down there with her music," Xander replied. "She was a flautist, and she recorded a sample of her playing and hid it in the basement. When we went down there to find her, she locked the door and sabotaged the gas pipes."

"How do you stop a girl from becoming invisible?" Inquired Doyle.

"By becoming her friend," Buffy answered. "The feeling of Invisibility is caused by loneliness. The hellmouth uses the suffering the victim endures as a weapon to turn her into a human ghost demon, essentially erasing them from the plane of existence. By becoming her friend, the loneliness should disappear, preventing the victim from turning invisible."

"What happened to that girl who was already invisible, Marcie Ross?" Doyle asked.

"Buffy found Marcie's yearbook, in which she had vandalised my picture," Cordelia said. "She had also took a baseball bat to my boyfriend, and killed a teacher I asked for help from, making it look like a suicide. When Buffy let me know what happening and protected me, she kidnapped the two us and threatened to kill me. We talked her down a little, but then these two guys claiming to be from the FBI, took her away."
"We later discovered that they weren't Federal agents," Willow added from her spot by the laptop. "There was no record of them on the FBI database. We never heard from Marcie or those guys who took her away again."

"And considering what we've found out about the Initiative so far," Buffy remarked, "I dread to think what they have Marcie doing. I'd rather not lose another person to them. Not on my watch."

"Found her," Oz announced at that moment as he leaned over Willow to click the mouse and bring up the entry. "Tara McClaye. Born in....."

"We don't need to know personal," Buffy interrupted him. "Only her classes and clubs. We only come to know about her fully from her, as she becomes our friend."

"Good point," Oz agreed as he scrolled down to that part of the page. "Right, she has," he paused as he read the first subject. "Art History 106,"

Angel gasped in shock, then Oz continued. "And your English Lit class, Buffy and Cordy."

"Oh god," Buffy murmured, as her soulmate reached into his bag, checked his class roster and confirmed his own part guilt.

"And she's a member of the wiccan club," Oz added.

Guilty silence followed, as she each member of the scooby gang mentioned dwelt on their memories, searching for anything that would lessen the regret of not noticing the innocent sooner, in vain. Hindsight and excuses were useless to the situation, as well as of purely selfish origin. Inwardly all of them resolved to never be so self-involved again.

"Is there a photo, Oz?" Jenny asked, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," Oz answered, clicking the zoom link. The scooby gang clustered around the laptop, the guilt each party was feeling the most prominent, as they tried to see if the photo helped jog their memories.

As their surrogate father realised, however, the photo did nothing. Taking off his glasses for a clean, he spoke. "It is in the past, there is nothing you can do to change that. You can help her in the present. Who will cross with her first?"

"Will," Oz answered. "This afternoon."

"Then, Willow, you can make the first move," Giles continued, "followed by Angel in his class tomorrow, then Buffy and Cordelia in English Literature after recess. Sooner if you meet Angel after class as usual. We reconvene back here tomorrow evening for a progress report. Remember, we have to act fast, before this girl is lost forever."

After they returned to the mansion, Angel took out and set up his own laptop, and began scanning for the innocent amongst his files, where he had kept records of every student he taught, their grades and progress in Art History. After a few moments, he found her.

Buffy leaned over his shoulder from behind his seat as together they read her current grade predictions and assignment marks.

"Wow, these are good," she commented.
"I know," Angel uttered softly. "Why can't I remember her?"

Buffy bent her neck a little and kissed his cheek. "Angel, you teach freshman, sophomore, seniors and grad students. You cannot be expected to remember everyone you teach, no matter how intelligent they are." she paused to wrap her arms around his neck, her fingers caressing the upper plane of his chest through his clothes, soothing away his brooding concern over his neglect of a pupil. "Even being a chosen warrior. We hold ourselves to a higher standard, but we're not prophetic or perfect."

He closed the laptop down, pushed it away across the table, then pulled at her arms until she came to stand beside him, whereupon he pulled her down into his lap. "You are."

"You're biased," was all she could say before he kissed her.

The union rapidly turned into a fully fledged makeout session as the chosen warriors surrendered to their passionate desire for each other. The slayer wrapped her arms around his neck once more, arching her back as their tongues duelled.

In barely a moment, the makeout turned into something deeper, as Angel's lips slipped to her neck, briefly worshipping the small scar she still carried from his fangs when she offered her blood to save his life last summer, before moving down to small expanse of soft flesh which lay before her rib cage. His hands wondered down the limits of her clothes, pressing the material against her skin, the friction of smooth cotton mesh slowly waking her arousal. He gently lifted her up on the table, his body following her movements to loom above her, not separating from her for a second. Together they laid down, Buffy's hands moving underneath his shirt at the small of his back, while his lips continued to seek out and worship what patches of bare skin he could find.

The buttons of her blouse were almost all undone when the moment was ruined, as their vampire and slayer danger senses came alive and told them that they were no longer alone in the dining room. In unison they looked away from each other in the direction of the source, who was casually leaning against the wall which marked the threshold of the room from the double height living and hall area of mansion, his eyes watching them avidly.

"Please, continue," Spike requested with a leering grin barely hidden upon his face.

Neither of the couple obeyed, rapidly making themselves decent instead, pulling down clothes, fastening buttons, adjusting their postures to upright, looking outraged and annoyed with their house guest.

"Willow called," Spike continued, walking further into the room, ignoring the glares he was receiving from the slayer and his grandsire. "She said that her and Tara established first names basis and their mutual distaste of the other members of the wiccan club, on account of them only being interested in making cakes and asserting their independence. She said and I quote that the next move is Angel's." He paused, then asked, "who's Tara?"

"Just an innocent we have to save," Buffy replied, hoping from her tone of affected indifference that Spike would see no further interest in it.

She was wrong. "What if she doesn't want to be saved?" He asked.

"From becoming invisible?" Buffy countered.

"How do you do that?" Spike asked, before answering the question himself. "No, wait, let me guess. You become her friend." He laughed. Loudly.
Usually, she would make a point of never rising to any baited comment from Spike, who seemed to be intent on causing as much annoyance as possible while he was a guest of their protection from the Initiative, but frustration from having their privacy disturbed was at present overwhelming that good sense. "What's so amusing about that?"

"First; you lot are the most dysfunctional group I have ever known," Spike replied. "Second; that's the most selfish act I've ever heard."

Now Buffy was truly mystified. "Selfish?" She echoed. "How is becoming someone's friend selfish?"

"Because you're doing it only because she appeared in a vision as an innocent to save. Not because of who she is." Spike paused to let that point register home, then added, "you're not bothered about her at all. She's like one of those people who you rescue from us, only you can't let her disappear into the night nursing nothing more than a fang scar. If you succeed, she'll be part of your group forever. And when she finds out why you became her friends, she'll be incredibly hurt."

When Buffy and Angel first heard Spike's words, they brushed them aside, as their distrust of him made them so inclined. But as the hours passed by, the words began to haunt them, causing them to think, and to doubt. A night of sleep furthered this, leaving Angel very thoughtful during what happened to be his first class of the day; Art History; Freshman.

He had watched his students enter the room, casting his eyes over each one of them, trying to see how long it took for his mind and memory to recall their name, their aptitude for the subject, whether or not they had chosen the course to fulfill a requirement or out of a general interest in the subject matter, and their general character during class. To his relief, most of the names came easily enough, along with a few of their grades.

But the last two caused more thought than the first. And though he had only been teaching them for a few months and he remembered Buffy's words the night before, guilt rose up inside him for not putting enough of himself into the job of college professor. Of not giving the students his all, as he had promised Sunnydale's UCA board during his interview when they offered him the post. Until last night he had considered himself to be one of the more caring professors, whom was well liked and respected by his students, who despite his semi-scandalous relationship with a student, was someone that those who he taught could confide in, and were not afraid of. Now he felt that he had betrayed that trust.

Then she entered, and he was forced to push the emotion to the back of his mind, and focus on the mission.

He watched her follow the other students in, noticing that she walked alone and talked to no one, taking her seat in a manner which was suggestive of someone who was scared of being noticed, and had endured several bad experiences when she was, or when she tried to draw attention to herself. Angel could not help but feel an empathy with her, as he remembered a time when he had felt just such an outsider, though for very different reasons entirely of his own making. He remembered the fierce desire he felt to belong, and the pain which the loneliness caused, as he believed every time that no one would accept him, not when they saw the demonic face his soul tried so hard to hide. How long it had taken him to trust his soulmate and her friends with himself, for fear that they would reject him whenever he revealed a part of his demonic past.

The lecture hall settled into silence as everyone took their seats and got out their notepads and source books. Angel gathered himself and turned to place a picture on the white board behind him, before beginning the lesson.
"Good morning," he uttered, turning to face them. "What, on first glance, without attention to the style or artist, can you tell me about this painting?" He asked, indicating the picture on the board with his hand.

He waited for the raised hands, and noticed that Tara's came up with them. Not wishing to appear obvious, he prompted someone else first. "Hyatt."

"It's of two women?"

All right, that one had clearly chosen the subject to fulfil a course requirement. Angel waited for the few bursts of laughter to die down, then prompted the next student. "Tara."

She seemed surprised to be noticed, which instantly caused another layer of guilt in Angel's mind, and when she spoke, it was with a nervous stammer. "F-f-from their positions; grief."

Angel flashed his smile and nodded in appreciation. "Yes, well noted," he remarked. A lot of hands dropped and he knew it was time for another prompt. "Okay, any studying historians here?" A few hands were raised, including Tara's. "Who can tell me which era their costumes are?" One or two hands dropped, but not Tara's. Still he had to pick someone else. "Anne."

"They're Tudor."

"Precisely. Now, note the rich colours, the use of gold. Putting these points together, the grief, the costumes, the richness, can any of you identify the main woman?"

There was a long pause, which he had expected, for the subject was not American. A few hands then cautiously came up, Tara's among them. Angel knew he had to choose someone else though. "Chris."

"Anne Boleyn?"

"Yes, Anne Boleyn in the Tower, is the title of the this painting," Angel confirmed. "She was a lady in waiting at Henry VIII's court, until she caught the king's eye. She was the woman he made the break with Rome for, in order to divorce his first wife. However, though giving birth to the future Elizabeth I, she could not provide Henry with a son and heir, and she was accused of multiple accounts of adultery, including incest with her brother, and executed in 1536."

He paused, before reverting back to his subject. "Now, let us consider logic here. Anne Boleyn was sent to the Tower of London before her execution, with only a few trusted female attendants allowed to wait on her at the end, the others before them being spies for the king, as his ministers assembled the evidence which was to condemn her to death.

"Paintings required official court permission, and a long series of sittings by the subject, as the artist was required to convey not just the features of the person they were painting, but any symbolism which would tell others who that person was, their beliefs and their position of importance to history. Do you think Henry VIII would have allowed such a picture to be painted, while he was destroying all displays of her badge and devices? No. So, now returning to style, when do you think this portrait was accomplished?"

Some hands were raised. Angel picked her out again. "Tara."

"In the Romanticism, by the style," she answered, with a little less nerves.

"Yes; 1835, to be exact. Which brings us to the main object of this lesson. Perception. Clearly, by the date of this painting, you can tell that the painter was not alive when this event occurred."

Unless he was a vampire, which Angel highly doubted. "This is further proved by the subject and
the setting. The artist has relied on his imagination, your imagination, and your knowledge of who Anne Boleyn is, and her fate. History has taught us her legend well, and the debate over her innocence or guilt still resides today. Perception is a very powerful but also very vulnerable concept. It can be manipulated and used to someone's own advantage. But if one applies logic and knowledge, it can also be overcome, though its impressions may stay imprinted on your mind. Edouard Gibot knew all of this when he did the painting.

"As did Paul Delaroche," he added, sticking another picture up, "when he did this; The Execution of Lady Jane Grey. As you can see the background show them to be inside, when the actual event took place on Tower Green, outside the Tower of London. The artist has focused on the romance surrounding the girl's story, presuming her innocence through her youth. She was only nineteen when she was executed, a fate her cousin, Mary I was forced to use, after the girl's father tried to raise a rebellion in her name.

"Historians know now that Jane was a devoutly religious Protestant, determined to save England from a return to the church of Rome. Even when she was condemned to death, her relatives and friends ensured that her letters describing her beliefs were published, so those who shared her faith viewed her as a martyr. Yet, the image of this young girl, struggling to find the block, remains a strong impression. Victorians focused on the romantic tragedy of the girl, even ignoring the records of letters written by her which did not tally with their impression of the nine days queen. Perception, in the end, is always our first memory."

Perfectly timed, the bell rang at the end of this moment. Angel placed the pile of assignments at the end of his desk. "You can collect your last assignments on your way out," he remarked.

The first students came up, and Angel having remembered some of them, quietly congratulated them on their work, or advised some to try harder. He glanced up as the doors of the lecture room swung open, and saw Buffy, Willow and Cordelia step into the room. English Lit was after the short morning recess which followed this class.

Angel turned back to the room and relocated Tara. She had hung towards the back once more, not wanting to draw negative attention to herself by appearing too eager, and he waited patiently for her to reach the desk and collect her paper before talking to her.

"Good work, Tara," he said, just as Buffy, Willow and Cordelia moved through the students towards the desk. "You made some very salient points," he added truthfully, for she was a very good student, someone who had a real talent for the subject as he had only just discovered.

"Hey Angel," a voice spoke at that moment, causing an instant smile to his face, despite him knowing that this time she had not just come to see him.

"Hey," he replied, before leaning across the desk to kiss her.

Curiosity. It was one of the things they could count on. From the moment it had become known that the new professor of Art History was dating a student, the relationship had been a source of great curiosity to the rest of the university populous.

And Tara was no exception. She was prepared to go as soon as Professor O'Connor had looked up to the source of the new voice, but witnessing him answer to a different name and then the kiss, she realised that she was watching the most gossiped about couple on campus, and stayed to see if what she had heard was true.

Due to time, and their own scruples to be discreet on campus, the kiss was short, but no less as intense. Their lips touched in an experienced way, conveying to witnesses how well, how
intimately, they knew each other. And as they parted, their eyes held each other's gaze for a long time.

"Hey Tara," Willow then uttered, and the spell was broken.

"This feels wrong now."

The scooby gang all turned to look upon the slayer, the author of those words, but none made any objection. All had met Tara now, for after the English Lit class spent with Buffy and Cordelia, she had accompanied them back to Giles and Jenny's apartment, where the rest of them by degrees had gathered, thus meeting the innocent they had to save. As they involved her in their conversations, inquired gently after her thoughts, feelings and opinions, they realised what a sweet, kind girl she was, just terribly shy.

"I told ya," Spike said, breaking the silence, having also met her, when he came over to watch Passions, because Buffy had yet to persuade Angel of the merits of getting a TV.

"You did," Buffy agreed, much to his surprise, "and you were right. Tara's a sweet person. Its wrong to become her friend just because we have to save her. It should be on her own merits."

"What do we do then?" Anya asked. "Disregard her? After going to all the trouble of seeking her out?"

"No," Willow answered, "that would hurt her just as easily. It could even accelerate the invisibility. Whatever our motives were we're committed now. And its not as if she won't be a gain. She has a knowledge, possibly some experience in magic, judging by the reaction she had to the wiccan books."

"Somehow," Buffy uttered, "that doesn't seem right either. Our motives for keeping her as a friend should not be because she has, or seems to have a knowledge of magic. Supernatural aptitude should not be a requirement to join our group." She paused to emphasise her point. "It should be because of her character, nothing more."

"Then we just make that our motive from now on," Anya decided. "As Willow said, we're committed now. There's no point in quibbling over the details."

"We see your point," Xander said from his seat next to her, "but that doesn't atone the first ones for us."

Anya glanced at the clock on the desk, which had been set on a countdown since the vision ended. "You have time, not much but some, to make amends."

"Make amends for what?" A strange but familiar voice asked.

The scooby gang looked up from the meeting to the front door, now open, and stared in surprise at their visitor.

"Mr Giles, you should really lock your door," Wesley Wyndam-Pryce added as he now entered the apartment.

"Wesley," Buffy remarked. "Where did you spring from?"

"Alabama," Wesley replied, before taking a photo out of his pocket. He held it up for them all to see. "Any of you seen this girl?"
The scooby gang stared at the photograph, noted that it was Tara, and chose to play dumb, saying "no," variously after one another.

"Really?" Wesley queried, sceptical. "Because this shot is on a page at the University of Sunnydale database of students. A page which the telephone line of this apartment clicked on to. I know because I set up a trace so I could track down anyone who looked up the name of Tara McClaye."

"Why?" Buffy had to ask.

"Because she has been missing from her home for over four months."

That was one thing none of them were expecting.

"And why should that concern you?" Jenny asked. "I thought, we all thought, you had returned to the Watcher's Council."

"The Council were not pleased with my actions concerning Faith," Wesley replied shortly, "and requested that I leave their service. So I set up as a sort of rogue demon hunter."

There was a short, rapidly muffled burst of laughter at that moment, as the gang recalled his ability, or rather lack there of, at killing demons. Then the slayer took charge.

"I'm sorry, Wes, but none of us have ever seen that picture before. Are you sure you traced it right?"

"Very sure," Wesley answered. "Because I checked the database afterwards and found out that she is in a number of your classes. Now, will you all stop evading me and tell me how I can find her."

"Why should we?" Cordelia asked.

"Because her family miss her very much and want her back."

"I highly doubt that," a voice said behind him, making them all jump, "as they won't pick up the phone and talk when I call them."

Wesley stepped back from in front of the door, and Tara walked inside, up to the group. "What is going on?" She asked.

There was a nervous moment of silence as the gang tried to decide how to answer, attempting to think of the most tactful words with which to reply, ones which might not hurt Tara's feelings and somehow justify their actions. Then Spike saved them the trouble.

"Its like this, luv," he began. "Doyle here had a vision of you turning invisible. Being a group who are charged with saving the world and slaying the dragon so to speak, they had to try and stop it by becoming your friend. So they played dumb in front of this guy who's trying to trace ya."

Tara brought her hands to her face, her fingers brushing away the tears which slid down her cheeks, her eyes blinking in an effort to control the grief she felt. When she spoke, it was with a half sorrowful voice. "You all b-b-became my friend just to s-s-stop me from t-t-turning invisible?"

Buffy stood up and faced her. "In the beginning, yes," she answered honestly. "And it seemed a good intention, at the time. But then we got to know you and we realised what a great person you are, and we began to feel guilty." She paused to meet Tara's eyes. "We know its terrible, but we're asking for a second chance."
There was a long pause, as Tara looked at every one of them. She returned to Buffy, still in thought, when the silence was broken by a loud buzzing noise. They all turned, to see that the alarm clock was ringing.

"Time's up," said Tara, before glancing at herself. "I guess I'm not invisible." She looked up at Buffy.

The slayer held out her hand. "My name is Buffy Summers. And I'm the vampire slayer," she began. "Can we start afresh?"

Tara looked from the outstretched hand, to her face, then placed her hand in the former, and shook it. "And I'm Tara McClaye. Nice to meet you."

"Same here. Welcome to the scooby gang."

Night came on and found slayerettes at the Bronze, explaining to Tara what a slayer was, vampires, demons and the hellmouth, and what being a member of the scooby gang meant, among other things.

"So," Willow remarked to Wes, who had joined them and was sitting next to her, "what are going to do now?"

"That's up to Tara," Wesley said, meeting her eyes. "Do you want me to tell your family I've found you?"

"No," Tara replied. "I'll tell them myself. I meant to tell them I changed university choices ages ago."

"Why did you run from them in the first place?" Buffy asked.

"They didn't like me having independence from them," Tara replied. "They tried to control my friends, every aspect of my life. They couldn't understand that I needed to find my own path. I thought the distance would allow me space to grow, while letting them realise that this would help me."

"So, you're a rogue demon hunter now," Xander said to Wes.

"Yes," Wesley replied.

"How come you were looking for Tara then?" Cordelia asked.

"Rogue demon hunter is mostly freelance, and pays very little. I did detective work on the side in order to make ends meet," Wes replied after a while. "I think I might set up a base here now. Help you guys out."

"You could offer Spike a job," Buffy suggested. "Keep him occupied."

"Rogue demon hunter and demon," Wesley mused, with a significant look at Tara, unnoticed by all save her. "That sounds worth investigating."

**Note:** The paintings of *Anne Boleyn in the Tower*, by Edouard Gibot (c.1835) and *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, by Paul Delaroche (c. 1834) (1797-1856), can be viewed by clicking [here](#).
The End.
To Be Continued In....
Hush.
Author's Note: All conversation marked with ‘ ’ instead of " " (except for those marked "" "", which indicate missed letters due to slang/dialect) are not spoken, just written on the message boards, projector, etc. Some dialogue was taken from the episode, but a few scenes have been cut out due to modifications of the plot- in other words, no B/R kissing! Enjoy.

Hush.

"So this is what it is. Talking about communication, talking about language. Not the same thing. It's about the way a child can recognise and produce phonemes that don't occur in its native language. It's about inspiration, not the idea but the moment before the idea when it's total, when it blossoms in your mind and connects to everything, before the coherent thought that gives it shape, that locks it in and cuts it off from the universal. When you can articulate it, it becomes smaller. It's about thoughts and experiences that we don't have a word for." Professor Walsh paused, then added, "a demonstration. Buffy Summers, come on down to the front here."

Buffy was surprised at being chosen, and came warily down as a result.

Professor Walsh continued. "A typical college girl, one assumes." She turned to Buffy. "Lie down on my desk," she commanded.

It was about at this moment, that Buffy realised she was dreaming, for as strange as Professor Walsh was, she was sure that she would never be asked to do this in the real world. At least, she was half sure. Nevertheless, she played along. "What?"

"Go ahead, you're perfectly safe," Walsh tried to assure her.

But failed. The slayer cautiously obliged, clasping the edge of the desk with her hands, using her upper body strength to lift herself up on to the flat wooden surface, before she rested herself on her elbows, prepared to jump off if this led to a scene which she might have to fight her way out of.

Walsh turned to her TA. "Riley, if you could oblige."

"A demonstration, right," the TA muttered.

"Be a good boy." Walsh cautioned him. She turned to the rest of the class. "A kiss is just a kiss as the saying goes. The rest comes from you."

The TA walked up to her, while Buffy was wishing for herself to wake up. This was not the sort of dream she wanted to be having, and Riley was the last person she wanted to dream about kissing.

Suddenly, Angel materialised in front of Riley, making her breathe a sigh of relief. She watched him come up to her, her body relaxing to the handsome sight of soulmate.

"I'm so glad you appeared," she said, "I was afraid this would turn into a nightmare."

Angel looked at her mysteriously, reminding her of the time when they first knew each other, before she discovered that he was a vampire, albeit a souled one. "Don't be so sure. When I kiss you, it'll make the sun go down."
Buffy did not wonder at the words, leaving that reflection till later. If this dream turned out to be what she thought it was; a prophetic slayer related one, she had to stay alert for every detail and follow it through, leaving the symbolism to defined by Giles and the slayerettes, as well as herself and her angel later.

The class watched as their lips touched. For a moment they were nervous, aware of the watching eyes of freshmen and professor upon them, then desire and passion conspired together so that they forgot and involved themselves wholeheartedly in the kiss.

When they came apart, true to her beloved's words, it was darkness all around, as the lecture room lights turned off, and night sky streamed through the windows which ringed the top of the room, below the ceiling.

Buffy sat up and slid down from the desk. As she stood upon the floor, a crossbow appeared in her hands, pointed directly at Riley; the only member of the class to remain. Professor Walsh, all the other students, had disappeared, leaving the three of them alone in the lecture hall. She glanced at him, noting the taser gun in his hands, the nozzle pointed at her, his finger on the trigger, poised as if about to fire, then he disappeared.

She turned back to Angel, who asked her, "do you hear that?"

Buffy was about to reply in the negative, when suddenly she did begin to hear something. A faint humming, almost chanting, echoing into the lecture hall, from outside in the corridors of the building.

She left the lecture hall, entered the corridor and walked towards the sound. Yes, it was definitely chanting. A little girl, no more than ten years old, blond hair and fair features, attired in a pink red dress, was standing in front of the entrance to the lecture halls, chanting a rhyme over and over in a singsong tone of voice. The tune resembled the melody to other nursery rhymes, like ring a ring of roses. In her hands she held a small, ornate wooden box, the kind used to carry an item of jewelry, or the once richly rare commodity of tea leaves.

"Can't even shout, can't even cry, the gentlemen are coming by. Looking in windows, knocking on doors; they need to take seven, and they might take yours. Can't call to Mom can't say a word. You're gonna die screaming but you won't be heard."

The rhyme came to an end, and Buffy felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned round, expecting Angel, only to find a demon in a business suit. It's hideous, skeleton thin face grinned maniacally down at her, its long narrow nose and dark penetrating eyes all silently conspiring to rise the level of fear his being delivered.

It was then that she woke up.

"So," Professor Walsh said as the slayer opened her eyes, blinking as she adjusted her pupils to the daylight and the somewhat comforting sight of her lecture hall, "I'll see you all Monday for a final review session."

The bell rang and Buffy closed her books and got up, trying for all the world to look like she had not just slept through class.

"Man," Willow remarked as they walked out together, "that was an exciting class, huh?"
"Oh, yeah," Buffy tried to answer convincingly.

Willow continued. "And the last twenty minutes was a revelation. She just laid out everything we need to know for the final exam. I'd hate to have missed that."

Her best friend groaned as she realised the game was up. "Just tell me I didn't snore."

Willow shook her head. "Very discreet, minimal drool. So were you dreaming?"

Buffy nodded. "Yeah, it was kind of intense."

"Intense, really?" Riley asked, coming up from behind them. "'Cause you seemed so peaceful."

Buffy rapidly went to change the subject, not wanting anyone who wasn't a slayerette to overhear the details of her dream. "Of course it was only for a moment."

"Right," Riley replied, not in the least dissuaded. "So this dream, can you tell me about it? As a Psych Major I'm qualified to go 'hmmm.'"

"I don't really remember it," Buffy replied.

"Well, did I appear at all in this dream?" Riley asked, still not discouraged.

Buffy was about to reply with a lie, when she was saved the trouble as her soulmate appeared in front of her. "Hey."

"Hey," Angel replied. "You were dreaming?"

Buffy smiled at him. "Yeah."

"Was I in it?" He asked.

"There might have been a cameo," she replied, as he put his arm around her.

"Is that right?" Riley muttered, disappointed.

"Maybe more like a featured role," Buffy elaborated as she rested her head on Angel's shoulder.

"Tell me more," Angel beseeched as they moved away from Riley.

Buffy kept silent until they had exited the lecture halls, then began. "It was a prophetic dream. Had this weird monster in that I've never seen before."

"So are we making a call to Giles before we have lunch then?" Angel asked.

"'fraid so," she replied. "Have you got your sketch book?"

"Right here." Angel patted his laptop bag.

"Then let's go."

"Can't even shout, can't even cry, the gentlemen are coming by." Giles paused as he considered it in his mind. "And the girl was carrying a box."

"Yeah," Buffy replied. "You heard it before?"
"It sounds vaguely familiar," Giles said thoughtfully. "You're sure it's nothing you heard when you were a child?"

"Complete with scary demons?" Buffy countered.

"Right. Well it could definitely be one of your prophetic dreams or it could just be the eternal mystery that is your brain. But I'll check it out and let you know if I find something."

"Thanks, Giles," Buffy remarked before ending the call. She walked into the kitchen of the Mansion on Crawford Street to find Spike searching the cupboards. "Spike, have you heard of a group called the gentlemen?"

Spike paused and turned round. "Group of what?"

"The gentlemen."

Spike shrugged. "Dunno."

"You certain?" Buffy persisted.

"No." He paused. "We're out of Wheetabix."

Angel walked into the room, sketch book in hand. "We are out of Wheetabix. because you ate it all. Again."

Spike shrugged. "Get some more."

"I thought vampires, half human ones aside, were supposed to eat blood," Buffy remarked.

"Yeah, well sometimes I like to crumble up the Wheetabix, in the blood; give it a little texture," Spike revealed with a grin.

Buffy groaned. "Since the picture you just painted means I will never touch food of any kind again you'll just have to pick it up yourself."

"Sissy," Spike muttered as he walked out of the room.

The chosen one turned to Angel, who held out the sketch book before her, having finished his sketch of the demon, who seemed to bear a resemblance to the demon der Kinderstood. "Is this him?"

Buffy took the A4 pad for a closer inspection. "I think so. Freaked me right out." She handed it back.

Angel carefully tore the page out. "I'll fax this over to Giles, and then we better get back to the campus."

The afternoon was one like any other. Lectures were delivered, pupils listened—without falling asleep, at least in most cases, —assignments were given out, and delivered in.

Slayerettes completed the day in the manner which had become the norm ever since they began attending Sunnydale University. A patrol around the town, with chosen areas i.e. graveyards; checking for vampires and demons when darkness fell, then returning to their perspective homes.

Their Watcher paced the floor of his apartment, analysing the rhyme and the picture, until his wife
arrived home from her last class, whereupon he quietly laid it down on the desk and proceeded to make their dinner.

No vampires bothered the Slayer's patrol and as the clock struck the first hour of the next day, she was asleep in the arms of her boyfriend.

As the night was quiet, the chimes of the clock tower could be heard as they sounded one o'clock. But all was not well. For in the clock tower a wooden box lay on a wooden table; the same wooden box which the slayer had seen in her dream.

A bony, ghostly pale, white hand reached out from the darkness and opened it.

Outside, the people of the town slept on, opening their mouths in their sleep, letting a pale mist escape from their bodies.

Pale mist drifted into the ornate wooden box, which was then closed by the same bony hand that had opened it.

A face emerged from the darkness. Shrunken, pale, ghostly skin, with deep set eyes, and bones outlined, it matched exactly the drawing by Angel.

Can't even shout, can't even cry.

The Gentlemen are coming by.

Morning came to Sunnydale, causing all citizens to wake from their sleep. As usual they opened their eyes, checked the time, sat up, and climbed out of bed.

The slayer opened her eyes and turned to her soulmate, to find his eyes upon her. She smiled in greeting, and then opened her mouth.

Only for nothing to come out.

Concerned, Angel tried to speak too. But when nothing came out of him either, they rapidly got up and rushed to get dress.

Within minutes they were in the car, Spike cowering in the back from the fatal glare of the sun, on their way to Oakpark Street.

They were among the first to arrive, walking into apartment 523B without so much as a knock. Spike was the first to enter, as he rushed out of the sunlight, dodging Giles as he came down from the bedroom.

Giles watched him sit down, then turned to hug Buffy in silent greeting. When they parted, the slayer walked to his desk and pointed to the faxed drawing, and then the notebook where he had copied the rhyme.

Understanding her query, Giles shook his head.

Wesley walked in, followed closely by Willow, Cordelia, Anya, and Tara, with Doyle bringing up the rear. He waved a hello at Giles then walked to the television set and switched it on.

"Big news item from Sunnydale California," the anchorman was heard to say as the picture came into life. "Apparently the entire town has been quarantined due to an epidemic of, as strange at this may sound, Laryngitis. It seems the town has been rendered unable to speak. There's no word yet
what might have caused this, or what other effects might be seen from this epidemic. Local authorities has issued a statement, a written statement, I should say, blaming recent flu vaccinations. A few sceptics call it a city wide hoax. In the meanwhile Sunnydale has effectively shut down, all schools and businesses will be closed for the time being, and residents are advised to stay home and rest up. Centres For Disease Control have ordered the entire town quarantined. No one can go in or out until the syndrome is identified or the symptoms disappear. We'll bring you more on this as it develops."

The Scooby gang exchanged looks with each other as the words of the news report became understood. Then the slayer picked up the notebook on Giles' desk, and began to write.

When she had finished, she showed it to Giles. It read. 'Keep researching. I should be in town tonight.'

'Why?' Giles mouthed.

"Because there will chaos," an electronic, computer generated voice answered, though nowhere near Giles for him to hear it. Instead it addressed the members of the Initiative, controlled by Walsh, who used the technologies sent to her courtesy of the government who secretly funded this project known as the Initiative.

"You will help keep order. Dress as civilians. A military presence would only increase panic."

Xander, who received a page from the headquarters and decided to show himself at the underground laboratory before reporting to the slayers, so he could provide a report of how the Initiative decided to deal with this problem, began to write something on the piece of paper provided, but Riley was there before him. 'What is happening?'

"We are looking into it," Professor Walsh instructed the voice to reply. "Go. Help maintain order. We will find an answer."

The moment Buffy stepped outside in the night surrounding the town on the hellmouth, all she saw was chaos. Cars crashed into one another by panicking drives, water hydrants burst from vehicle impact, people wandering the street in an desperate motion to do anything but sit at home and worry, hoping they might find the solution to the problem upon the streets, hoping to find out if everyone they knew in the town was alive.

She split up two fights started by nothing more than misunderstood stares, passed a group which had collected around the vicar, who was reading from the Bible. A blackboard rested before him, showing the passage; Revelations, 15:1.

"'I saw another great and marvellous sign in the sky; seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them god's wrath is finished,’” the reverend's board quoted, causing Buffy to wonder once more about the significance of the number seven.

Turning a corner, she found Xander splitting up another fight. They hugged in greeting, before he took out his army id necklace to show her that he was working under orders from the Initiative. He shook his head when Buffy's expression conveyed a silent inquiry as to whether they knew anything more than them. Silently he pointed to a scene behind her.

Buffy turned round. A guy was selling message boards; ten dollars each. The glanced at each other and grimaced at the extortion.
All the same; they realised the need of them, and brought one.

Later, as the hour of one drew to a close, the figures taking up residence in the clock tower moved out into the neighbourhood. Their feet hovered above the ground, as though they travelled on a conveyor belt, attended by companions; crouching lunatics in straight-jackets, anxiously courting favour from their masters.

Looking in windows, knocking on doors, a group in the university, another about the town, looking for the seven angels. The former collective walked down a corridor in one of the dorms of a residence hall, taking in the numbers of every room.

Until they came to room one hundred and eighteen, to which one pointed with their bony forefinger, silently signifying the number to their colleagues for consideration. When they were all agreed they stopped and knocked on the door.

Inside, a male student woke up and crawled out of bed to answer it, unable to call out for the intrusion to go away.

When he opened the door, he had expected to see another student asking for something, someone he could order away with a silent glare at having his body temporarily deprived of much needed sleep.

Not skeleton thin face demon, whose flesh clung to his skull, whose dark eyes hung deep in his sockets, whose smile was a maniacal grin to inspire pure terror, attired in a business suit accompanied by two mummified lumbering beings in straight-jackets.

The latter grabbed him, dragging him back inside the dorm room before lying him on the bed. Demon in the Business Suit advanced forward, until he hovered over him. The straight-jackets drew back his night-shirt, revealing the bare expanse of skin beneath. Suit reached out with his scalpel to the chest.

Student let out a silent scream.

Back at the clock tower, hours later, two jars containing hearts were put upon the table. One demon surveyed the gifts with evil appreciation, before turning to congratulate his colleagues responsible with a round of applause. This clapping of hands, eerily as silent as the grave, soon became unanimous, as the demons celebrated their success so far, a good nights' work considering the mass panic which had conquered the town on the hellmouth.

_They need to take seven._

Morning brought the arrival of newspapers to Giles' and Jenny' apartment. The Watcher picked them up from the doormat and read the front page's gruesome story about the removal of hearts.

He journeyed to the desk while reading the article. His eyes fell on the faxed copy of Angel's drawing, and image together with the combination of the newspaper article triggered a sudden recognition.

Giles left the broadsheet and faxed sketch on his desk before walking to his book shelves where he took out a old book of fairy tales.
A beeping sound disturbed what had long since become an eerie silence in the living room of 1902 Crawford Street, where the chosen warriors ending sleeping during the night, wanting to be on the alert just in case any demon decided to take advantage of the chaos on the street and attack their neighbourhood. Realising it was their pagers, Buffy and Angel took them from where they had been resting on the coffee table, bringing them to rest before their eyes, in order to read the answer left by the sender.

'Room 112,’ the message read.

The entire Scooby gang assembled at the lecture hall for Introduction to Mythology; Giles' campus headquarters; the first time they had used this location for a meeting of the slayerettes.

Buffy and Angel, along with Spike, were the last to arrive. Upon their entrance friends and family rose from their seats to greet the arrivals, relieved that they had made it here without any visible harm coming to them.

Joyce leapt up from her seat to hug her daughter when they had entered, and the slayer gratefully returned the motion, just as thankful to see that she was alive.

Danse Macabre by Saint-Saëns began playing on the speaker system, bringing the slayer and her mother out of their embrace. They made their way to the chairs, and sat down for the presentation.

Giles switched the projector on, then laid on the first acetate sheet above the clear plastic which covered the viewing reflecting light. A few hand signals ensued, as the Scoobies tried to explain without speech why the drawing and words were intelligible, until he realised it was upside down, whereupon he set it right.

'Who are the gentlemen?' The first sheet read.

'They are fairy tale monsters,’ answered the second, with a picture.

'What do they want?' The third asked, as Giles held up a finger in emphasis.

'Hearts,’ answered the fourth.

The slayerettes nodded in understanding. Anya and Spike reached into the popcorn bags she had brought and graciously allowed him to share, and continued to eat.

'They come to a town,' the fifth continued, with appropriate illustration.

'They steal all the voices no one can scream,' read the sixth.

'Then,' the seventh said for dramatic emphasis, with a picture of a Gentleman.

The eighth and ninth contained no words. Just detailed sketches of the Gentlemen stealing hearts, complete with coloured blood.

Willow and Buffy exchanged disturbed looks with Tara, Oz, Angel and Joyce. Xander began to write something on his message board. Anya and Spike ate more popcorn.

The slide show continued. 'They need seven, they have at least two,’ read the tenth, with drawings of the seven hearts.

Xander finished writing and snapped his fingers to gain the Watcher's attention as he held up his
message board. It asked, 'How do we kill them?!

Buffy held up her stake in answer, mining a stabbing motion with the wooden weapon to emphasise her point.

The eleventh slide however, had a disagreement with that choice of weapon. 'In the tales no sword can kill them,' it said, with a picture of a Gentleman stabbed with three swords, but still alive.

'But the princess screamed once... and they all died,' said the twelfth.

Willow held up a c.d. and mined dying.

Giles shook his head and laid on the thirteenth slide. 'Only a real human voice,' it said, with a picture of a Gentleman dancing to an old fashioned record player.

Buffy wrote something on her message board, then held it up for Giles to see. 'How do I get my voice back?' it read.

Giles held out his hands and shook his head in an expression of helplessness. Then he put up a fourteenth slide. 'Buffy will patrol tonight' it read, with a picture of her, complete with crossbow and stake. Then he picked up a book and gestured to the others that research was their task.

The slayer held up a hand while she wrote another message. 'What should I do if I run into the Initiative?' it asked.

Giles grabbed a spare acetate sheet and wrote a reply. 'What we discussed. Our contact with them must proceed as planned.'

The music came to an end. The watcher switched off the projector while the Scooby gang rose up from their chairs and walked down towards the desk.

Buffy picked up the slide with a picture of two Gentlemen upon it, and looked at them.

As a hunter would its prey.

While the slayerettes researched, Buffy and Angel walked out into the town, their warrior senses alive and active to their surroundings, as they used them to hunt out which area of town the demons might be stalking.

They soon came upon the Gentlemen, hovering along the lamp lit road, intent on their own gruesome hunt for hearts. Moving into attack, they were caught off-guard by the straight-jacket lackeys who set upon them from behind.

Rapidly catching up, Buffy and Angel recovered and began to fight back, throwing punches and kicks, back-flipping up whenever they fell to the ground, until they had one of them in their sights, whereupon they closed their hands around them and snapped their necks.

The final lackey saw its comrades go down and ran-off. Buffy and Angel glanced at one another, and then gave chase.

It ran all the way to the clock tower, its pursuers' close behind. As it stopped to try and bar them from entering, Buffy and Angel set upon it, using it as a battering ram and to break their fall as they burst through the window.

Inside, another battle was being raged; Lackey verses Initiative member. But the chosen warriors
of the Powers That Be had no time to notice him as they jumped up from the ground and continued with their fights.

Only when their respective lackeys were knocked down, did they turn and come face to face with each other, crossbow and taser raised.

Buffy glanced at Riley with pretend surprise, noting the real reaction of shock at finding her with a crossbow in her hands, her battle attire a complete contrast to her everyday college girl wear. Then the lackeys intervened and the fights began again.

Some moments later one of the lackeys broke away to run up the stairs to the next level of the clock tower.

Buffy glanced at Angel and Riley, making sure the former was all right, then followed the lackey upstairs.

When she had reached the landing, she took in her surroundings, and noticed that their were a collection of jars on a table near the clockworks. Seven jars to be precise. And five were full.

They did not have much time, she realised.

Several lackeys came up to her, trying to capture her. Buffy shot a cross bolt at one, then tossed her weapon and began to kick at the others.

Angel and Riley dealt with their lackeys in time to glance at each other in surprise also, before rushing upstairs to help the slayer.

The former flew straight into the fight, helping Buffy out.

Riley stood and watched them, wondering who and what they were. Then a lackey made a grab for him, and he entered the fray.

Some Gentlemen came into the room, followed by more lackeys. They selected the strongest fighter; the slayer, and began to overwhelm her.

Buffy felt herself being grabbed, and then dragged to the Gentlemen, who were holding scalpels. She let herself be dragged towards them, hoping to get a closer look at the objects on the table.

She was right. The ornate wooden box from dream was also there. Abruptly she fought off her attackers, until they brought her to the table whereupon she banged on the wooden surface to make a noise.

Angel threw off the last lackey fighting him and turned to her, as did Riley. Both rushed forward to the table.

Buffy gestured with her eyes and mouthed the word 'box' as she struggled to get free.

Riley looked at the table, raised his weapon and then brought it down.

The smash of glass announced that he had hit the wrong thing.

Angel meanwhile had read Buffy's lips and opened the box.

The mist swirled out of the it, a part falling into the slayer's open mouth. She broke from the now frightened lackeys, dropping on her knees to the floor.
The Princess screamed.

Gentlemen heads exploded.

Sunnydale citizens recovered their voices. Life reverted to its normal patterns. Students attended lectures, Professors taught, and workers worked.

Warriors met in the lecture hall for Art History.

Angel, who had been talking with his soulmate the slayer, fell into silence as a third entered the room.

Buffy turned and saw Riley. Quietly she watched him come up towards her.

"Hi," Riley said cautiously.

"Hi," Buffy returned.

"I'll be waiting by the door," Angel remarked.

Riley held off until Angel had left them. Then he turned to Buffy, nervously taking her in, silently wondering if what he had seen the night before really happened. "Well, I guess we have to talk."

"I guess we do," Buffy replied, careful to keep her reply as direct and abrupt as he.

They stood facing each other, hands folded.

Waiting.

The End.

To Be Continued In

Doomed.
**Author's Note:** A lot of dialogue was taken from the actual episode, with modifications to make sense for my version of season four. I have mostly just extended this from the original and improved the descriptive sentences and various dialogue. I have also taken some lines out of the shooting scripts as I rewrote these episodes, which helped a great deal when it came to adding additional scenes. *Enjoy.*

**Doomed.**

They had rehearsed for this. From the very beginning. Seconds after their first encounter with the Initiative, a strategy had been devised for this inevitable moment. Its premise was simple; learn all they could, while giving nothing in return, yet at the same time seeming to be just as communicative as them.

If things went well, they could maintain a cooperative front with the Initiative, while they continued through Xander and the hacking program created by Willow and Oz to investigate them on the side. Above all, the Initiative was not to learn too much about them, particularly Xander's deception, and the 'special talents' of Angel, Doyle and Oz. At the most, all they would come to know were the roles of slayers and watchers, information which could be confirmed by the vampires they caught.

If things went badly, well, they would survive. After all, the Initiative had to be dealt with at some point, their methods, from what they had seen of them so far, were nothing short of lab rat experiments which could involve the creation of something sinister in room 314, a theory that had evolved from their current thinking on that as yet undiscovered part of the underground complex otherwise known as the Initiative HQ.

All this ran through Buffy's mind as she faced Riley Finn in the lecture hall for Art History. So far the meeting had gone like clockwork. Surprise encounter during the fight against the Gentlemen, followed by the choice of meeting place in the neutral territory of the university. Angel on perimeter, ready to intercede if too many of the wrong questions were asked.

Silence had gone on for long enough. She spoke. "Somebody should speak before one of us graduates."

Riley looked at her and began. "What are you?"

The question was blunt and Buffy responded to it as such. "Capricorn on the cusp of Aquarius. You?"

"Sorry. That came out a little blunter than I intended. It's just... you are amazing! Your speed, your strength."

"Also passionate, artistic and inquisitive. Who are you?"

"You know who I am. The rest... what I do..." he shook his head. "I can't tell you."

"Well, then let me. You're part of some military monster squad that captures - demons, vampires, probably have some official sounding euphemisms for them, - like unfriendlies or Non Sapiens."

"Hostile Sub Terrestrials," Riley volunteered, already revealing information.
"So you deliver these," Buffy paused to pretend that she had to think about the shorthand, "HST's to a bunch of lab coats, who perform experiments on them, which among other things turn some into harmless little bunnies. How am I doing so far?"

"A little too well."

"Meanwhile by day you pretend to be Riley Finn, corn-fed Iowa boy. Ever been to Iowa, Riley? God, if that's even your name."

"It is, born and raised. And hey! Bulletin: I'm not the only one who's been a little less than honest here."

Buffy folded her arms. Now it time to release her only information which they had planned to let them know. "I thought a professional demon chaser like yourself would have figured it out by now. - I'm the Slayer."

Riley looked at her, confused. "Slay-er? - Chosen One. She who hangs out a lot in cemeteries?" Faced with his continued incomprehension, she added, "you're kidding. You've never asked one vampire if anything else chases them? Ask around. Look it up: Slayer, comma, the."

"And you fight demons," Riley guessed. "I mean, you whaled on those guys."

"You did pretty well yourself." The compliment was grudging. 

But he did not see it in that way. "But I'm a walking bruise today. I don't see a scratch on you."

Her face went hard. "You're not looking deep enough."

"I'm looking pretty deep."

With that comment Buffy looked away from him, back to Angel.

Riley caught the look. "And who's he?"

That was exactly one of the questions they had not wanted asked. Fortunately for them, there was never time to give the answer, even if they had planned on doing so. For the ground suddenly shook beneath them.

It took until the second shock for Riley to guess. Meanwhile Buffy already knew the moment the first began. Rapidly she sought the comfort of the door-frame of the lecture hall, and Angel's arms, where Riley joined them to stand alone a moment later.

How long the quake lasted, no one knew. For the slayer it seemed like an timeless nightmare, as she remembered the last time she had felt Sunnydale shake.

For Riley it was a different matter. When it ended, he walked back into the lecture hall, an amazed expression upon his face. "Wow. That was some ride. Sorry I'm so excited. This is my first earthquake."

"It's not mine," the slayer quietly replied. The tone of her voice barely concealed her fear. Angel picked up on it instantly, and tightened the embrace of his arms around her, making her look from Riley up into his dark eyes.

"I'm sure its nothing," he said to her softly.

"Are you?" She asked in return, knowing neither of them were.
Another shake sounded around them then. Not the ground, but the vibration of their pagers going off. Separating, they reached into their pockets and consulted them.

'523 B,' read the message. Buffy and Angel exchanged a glance, then she turned to Riley. "I'm sorry, we'll have to continue this discussion later."

They walked off before he could reply.

Willow was the last of the Scoobies to arrive. "Hey! Sorry I'm late, I was in the library, almost got buried under some 19th century literature. And I don't have to tell you how hard it is to dig through some of that stuff." She sat down on the sofa. "Any damage around here?"

Giles shook his head. "Nothing major, I believe."

"Well, Porter dorm is completely blacked out," Willow added. "So naturally they are dealing with the crisis the only way they know how: 'Aftershock Party'."

"Ah," Oz remarked, "this from the dorm that brought us the 'Somebody Sneeze' party and the 'Day That Ends in Y' party."

"They do seem to be pretty generous with the milestones," Willow agreed. "So, what's the Sit?"

The slayer turned to Giles from her place in the armchair, which she and Angel shared. "Something horrible is going to happen, Giles."

"It was an earthquake, Buffy. A not uncommon occurrence in southern California," Giles reminded her. "All the same, I agree there is reason to be concerned. Which is why I assembled all of you here."

"Oh, good," the slayer commented sarcastically, "cause I'd hate for my little untimely horrible death concern to be ambiguous."

Giles nodded. "Buffy, I understand your anxiety, believe me. Its why I called all of you over. Now, I'm afraid I have no knowledge of anything which could be related to this; there's nothing in the Codex. So I suggest that we research, and attend that Aftershock party, because, chances are, if this quake does mean anything, it will show itself then." He paused and sat back in his desk chair. "Now, what did you learn from the meeting with Riley?"

"Nothing much beyond what we already know," Buffy replied. "He hasn't heard of the slayer though, which is odd considering how many vamps they've captured."

"Makes kind of sense considering their experiments," Tara pointed out. "The vamps are just test subjects, they're not too interested in what they talk about."

Giles nodded in agreement. "Well, I suggest you keep a level of curiosity before him, and see what happens next."

The slayer nodded.

Meanwhile, back at the underground complex beneath Lowell House, Riley was doing a little bit of information gathering.

"What's a Slayer?"

"No. A girl, with powers," Riley clarified.

"Oh. The Slayer. Oh, yeah, I've heard of the Slayer."

"Fill me in."

"Well, the way I got it figured the Slayer is like some kind of boogey man for the Sub-terrestrials, something they tell their little spawn to make them eat their vegetables and clean up their slime pits."

"You're telling me she doesn't exist?" Riley asked, incredulous.

"Oh, wait a sec. Am I bursting somebody's bubble here? Maybe this is a bad time to tell you about the Easter-bunny? Sorry, sorry, it's a myth, Rye. All part of that medieval folklore garbage kooks dream up to explain things we deal with every day."

"How do you explain the things we deal with, Forrest?"

"They're just animals, man, plain and simple. Granted they're a little rarer than the one's you grew up with on that little farm in Smallville..."

He trailed off as a demon behind them broke loose from the lab technicians who had been escorting it.

Forrest grabbed the demon by its neck. "Where is that hypo?"

The terrified lab tech was struggling with the syringe, eventually dropping it. Riley grabbed a night-stick off one of the security men who had come to help and knocked it out. "Never mind."

"Like I said. Animals." Forrest paused at the sound of noise. "What's that racket?"

"Animals rattling their cages. Doing it all day. Wonder what's got them all worked up?"

"Earthquakes man. They make everybody crazy."

Due to the research session, none of the Scooby gang reached the Porter dorms until the party was well into motion. Over in fact, as they could tell by the flashing lights of the ambulance and cries of civilians.

Glancing at one another, they silently slipped through the crowd, until they could go under the yellow ribbons to the scene of the crime.

It did not take long to reach the bedroom where the boy still lay. Paramedics had returned to the ambulance to fetch a death kit, giving the Scoobies a chance to take a look at the symbol craved on his chest.

Knowing they had little time, Angel grabbed a napkin and biro and drew a rough sketch of the symbol, while the rest kept a lookout.

When they were done, they returned to Oakpark Street.

"It's kind of like the CBS logo," Xander commented as they gazed at it on the table. "Hey, could
"This be the handiwork of one Mr. Morley Safer?"

"I'm telling you I've seen this somewhere before," Buffy remarked. "I just can't remember where! I mean, it's like..."

Giles interrupted their flow. "It's the end of the world."

In unison, the rest of the Scoobies turned to him with one word. "Again?"

"It's ah, the earthquake, - that symbol, -yes."

"I told you," Buffy pointed out. "I-I said end of the world and you're like 'poo-poo southern California, poo-poo!'"

"I'm so very sorry. My contrition completely dwarfs the impending apocalypse."

"So what do we do?" Joyce asked.

"We stop it," her daughter replied, her eyes still on the drawing. "I think I know where I've seen this. I'm going on patrol."

She grabbed her crossbolt and walked to the door, Angel following, making her stop at the frame. "Angel, no. I have to go alone."

He shook his head. "No."

"We discussed this," Buffy reminded him. "After meeting a member of the Initiative I would patrol alone in order for no suspicion to fall on you or anyone else."

"I know," Angel replied. "But this is different, Buffy. I watched your face after that quake. You were terrified. You still are. And when you're terrified, you're distracted. You need my help."

Buffy sighed, looking up into his eyes, seeing there was no room for argument. She nodded.

"I wonder where I've seen this before?" Buffy remarked as she and Angel came to a stop a few minutes later. "Where else? The place I spend most of my waking hours memorising stuff off the sides of mausoleums, big freaky cereal boxes of death."

Angel put a hand to her wrist, making her turn. "Hear that?" He asked her.

There was the distinct sound of stone scraping against stone. The warriors headed inside the crypt, to find a demon putting some bones into a sack.

"Door was open," Buffy announced by way of greeting.

Demon turned and roared at them. Immediately Buffy raised her crossbolt and fired one off, hitting his shoulder. To no effect. She threw the crossbolt at him, then she and Angel readied themselves into fighting stances as it came at them.

The fight naturally continued on to more open ground outside. The demon was strong, more than a match for either of them, as it proved by throwing Angel to the floor, then picking up the slayer and slamming her back hard down on a gravestone.

Buffy lay stunned for a moment, but then she saw a shadow move over her, whereupon she executed a back-flip to land upright, followed by a swift punch. Something which Riley was just
able to stop.

"Wow, that flippy-thing you did..." he commented, as she regained her stance and Angel came to them.

"Where did it go?" Buffy asked.

"I saw it take off towards the woods," Riley replied.

"And you didn't follow it?" Angel asked.

"No weapons, no backup, you don't go after a demon that size by yourself."

"I do," Buffy muttered.

"Yeah, well, I'm no Slayer," Riley remarked, pulling out a radio. "Base One, this is Lilac One."

Angel smirked. "Lilac?"

Riley ignored him. "Confirmed sighting of an unidentified Sub-T. Mobilise patrol team for debriefing at 0800 hours."

Buffy folded her arms. "Very commandery. Lilac not withstanding. What are you doing here?"

Riley put his radio away to look at her. "Looking for you. 'She who hangs out in cemeteries.'"

Buffy frowned. "I have to get the demon."

"Don't sweat it. We'll bag it."

"It's not that simple," Angel remarked, causing Riley to look at him. "Seriously, what's your deal?"

"It's gone," Buffy remarked, before turning to Angel. "And we don't have time for this right now. Bigger things are at stake. Let's go."

Angel nodded and they walked off, once more leaving Riley alone and confused.

"A Vahrall demon," Giles announced, causing the group to put down their books and gather around his.

"Eew!" Tara remarked, looking at the illustration provided.

"I second that revulsion," Oz added.

"Yes," Giles agreed before reading aloud. "'Slick like gold and gird in moonlight, father of portents and brother to blight'."

"'Limbs with talons, eyes like knives, bane to the blameless, thief of lives.'" Buffy continued.

"Three meters tall, approximately 100 120 kilograms, based on my visual analysis," Riley added to the description, though unknown and unheard to the slayerettes, as he briefed the Initiative team.

"Special hazards?" Xander asked while he discreetly wrote down the information Buffy and Giles were feeding him, via the micro-headset in his ear.
"Unknown," Riley answered. "Probably nothing we haven't handled before. There is no pattern we can discern yet, so we got to assume that it is on a basic kill-crush-destroy."

"This thing isn't digging up the bones of a child for fun," Buffy added into Xander's ear.

"Well, a demon's got some pretty hilarious ideas about fun," Doyle remarked.

"Bones of a child though," Jenny repeated, wondering, before picking up the book she had been studying and flicking through the pages. "Here it is: an ancient ritual uses the blood of a man, the bones of a child and something called the word of Valios? It's all part of the sacrifice the sacrifice of three."

"Let me guess ends the world," Buffy said.

"Well, yeah. It's not big with the details, though. It doesn't say how the world ends or what the ritual entails exactly."

"The sacrifice of three..." murmured Willow. "Three people are going to die?"

"No, they won't," Buffy answered. "Because claw boy is not getting all of his ingredients. We have to find that third one, the Word of Valios, keep him from getting it."

"If he doesn't already have it. I mean, who knows where he's been?" Anya pointed out.

"Here is one for the good guys," Riley continued. "This thing has a pheromone signature a mile wide. Agent Gates has been working with the detection system the lab's developing."

Forrest Gates rose up from the table to stand before the map. "Can't tell where it's going, but I've got a beat on where it's been. Residual traces showing up in populated areas. The thing's not shy."

"We're going out in civvies, day clothes only guys. Weapons stowed in packs, keep 'em out of sight till nightfall. Remember this isn't a capture, it's a kill."

"Get your quadrant assignment from me," Forrest added as the meeting broke up. "We'll blanket the town."

"I'll check the magic shop," Buffy remarked. "See if they've heard of a book called the word of Valios. Willow, Tara, Oz, how about the book archives at the museum?"

"Stop at the mansion on the way," Angel added, "check on Spike and fetch some weapons." He turned to Buffy. "We ought to give him a pager you know."

"Later. After we've stopped the apocalypse." She looked at her friends. "You guys, this thing, takes wicked very seriously. Be careful. I couldn't stand anybody getting hurt."

"Good bye, Dru. See you in hell."

Spike let himself fall from a chair, aiming his heart for a stake clamped on the edge of the dining table of the Mansion on Crawford Street. The front door opened as he did so, causing him to look up and miss completely, landing on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Willow asked him.
"Bloody rot," Spike answered as he stood up. "Can't a person knock?"

"What were you doing?" Tara asked.

"You were trying to stake yourself!" Willow guessed, seeing said weapon.

"Fag off! - It's no concern of yours."

"Is too," Willow protested. "We know you, we can't just let you dust yourself!"

"Oh, but you can. You know I'd drain you drier than the Sahara if I had half a chance. And besides, I'm beyond pathetic. I'm living on a diet of pigs blood with Wheatabix, in a house where I have to put in ear plugs to escape the sound of my sire and the slayer enjoying the permanence of his bloody curse every night! I mean, am I even remotely scary anymore? Tell me the truth."

The three looked at him, making Spike jump and put on as scary face as he possibly could without activating the chip inside his head. "Well, not right now, but that could be because we know you can't bite, which I guess isn't really what you need to hear, is it?"

"Stop, please, just clear out."

"We can't leave you here like this!" Tara argued.

"Oh, you go on. I won't do anything. I feel better now. Promise."

"Think of the happy," Oz said. "If we don't find what we're looking for, we face an apocalypse."

Spike looked at him surprised. "Really? You're not just saying that?"

"Buffy."

The slayer looked up and came to a halt as Riley came up towards her, a small device in his hands. "Is this really the time for Donkey Kong?" She asked him.

"What? Oh. It, ah, takes trace readings of creatures pheromones."

"And?"

"And it's either mating season for this thing or it's moving all over town. - You know, Buffy..."

She knew he wanted to talk. And she had a feeling that she knew what about. The boy never seemed to get a clue. She was not available. She never had been. "Actually I need to go. Big bad, needs to be squished."

"Right. I'm on it, too," Riley falling into step beside her.

Buffy stopped. "Listen. As much as I appreciate the backup you Initiative guys have given ever since I started SUC, this is big league here. End of the world. Literally. You don't have a clue what you're dealing with."

She walked away, leaving him to watch her go.

"Great. No word of Valios." Willow remarked as they exited the History Museum.
"Not even a syllable of Valios," Oz added.

"Which means I'm one step closer to melting in a sea of molten hellfire, yeah?" Spike asked.

"You shouldn't talk like that," Tara said to him. "Yeah, okay, so you can't kill anymore, but there are other fun things you can do. You'll adjust."

"Adjust? And what? End up like the three of you? No thank you. I should think you would be glad to greet the end of days. You guys are way worse off than me."

"I see what you're doing. You're trying to get us to dust you," Willow said.

"Am not! I just don't want pity from geeks more useless than I am."

"We're not useless! We help people. We fight the forces of evil!" Willow argued.

"Buffy fights the forces of evil," Spike emphasised. "You're her groupies. She'd do just as well without you better I'd wager, since she wouldn't have to go about saving your hides all the time."

"That is not true! We're part of the team. She needs us."

"Or you're just the same tenth grade losers you've always been, and she's too much of a softy to cut you lose."

The three came to a stop, speechless. Then their pagers began beeping.

"Oh," Wesley remarked, causing his fellow ex-patriot to come over.

Giles glanced at the illustration in the book, underneath which were the words 'Word of Valios' and echoed Wesley's sentiment. "Oh. And, as usual, dear."

He walked over to a chest which was resting by the wall, opened it, and after rummaging around for a while, held up the article in question.

Which was when the Vahrall demons decided to attack.

"What happened?" Buffy asked as she entered the chaos that once was the living room of Giles and Jenny's apartment.

Her watcher was on the sofa next to his wife, who was holding an tea towel full of ice cubes to his head. "It's my fault. I should have known."

"The Word of Valios is the name of a talisman not a book," Wesley informed. He also had a self-made ice pack to his head.

"I blame myself entirely," Giles added. "I had it here."

"You had it here?" Doyle queried.
"I bought it at a sorcerer's estate sale. I really only glanced at it once. I thought it was a knock off."

"Well, now they have it," Buffy commented. "And they probably have their sacrifices by now, too."

"They're on their way to perform the sacrifice now," Wes added.

"On their way where?" Angel asked. "You found out what the ritual is for?"

"The Hellmouth. They are going to open the Hellmouth," Wes answered.

Buffy rose up and began handing out weapons. "Looks like we're going back to high school."

"Be careful you guys," the slayer warned as they entered the remains of Sunnydale High. "The place doesn't look too stable."

"Fine by me," Spike commented. "Hope we all go under."

"Why is he even here?" The slayer asked. "It's not like he can fight!"

"If we leave him alone, he'll stake himself," Tara answered.

"And that's bad because...? - Fine. Whatever. Just keep him out of the way. Okay, when we get to the library keep a look out for victims they're keeping alive for the sacrifice. You guys ready?"

"Let's rock and roll," Xander remarked.

"Let's rock and roll," Spike added in a deliberate mock.

They walked down the corridors.

"Sunnydale High," Xander remarked. "These walls if they were still walls, what stories they could tell. Eew! Mayor meat. Extra crispy."

"I think we're near the library," Willow said "Whoa. Check out the new floor plan."

The slayerettes and slayer came to a halt as they saw the giant whole in the middle of what used to be the floor of the library. Around which stood the Vahrall demons.

"Three of them." Buffy observed.

"I don't see any sacrifice people," Angel added.

"They must be around here somewhere," Buffy remarked. "The ritual is not finished. And it's not gonna be."

She jumped down and began to attack them, followed by Angel. "Start collecting the blood and the bones. And the talisman."

Xander went for the blood and instantly one of the demons broke off from attacking the chosen warriors to attack him.

Willow fetched the bones and tossed them to Spike. "Catch!"

Spike caught, then saw a demon leave Angel and come for him. "Right, perfect."
The one fighting Xander managed to grab the blood. Breaking away, he jumped down the hole to the Hellmouth.

"Okay, I guess I won," Xander commented, just as the ground began to shake. "The demons! They are the sacrifice!"

Spike was also in the middle of a revelation. Sick of taking the punches he threw one himself, only to feel nothing. "No pain! I can hurt a demon! That's right. I'm back. And I'm a BLOODY ANIMAL! Yeah!"

He lifted the demon up and prepared to chuck it into the hole.

"Spike, No!" Angel called out just as he started to let go. "Kill it!"

For once, Spike obeyed his sire, and broke its neck.

The third, seeing his other comrade dead, began to run away. He was stopped by Buffy and Angel, who calmly dealt to him the same blow as Spike had to the second.

They stood collecting their breath for a moment. Then Buffy got her cellphone out of her pocket and called Giles. "Hey, its me. Do we need to fish a demon out of the hellmouth if his other friends are dead and he only has one talisman? No. Good. Mission accomplished. We're on our way home."

She paused to put the phone away, then put it back to her ear. "Oh and BTW; Spike can kill demons."

"What's this? Standing around while there's evil still a foot. That's not very industrious of you. I say we go out there and kick a little demon ass! Come on! Vampires! Grrr! Nasty! Let's annihilate them. For justice - and for - the safety of puppies and Christmas, right? Let's fight that evil! - Let's kill something! Oh, come on!"

Buffy could hear Giles chuckling at hearing Spike's speech as she added, "I think we have a new member to Operation 314."

*The End.*

To Be Continued In

*Bronze Candy.*
Author's Note: Some of the dialogue was taken from the original episode, and modifications have been made due to the main plot of the season. I have made this a rewrite of Band Candy, which although I enjoyed, I never managed to fit into my Season 3. For a long time I didn't think the plot would work; I was stuck finding justification for the source and the reason why, but now I have both. With regards to Giles' brief demonic turn, I also enjoyed that part of A New Man, but I knew it wouldn't work here, as he's married, so Jenny would realise immediately, cutting out the rest of the plot. I have changed things around, putting Buffy's birthday party second, because the episode flowed better that way. Enjoy.

Bronze Candy.

"So, the Slayer," Professor Walsh remarked.

Buffy chose a nervous expression, while Giles pretended to shift uneasily behind her. "Yeah. That's me," she replied. In reality she was carefully studying the Professor's every look, along with her tone and how she dealt with the news. Her psychology lessons were paying dividends in a way she had never realised they could.

Professor Walsh sat in the chair behind the desk in her office on the campus, regarding the visitors with a surprised, albeit serious gaze. Riley stood behind her, conveying a solemn but proud face, the latter emotion due to the fact that he had discovered the slayer before his superior could. "We thought you were a myth."

"Well, you were myth-taken," Buffy tried to joke.

It fell flat. "And to think all that time you were sitting in my class," Walsh mused. "Well, most of those times. I always knew you could do better than a B minus. Now I understand your energies were directed in the same places as ours, in fact. It's only our methods that differ. We use the latest in scientific technology and state-of-the-art weaponry and you, if I understand correctly, poke them with a sharp stick."

Buffy shrugged, trying not display her offence at the somewhat patronising description of her weaponry. And you, she mused, poke them with lasers, needles and microchips, then place them behind bars. "Well, it's more effective than it sounds."

"Oh, I'm quite sure of that," Walsh continued, her tone belying the truth of her words. "As I'm just as sure that we can learn much from each other. I'm working on getting you clearance to come into the Initiative. I think you'll find the results of our operation most impressive. Agent Finn here, alone, has killed or captured... how many is it?"


"Oh . . . Wow," Buffy said, trying to sound impressed, while Giles held back a humorous smile. A part of her wondered how she would handle viewing the demonic prisoners. It was one thing having Xander describe the conditions, she imagined that it would be quite another actually seeing them in the flesh. "I mean, that's . . . seventeen."

"What about you?" Professor Walsh asked.
"Me?" Buffy countered.

"How many hostiles would you say you've slain?" Walsh asked, obviously expecting the answer to be less than her protégé.

Buffy glanced back and forth between Giles and Walsh, silently trying to decide if she should tell the true total, or a reasonable sounding educated lie. "Altogether, or on a daily to weekly basis?"

"Both figures, if you can," Walsh decided.

Buffy turned her head, and saw Giles nodding his approval, then she turned back and named two figures which were of a large amount to set both the professor and Riley in shock.

"That's pretty impressive," Walsh remarked eventually.

"I'll say," Riley muttered, still stunned.

"And how long have you been in action?" Walsh asked.

"Since I was fifteen," Buffy replied, eliciting another round of shocked reactions.

"Okay," Professor Walsh said eventually, leaning back in her seat. She turned her gaze on the man behind the slayer. "And how do you fit into this, Professor Giles?"

Giles placed his hands on the back of Buffy's chair as he replied, conveying a certain dangerous possessiveness. "I'm her Watcher. Have you heard of us?"

Walsh shook her head.

"I'm not surprised," Giles remarked, allowing a not of superiority to enter his tone. "We're usually very much in the background, providing the slayers in our charge with the information they need. Vampires and demons rarely get to hear about us."

"Just the older ones," Buffy added.

"Us," Walsh echoed. "So there's more than one of you?"

"Yes, there's a Council based in England," Giles replied. "And several around the world, keeping an eye on any potential demonic problems."

"It seems your methods are a lot more successful than ours," Walsh commented.

"Well, I'm sure we have a lot to learn from each other," Buffy remarked, wondering why her instincts were silently telling her that there was something to worry about in the Professor's tone.

Walsh nodded. "An exchange of information? I would be very interested in that."

A page beeped at that moment, signalling a timely end to the meeting. Giles lifted the to his gaze, then reattached it to his belt. "It's time for Mythology class."

Buffy rose from her seat. "Perhaps we'll discuss more in our next meeting."

They walked out of the office and into the corridor. When they were some distance away, Giles turned to her. "Well, that went as expected."

"It did," Buffy agreed with relief. "I was afraid Riley would ask about Angel."
"I would advise you to patrol alone for a while, just put any suspicions he might have to rest," Giles said.

Buffy nodded. "He has assignment marking to do anyway." She paused as they came to a halt outside Room 112. "I don't know if I'm being paranoid, but there was something in her tone which made think our suspicions regarding Room 314 and the slayer were more well founded than we thought."

Giles nodded speculatively. "She did seem to be concealing something. However, until Xander manages to get inside, we have no way of confirming or disproving that concern."

"So, what's next?" Buffy asked.

"As she said; an exchange of information," Giles replied. "Just not as much they think."

The slayer inclined her head in acknowledgement and they walked into class.

Riley took a solo patrol that night through the graveyards, his objective not to find vampires or demons, but the girl who slew them. He wanted to know more about her, this young woman who had beaten not only his kill ratio but the rest of the Initiative's combined and then some. He hadn't seen a scratch on her after that encounter with the Hostiles which caused them laryngitis, or the day after she informed him that she had prevented another apocalypse. He was also surprised at how calmly she appeared to deal with whatever she encountered, causing him to wonder if Professor Giles or Professor O'Connor were counsellors as well, for to deal with those demons from the age of fifteen required a great strength of character not usually known to exist in your average teenager. The Initiative provided Psych consults on staff, along with making the subject required college course while they served, but despite all this he found it difficult dealing with the demons day after day.

A cry followed by a growl caused him to drop to a crouch and slow his pace to the next gravestone, which provided suitable cover to watch the slayer at work. She was fighting a vampire, who loomed over her, yet was at a disadvantage, as she calmly fought fiercely to slay him. Riley watched Buffy as she countered kicks and punches, dodged strikes, before reaching for the weapon which Walsh had termed a sharp stick and thrusting in the demon's chest. He slowly transformed from decomposing flesh to bones then to fine dust, startling Riley, who had never seen a vampire killed before.

He stood up, just as Buffy turned round to catch sight of him, her arm poised to throw the stake. She put the weapon when as she recognised him, then stood still, waiting for him to come to her.

"I take you have more questions?" She astutely surmised.

"A lot, actually," Riley replied. "My main one is how do you deal with this night after night, ever since you were fifteen?"

"I used to rebel against it," Buffy admitted, deciding the boy deserved some truths, after all he was a soldier like herself, probably unaware of the Initiative's agendas. "When I came here, I wanted to forget that I was the slayer. But then I ran into Giles at the Library, and then the vampires killed some students. It made realise that I was born with this destiny to fulfil, that I couldn't fight who I was, without going insane. So I took another look at it. I realised that I was helping people, helping the world, making a difference. Few people do that nowadays. Now, I've accepted it, though I do still occasionally gripe about it." She turned to him. "How did you get involved?"
"I was recruited out of High School," Riley replied. "They looked at the grades of all students who performed well in Science and athletics, and gave them college scholarships for Sunnydale. At first it was quite terrifying, but I like to think I'm getting a handle on things now."

"Trust me, just when you think you've seen the most horrible demons to haunt the earth, something worse makes it's existence known," Buffy remarked. "Well, if you're going to ask more questions, you better come with me. I've got a lot more graveyards to check out."

Riley fell into pace with her. "So do you do this every night?"

Buffy shrugged. "Mostly."

"Don't you ever get tired?" Riley asked her.

"Sometimes. But slayers are built for this, genetically speaking. I have a higher pain, energy, injury, you name it threshold than your average teenager."

"Were there others before you?" Riley inquired.

Buffy nodded. "Yeah. One in every generation. Most are lucky to see out their eighteenth birthday, let alone their nineteenth."

"How come?" Riley queried.

"We're only as good as we fight. All it takes is one demon or vampire stronger than you, and that's it. For vampires it's something of an honour to kill slayer. I knew at least two who had that claim to fame."

Riley shook his head in amazement at her. "How do you live day to day knowing that you could die?"

"You can't think like that," Buffy replied. "Once you do, you are dead. Speaking of which," she turned and retrieved her stake again. "Vampires, dead ahead."

She rushed forward, bending her head to take one down by a strike to his midsection. Riley only hesitated for a moment before joining her in the assault, taking on the second vampire. It was an opportunity for the slayer to watch him, as soon as she had taken care of her prey, who was so surprised by her form of attack that his dusting took merely minutes. As his ashes floated to the grass, Buffy turned to watch Riley fight. She found herself comparing him to Angel; twenty-first century military combat verses eighteenth century gentleman duellist style. Where her soulmate had the grace, Riley relied on his brawn to withstand the onslaught. She watched him counter punches and kicks until it was clear that he had an advantage over the vampire. Then she threw him her weapon.

Riley grabbed the undead beast by the scruff of its neck as he caught the stake and turned to her curiously.

"Just aim for the heart," Buffy ordered, observing his reaction to the undead corpse transforming from flesh to bones to ashes. Seventeen captures, she realised, wondering how much he knew about the Initiative testing.

"Thanks," Riley said, returning her weapon.

"Come on," Buffy replied. "We have more to see."
She returned to the Mansion via the back door through the night garden, after Riley had seen her home. Despite her general dislike of the boy, he had proved his worth tonight in the ability to slay, but Buffy wasn't ready to accept his alliance entirely. She closed the door behind her and shrugged off her leather jacket, the one which Angel had given her four years ago, hanging the coat on the rack beside the door.

"Happy Birthday."

In a remarkable symmetry to this day one year before, a piece of cool metal came to rest around the chosen one's neck after she turned round, before she could walk out of the kitchen, followed by two arms wrapping themselves around her waist, the sensations sending waves of warmth and desire through her figure.

Buffy smiled as she leaned back into the embrace of her soulmate, then glanced down at the present around her neck. It was a silver necklace with a delicate chain, upon which hung a small silver cross, and a small round silver square in which the shape of that cross had been cut out.

"Angel, its beautiful, thank you," she uttered before turning her head so she could kiss his lips in gratitude.

Angel returned the kiss with a willingness which promised that gesture and infinitely more, causing the slayer to reverse herself in his arms so she was facing him. The kiss intensified, then continued, as he backed them out of the kitchen and into the double height living room of the Mansion on Crawford Street.

Whereupon he gently broke from her to stand a little apart as the lights came on and everyone else in the room shouted one word in unison.

"Surprise!"

Buffy gasped as she saw that the entire room had been decked out in banners, balloons, streamers and all manner of nineteen themed decorations, from floor to ceiling, some in seeming impossible places to reach.

"You guys," she said, her eyes coming to rest on all the members of the Scooby gang standing before her. "How did you manage to get this done?"

Willow came up to hand over a present and hug her best friend. "A little decoration slash celebration spell," she answered sheepishly. "Which kinda takes the magic away when you explain it."

"Well, I'm very grateful, thank you," Buffy assured her.

Wesley handed her a drink. "Here's to a second curse free birthday," he added, holding his own glass in salute.

"And here's hoping that hasn't tempted fate," Buffy added.

"You did have that Cruciamentum test last year," Giles pointed out to his fellow ex-watcher, who shuddered as he silently recalled the conditions placed on a slayer involved in just such a trial.

"Yeah, but I got into that of my own choosing," Buffy replied. "Unlike the prophecy gig and Angel's curse."
“Bright side; we've already had the apocalypse,” Cordelia added. "At least you can rule that one out for the rest of the year."

"Unless that's the Initiative's secret main agenda," Buffy remarked.

"Somehow I don't think that the end of world would be an aim of theirs," Giles murmured. "Too unpatriotic."

"Let's debate on the Initiative tomorrow," Oz proposed. "Now is the time for a hootenanny."

"Here, here," Xander agreed, picking up a plate from the food table, which he placed before his best friend. "Try these."

Buffy tentatively picked up a square of the chocolate bar. "Candy?" she queried.

"Not just any candy," Xander replied. "This is Bronze Candy. It's a new thing I'm trying out for the club. I got a deal with a contractor, who offered to put them in stores, increase publicity. Go ahead, try some."

Buffy obliged, popping the square into her mouth. She chewed the item slowly, grimacing at the bitter taste. "Hmm, how much coca does it use?"

"Quite a lot, apparently," Xander replied, offering the plate to everyone else, who each took a square.

"Mmm, this is quite tasty," Wesley mused.

"Yes, this is very nice," Joyce added.

"A little strong, but otherwise okay," Willow allowed.

"Well, there's plenty more," Xander replied, setting plate down. "Come on, lets get down to the hootenanny."

And with that, the party got underway. Slayerettes placed their presents on the large coffee table between the seats, then collected together in the large space to do some dancing. The adults mostly sat and talked, sampling more and more of the Bronze Candy.

The slayer took the opportunity to relax in her soulmate's arms, swaying along to the music. Ever since the 'official discovery' of the Initiative, when Buffy faced Riley down with a crossbow to his taser, inside the abandoned clock tower as they saved Sunnydale from the Gentleman, the slayerettes had been working overtime preparing themselves for the next stage of Operation 314.

From the moment in which they had first realised the dangers behind such a secret government controlled military group, they realised that it would not be enough to have someone on the inside of the Initiative, trying discover what they could. That would not give them access to all their secrets. Nor would it be wise letting them know everything about the slayer. The ultimate goal was not just to achieve full knowledge and access, but put them in a position where they could just walk into the base, open the door on their most secret project, and put an end to it, before any of them even realised she was there.

But for now, they could relax, and enjoy Buffy's nineteenth birthday.

Angel wrapped his arms around his slayer, and seeing her distracted thoughts upon her face, leaned forward and kissed her again, wiping away her thoughts of tomorrow. When he drew back to let her...
breathe, he smiled as saw her return to the present. Then he leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "I have more presents for you."

"Angel, you don't have to shower me with gifts," Buffy said to him as they danced, "though everything you give me is very precious."

"I like showering you with gifts," he said softly, smiling at her.

"Then far be it from me to stop you," Buffy decided, returning the expression.

Dancing continued for a few minutes more, then the gang migrated into the sofa area, and Buffy sat down to receive the rest of her presents from her friends.

Xander gave her a weapons chest which he had carved himself, while Anya with her usual lack of regard for tact gave her a ancient edition of the Karma Sutra. Cordelia and Doyle gave her an aromatherapy kit which she had been eyeing appreciatively in the shop on Sunnydale's high street. Willow and Oz gave her a new elaborately bound diary, while Tara gave her a collection of slayer tales from her ancestors, which she had gathered together in a leather bound volume with the help of Spike, who added a carved knife to her armoury as did Wesley. Joyce gave her daughter a first edition of her favourite book, while Giles and Jenny gave her a collective edition of all the slayer diaries, as well as the news that she would be a godparent to their future child.

Angel gave her one gift while they were all assembled, saving the rest till later that night. It was an antique book filled with sketches of her, him, the Scoobies, and various special moments in their life, drawn from memory, which occupied the gang for the rest of the evening, as they gazed at the pictures and indulged in nostalgia.

Later, when the slayerettes had departed, the soulmates sought the privacy of their bedroom. This time it was difficult to forget the meeting with the Initiative which took place earlier today, and the possible consequences which could arise. Buffy recalled the time when it was arranged, the morning after they prevented the apocalypse by the Vahrall demons a week ago. Riley had met her as she and Angel well walking through the campus, asking her if she found anymore of the demons they had encountered two nights before, when he chose to call for backup, instead of running after it. She had replied with the truth, that the demons were here to bring about the end of the world, and she had prevented them from doing so.

To her surprise Riley admitted that he believed her, along with the fact that even when he asked his colleagues, he was still none the wiser as to what a slayer was. He then proposed a meeting between her and his boss, adding that he wouldn't tell Professor Walsh who she was if Buffy refused. He had no idea that was the opportunity which they slayerettes had been waiting for. For a slayer asking questions was a excellent smoke screen for their inside man to access areas he had not been able to previously without risking his discovery.

After pretending to give it some thought, Buffy agreed to the meeting the next day after class, whereupon Riley went to talk with Walsh. A further day spent in waiting had brought them to this meeting today, which she and Giles attended. The fewer people that Riley and Walsh knew who knew her secret the better, particularly where Xander was concerned, and Spike, for they were harbouring a Hostile fugitive now too. Since the meeting was arranged, they had spent most of the time in which they were not slaying demons or attending college in preparation for this meeting, but despite all their caution, Buffy was still concerned that they had not anticipated everything Walsh might decide to do now.

Angel wrapped his arms around her as she stood before the window in their master suite, her gaze surveying the night sky, though in reality, he knew her mind was focused on the meeting.
tomorrow. Tenderly he rubbed the silk of her night-gown between her skin and his fingers, before pressing a kiss to the scar she still carried on her neck.

"It's out of our hands now," he commented softly.

"I know," Buffy replied. "And that's what terrifies me."

"You know if anything happens that I and the others will rescue you," he added.

"I do," she replied with a sigh. "I'm sorry, I spoiled your surprise."

"No you didn't," he assured her. "I'm just glad you made it to this birthday. You're one of the privileged few who have."

"The only time I feel that, is when I'm with Giles," Buffy confessed. "And you," she added, "though for entirely different reasons."

"I hope so," he uttered, making her laugh despite herself. "Now, time for more presents," he decided.

Buffy stood still as he slipped another chain around her neck, this time made of platinum, attached to which was a Amethyst and Garnet cross. Then he took her left hand in his and placed another claddagh ring above the silver one he had given her twice, first two years ago, then again this time last year. This ring differed in metal and adornment; platinum, with a garnet heart.

Softly, he turned her round in his arms, catching her lips with his own. His hands caressed her back through the silk of her night-gown, teasing her until she cried out with need, whereupon he slipped the straps off her shoulders. Buffy moved her hands from his back, letting the straps fall off her arms, causing the garment to pool around her feet. She moved her hands to his waist, removing the pyjama pants he wore, to allow her sex to press against his equally aroused one.

Together they stepped out of their clothes, Angel moving backwards to sit down on the bed, lifting his head so he could continue to kiss her. Buffy bent her legs either side of him, kneeling before him, whilst her hands pushed him gently until he was seated in the middle of the bed. His hands slid down to her butt, holding her as she straightened her legs, placing them around his waist, then he lowered her into the space between his own.

Breaking for air, they met each other's heated gaze as he entered her, the speed causing her to gasp and stretch to accommodate his size. His hands rose to clasp the side of her chest, his thumbs teasing her nipples as they began the ancient and once holy dance. Carefully he watched her, waiting until she reached ecstasy before he let himself do so, a warm glance of love in his dark soulful eyes as he saw her lean head back, close her eyes and silently let loose his name from her lips. This was the moment when he was in awe of her, when he felt honoured to be the one whom she allowed this joy, this love to be found. When he wanted time to slow down, so he could savour their love for eternity.

Later, as she lay in his arms in their bed, Buffy realised that her angel had given her one final gift; making love to her so powerfully, as to cause her to forget her fears about what might lie ahead, now that Walsh knew the identity of the slayer.

The first thing which alerted the slayer that something was weird in Sunnydale, was her professor being absent for her first class the next morning. After a quick patrol in the college, she established that Giles, Jenny and Doyle were missing too, along with a lot of other teachers.
Concerned, she borrowed Angel's car keys and drove to Oakpark Street. Parking the car, she got out and entered Giles' courtyard, walking towards the window which looked on to the front room. To her surprise, she found Giles and Jenny examining record collections which were scattered about the floor.

"Giles, what are you doing?" Buffy asked as she opened the front door and walked in.

"Oh, Jenny has a ultrasound in half an hour," Giles replied. "I don't have classes till this afternoon, remember?"

"Oh yeah," Buffy replied. "It's not just you though. Almost the entire faculty is absent or late. I wondered if you had heard anything."

"Er, no," Giles replied. "But I'll do some checking. In the mean time you go back to college, keep an eye on things till I get there."

"Sure," Buffy replied as she let herself be guided back to the door, then outside into the courtyard. She glanced one time at the window, then walked back to Angel's car, determined to investigate further.

Inside the apartment Jenny turned to her husband. "Do you think she noticed anything?"

Giles lit the cigarette dangling from his mouth. "No way," he replied, before leaning back to take a long drag, his hand going to the record player and switching the device back on.

"Here are your keys," Buffy opened with as she greeted Angel during the break between classes.

"Thanks," he replied. "Giles and Jenny okay?"

"I'm not sure," Buffy admitted. "He said they had a sonogram, but they had records scattered across the floor, and now I come to think of it I'm sure I could smell nicotine."

"That's weird," Angel agreed. "What do you think happened?"

"I don't know," Buffy replied. "That's the problem."

"Er, Buffy," Riley called out, making them turn round as the young Initiative member entered the lecture hall. "You got a minute?"

"Come in and speak freely," Buffy replied. "Angel knows all my darkest secrets," she added, with a secret smile reserved only for him. "What's up?"

"It's Professor Walsh," Riley replied, walking towards them. "She's acting kind of weird. Almost as if she's high or something. And most of the faculty is absent or tardy."

"Yeah, we've noticed that," Buffy agreed. "Giles has been acting weird too. Any of you guys determined a cause?"

"No, all the tests we ran came back negative," Riley replied.

"Okay, let's narrow down a time frame," Buffy decided, beginning to pace. "Let's see, Giles and Jenny were fine last night....." she trailed off into a pause as she realised. "The Bronze Candy."

"Bronze Candy?" Riley echoed. "That's odd, she had a wrapper of that in her coat."
"It must be cursed," Buffy guessed. "We better call the club, get them to cancel the subscription."

"I can do that," Riley replied. "The owner's an member."

"Oh," Buffy uttered, pretending surprise where there was none. "In that case we better go to the source."

"Demand's high," a voice mused, as they strolled down one of the alleyways between the aisles of chocolate boxes which lined the warehouse of the Bronze Candy factory.

"I thought it might be," the man walking beside them replied.

"That's the reason I love this country," the voice added. "You make a good product, and the people will come to you. "We're getting close. Keep it flowing. It's almost feeding time."

Outside, Angel brought his car to a stop before the crowd which had gathered at the warehouse's loading dock. On a platform two men held cases of chocolate, throwing bars to people within the crowd, who lapped them up as if they were bottles of water and the surroundings were a desert.

Buffy, Angel, and Riley climbed out of the vehicle, the former's gaze settling on the kissing couple which was Jenny and Giles, who seemed to be making out on a police car which was parked at an odd angle in the alleyway. Nearby stood her mother, who was happily munching on another bar.


"Go away," Giles remarked. "We're busy."

"Mom!" Buffy cried as she pulled the candy bar out of her hand. "Where did you get that coat? Never mind. Listen..."

Giles grabbed her from behind. "Back off!"

Buffy turned round calmly. "Giles, think about this. You wanna fight me, or you wanna let me talk to my mother?"

Her watcher backed down, taking a cigarette lodged above his year and placing it in his mouth. Before he had a chance to light up, Buffy snatched the article from his lips.

"Don't, it's bad for the baby," she lectured before turning to her mother. "Mom, look at me. Do you know who I am?"

Joyce smiled. "Of course. You're Buffy. Hey, look. They're, giving away candy. You want some candy?"

"No, I don't!" Buffy replied. "And you don't need any more, either."

"I'm fine," her mom replied, annoyed. "I can have more if I want."

"You are not fine," Buffy replied. "You need to go home."

"Screw you. I want candy!" Joyce yelled.

"Mom!" Buffy cried. She sighed and turned to Riley and Angel. "Come on, let's get inside this warehouse."
They advanced through the crowd minefield, pushing people aside until they reached the platform. Buffy jumped up and set about despatching the met into the crowd; one with a kick to the back of his knee, the other with a punch to the midsection then to his back. When the boxes and the men were amongst the crowd, she turned round and opened the loading dock door. Giles, Jenny, Joyce, Riley and Angel followed her inside.

Navigating the aisles of candy bars, they came to a conveyor belt where there was a man standing with his back to them, listening the mobile placed by his ear.

"Yeah, I've been out there," he replied. "Town's wide open. You guys can go anytime."

Even though it had been over two years, Buffy recognised that voice. "Ethan Rayne."

The man turned round and caught sight of the slayer, followed by Angel, Riley and Giles. "Might wanna hurry," he added nervously into the phone before ending the call.

"Ethan," Giles greeted dangerously.

"Ripper," Ethan returned, before breaking into a mad dash for the exit.

Buffy, Giles, Angel and Riley gave chase, following him through aisle upon aisle until the turns became too quick for them.

Giles stopped to catch his breath. "Where... Bloody Hell!"

"That's what smoking will do to you," Buffy returned. "Now be quiet."

"Well... Where'd the bastard go?" Giles asked.

"Shh!" Buffy ordered, listening carefully the apparent silence.

"What?" Giles asked as she stopped.

Buffy executed a half-spinning hook kick into a crate, yanking away a piece of wood, before reaching in and pulling Ethan's head out. "Look. A box full of farm-fresh chicken. So, Ethan, what are we playing? We're pretty much in a talk-or-bleed situation. Your call."

"Hit him," Giles urged, causing Buffy to glare at her watcher.

"I-I'd just like to point out that this wasn't my idea," Ethan replied.

"Meaning...?" Buffy pushed.

"I'm subcontracting. I'm just helping someone collect a tribute... for a demon."

"He's lying. Hit him!" Giles urged.

Buffy sighed. "I don't think he is, and shut up."

"You're my Slayer, go knock his teeth down his throat."

"Giles!" Buffy cried. "What demon?"

"I don't remember," Ethan replied.

Buffy punched his nose, sending him stumbling back against the broken crate, causing Giles to air
punch with satisfaction.

"Lurconis," Ethan replied. "Demon named Lurconis. They wanted a way to get the tribute away from people."

"So you're just Diversion Guy?" Buffy sought to confirm.

"More than a diversion," Ethan admitted. "Well, they said the tribute was big, so big that people would never let them take it. That people had to be out-of-it. And later on, when the candy wore off, they'd blame themselves."

"Hence, land of the irresponsible," Buffy sighed. "So, who's behind this?"

"I don't know exactly," Ethan replied.

"Hit him again," Giles urged.

Ethan raised a hand to ward off another strike. "No! I-I-I really don't know. Anonymous call, half the cash up front, the rest after the tribute was delivered."

"Which brings us to the bonus question, and believe me when I say a wrong answer will cost you all your points," Buffy remarked sarcastically. "What's the tribute?"

"I swear on all that's unholy, I don't know," Ethan replied.

"Right," Buffy took out her mobile and pressed a number on her speed dial. "Will, it's me. We're looking for a demon called Lurconis. See if it says anything about a tribute."

Behind her Ethan picked up a crowbar. He raised the weapon, ready to strike, when Giles pressed a gun to his head.

"I wouldn't," Giles uttered dangerously.

Ethan stopped cold. Angel motioned to Riley, who grabbed him, then turned to Giles. "Give me the gun."

Giles entered a brief staring contest with the half-human souled vampire, resulting in an easy victory for Angel, who calmly put the gun in his leather jacket.

"Okay, Oz just found it," Willow replied in Buffy's ear. "The tribute to Lurconis is made every thirty years. It's a ritual feeding. And this one's late, so it's probably, you know, a big meal. And... Oh. Lurconis eats babies."

"Thanks Will," Buffy replied, before ending the call. "Come on."

"Well, what about that man?" Joyce asked.

"By the authority of the US military, you're being taken into custody pending a determination of your status," Riley declared. "I'll hand him over to military police, who'll take Mr. Rayne to a secret detention facility in the Nevada desert. I'm sure he'll be rehabilitated in no time."

"Thanks," Buffy replied. "We'll go to the hospital."

"Lurconis dwells beneath the city, filth to filth," Giles quoted.

"What?" Buffy queried.
"Ooo! I know this. Uh... I knew this. Lurconis means... glutton. And we'll find it, um... in the sewers."

"The sewers? The babies must be so scared," Joyce murmured.

"Right, we're going to the sewers," the slayer decided.

A few minutes later, Buffy, followed by Angel and Giles, descended into the depth of the hellmouth's sewage tunnels. A group of vampires rushed towards them, and Buffy and Angel launched themselves into the fight, delivering roundhouse kicks, dodging return strikes, kicks and punches. Buffy punched one in the face, and dealt another a strike to the gut, while Angel grabbed one by the neck and snapped the vertebrate, dropping him to shove a stake into his chest then moving on to the neck. Buffy staked her victim, then moved on to the next, while Giles went to retrieve the babies.

Suddenly a rumbling sound echoed through the tunnel, causing the fights to stop, as the combatants turned in the direction of the source. Out of an entrance an enormous snake like demon emerged, engulfed the nearest vampire, then retreated back into the tunnel.

"What the hell's that?" Giles asked.

"Lurconis, I'm thinking," Buffy replied. She glanced around for a weapon to use.

"Buffy, the gas pipe," Angel directed.

She leapt up to grab the item in question, wrench a section from the wall, angling towards one of the lit torches which aligned the place. When the gas was ignited, she aimed it towards the entrance, causing the demon to come out and receive fatal burns.

"Thanks," Buffy remarked to Riley as they met up back at the campus after she, Giles and Angel returned from the sewers, returning the babies to the hospital on their way.

"I told you I'd help," Riley replied.

"You did," Buffy added. "I don't know what I would have done with Ethan. I can't kill him, part of the slayer ethics."

"You found another way," Riley said. "You're really strong; Spider-Man strong. You're in charge, you make the plan, execute it, no one giving you orders."

"The advantages of independence," Buffy shrugged. "I just wish we'd managed to find out who was responsible for all this."

"Who ever it is has likely just gone out of town," Riley concluded. "Beyond our reach. But I'll do some checking, see if I can find out anything."

"Thanks," Buffy added. "So, you have to go and report now, eh?"

"Yeah, Walsh is back to normal," Riley nodded. "Just one thing, who exactly is Professor O'Connor?"

"My boyfriend," Buffy replied.
"Aside from that," Riley pressed.

Buffy smiled. "My soulmate," she replied, before walking away.

"So she walks in and the rules just suddenly break?" Professor Walsh guessed.

"Umm . . . pretty much." Riley admitted.

They were walking down the corridors of the Initiative complex.

"Be careful with her," Walsh warned. "She reacts on instinct. There's no discipline there. Her loyalties are uncertain."

"You won't be disappointed in her," Riley assured her. "She's good at what she does. She is the truest soul I've ever known."

Walsh groaned. "Oh no. Spontaneous poetic exclamations. Lord, spare me college boys in love."

"I'm just saying she'll work out," Riley protested. "You'll be proud of her. She has a boyfriend anyway."

"You want to know what I think?" Walsh remarked. "I think you're probably right."

Riley nodded, then walked away, leaving his boss outside a white door. Professor Walsh watched him go, then took a card out of her pocket and slid it through the access panel beside the door. She entered a code into the keypad, then slid the card through again.

The door opened, and she stepped inside. It closed behind her.

Xander emerged from the shadows, dressed in his army attire. Checking that no one was in sight, he took his walk-talkie out of his pocket. "Sleeper to base. W has gone into Room 314."

He held the device to his ear to listen for the reply, then walked away from the room, and out into the night.

_The End._

_To Be Continued In Friday._
**Friday**

*Author's Note:* Some of the dialogue has been taken from the original episode; *Goodbye Iowa.* The title changed due to the original one having a reference to Riley, because I have different plans for him- none of which involve B/R. I called it Friday instead for a mild reference to Friday 13th, a day when best laid plans can go awry, which what happens here. Additionally, there is a hot B/A scene, as well an additional cliffhanger which will start a storyline for episode 20, and which you are probably all gonna hate me for until it is resolved. I will remind you though that Buffy is in Season Five, so you know the ending of this story already. *Enjoy.*

**Friday.**

Thwack! Punch! Kick!

Punch! Kick! Thwack!

Thwack! Kick! Punch!

"Come on, you're meant to be down by now!"

"I am down!"

Buffy turned to her other 'opponent' and smiled at him as she went to help him up from the floor. "Not you Xand, Angel."

"Oh," Xander uttered in understanding, then shied away from the slayer's hand. "Thanks, but I need to stay on the ground rolling around in agony for awhile."

"Beloved, I am a vampire, remember?" Angel, who was still standing, unbruised, reminded his soulmate.

"I know, but for the purpose of this exercise, you're both meant to be your average male. Not that either of you are average, by the way."

"Nor are the Initiative, remember?" Xander added as he cautiously rose from the floor. "They have those steroids, which you guys advised me to avoid."

"Oh yeah," Buffy uttered in remembrance.

The Scoobies took a collective shiver at the thought of the 'vitamins' which were standard issue to the Initiative and when they tested them after Xander had brought his prescription to them after being issued with acceptance to the military team. Aside from their strength enhancing and pain desensitising effects, they had found them to be highly addictive, with potentially deadly side effects if the prescription was suddenly abandoned, similar to the withdrawal from harmful drugs like heroin and cocaine, which, if their plans for the Initiative worked like they wanted them to, Xander would have had to endure.

"Still, steroids or no steroids, Buffy does have a point," Giles added his voice to the discussion. "The Initiative will not match up to the strength of a two hundred and forty-seven year old souled vampire."

"Hey, they proved a match for me," Spike pointed out.
"Er, you're several years younger, not souled and chipped," Buffy reminded the other vampire of the team, who was now working for Wyndam-Pryce Investigations, the small operation which Wesley had set up after settling into neighbourhood, an organisation which in the future would include all members of the Scooby gang, working to pay for killing demons as a side job to the destiny of a slayer.

"Buffy's right," Wesley now added to the discussion, "but we're also wasting time. This 'test' of Professor Walsh's is only a few hours away, and you need to be ready for anything they throw at you."

"I know," Buffy said as she and Angel began parrying each others punches and kicks once more. "I need to show them how powerful a slayer can be. I need to impress them and Walsh, while at the same learn their strengths, weaknesses and knowledge without anyone of them knowing about it." She recited the instructions Giles had given her when they had first decided to accept Walsh's suggestion of an exchange of ideas between military and slayer.

The next phase of Operation 314 had always been for Buffy to join the Initiative. From the moment of their discovery of the team, they had realised that one Scooby working undercover was not going to be enough, and if he was ever found to be looking where he should not, they would lose one of the few advantages they had. Hence Buffy's entrance. She would be perceived by Walsh as an unpredictable element, someone to watch; the perfect distraction from their main double agent.

On this day, as the afternoon hours slowly wound down into the evening, the slayer was preparing for the test which Walsh had devised to see a slayer at work. Xander and Angel had been given the difficult task of helping Buffy train but be ready to be unprepared for what the Initiative would throw at her, because too much alertness could betray Xander's involvement. This was most dangerous part of their plans involving the Initiative, and everything had to go smoothly so they could learn what was behind Room 314 without Walsh finding out about it.

And they were getting close. Last night Xander had managed to gain the access code to the door which guarded the Research rooms, and this morning between classes Willow and Oz had been working on a constructing a fake key card for him to use while Buffy was providing distraction. All they needed to find out was Walsh's access code to Room 314, and then what was inside it.

Buffy and Angel broke from another play fight, as the clock chimed, causing Xander to glance at the hour then pull his commando military green suit on.

"I better get going if I wanna make Walsh's meeting before the test."

Buffy stopped fighting and touched his arm. "Good luck."

"You too," Xander nodded before disappearing into the night.

Night time. Bushes surrounding a small clearing, situated near one of the many graveyards which occupied the town that housed the hellmouth, but out of the way from your usual visiting populous, be they native or tourist. Even the demons had been cleared out of the neighbourhood for this night, as one of the most unusual events took place.

Buffy advanced carefully, watching the small but subtle movements of the bushes which told her that the Initiative were near by. Inwardly she smiled. They might have had difficulty tracking her, but she had no problem knowing they were on her trail.

She took a look at each of the moving bushes, evaluating and picking out her first target. Then
there was no more time for thinking as she jumped into the bush and threw the first of the assault team out into the open, making him land flat on his ass.

Two more followed before the rest of the team had come out into the clearing, expecting outnumbered odds only to be confronted with just a girl who could fight better than all of them put together and then some.

Buffy delivered her customary roundhouse kicks and punches; going for the places where she knew it would hurt the most; groin, arm and knee joints, aiming to bring them down and out as fast she could.

One of the commandos popped out from the bushes with a taser rifle. She moved one of the ones she was fighting into the firing path of the weapon, sending twelve thousand volts into him, instantly taking him out of the running.

The lead commando who had fired the shot jumped out of the bushes to advance on her. Buffy readied herself, then halted as the situation changed.

"Lights!" Professor Walsh stepped out of hiding, and the outline of a humvee became visible to the slayer as the day was made suddenly brighter by the effect of several hundred wattage fluorescent lights, placed strategically around the clearing. "It took the patrol team 42 minutes to track you and you neutralised them in 28 seconds."

Buffy went for the modest approach. "I was just lucky."

"I see." Walsh paused. "Well. . . still. Very impressive."

She walked back to the vehicle, while Riley stayed standing in front of her. Despite all of Buffy's blatant attempts to remind him she was taken, he could not seem to take the hint and stop trying to chat her up. "I was just being modest with the whole 'lucky' thing. You got that, right?"

"I got it."

Graham walked passed her to the humvee. "Awesome, Buffy."

Forrest shrugged and muttered in annoyance, while the rest of the team muttered congratulations to her.

Riley smiled. "See? You're a hit. Everybody loves you."

He moved to put his arm around her but Buffy moved ahead, exchanging an unseen glance with Xander while Walsh watched Riley's expression with a frown on her face.

"You sure about this?"

Buffy smiled. "I'm ready." Inwardly she grimaced, wishing Riley would just get on with it and stop trying to hit on her.

Riley turned to the mirror before them and reached to pull open a small concealed wall panel beside it. He pulled a switch and a green laser beam swept over her.

Buffy pretended surprise, but Xander had already warned her about all of this after his first time when he was confronted with the location of the secret underground lab.

"New retinal scan recorded. Summers. Buffy." A computer voice said. The mirror slid back to
reveal an elevator.

Riley stepped in first, followed by Buffy. It descended into the hangar sized complex beneath the frat house.

Buffy took a glance around, pretending to be impressed once more. "My God. You said it was big. You told me, but you never said it was huge!"

Riley fell for it hook, line and sinker. "I don't like to brag."

"I had no idea," Buffy replied. "This is incredible. But not that I thought it was some fly-by-night operation. Unless it is! I mean, can you guys fly? At night. With those jet-pack things, do you have those?"

Riley tried to play coy. "I can't really talk about it."

Buffy stuck to her adopted awed tone. "This is unreal."

"So, you like our little operation?" Walsh said at that moment.

Buffy pretended to be at a loss for words. "Yeah. Yes. It's very . . . clean."

Walsh handed her a small ID badge. "Your visitor's pass. And I've assembled some reading material to bring you up to speed."

Buffy frowned. "Oh. And I thought I was never gonna get homework from you again."

"You can't take that home," Walsh informed her. "That's classified material. Highly sensitive. When you're through reading those pages you'll have to eat them."

Riley grinned while Buffy pretended to look concerned. In reality, she had read most of the stuff when Xander had been presented with the same papers on his joining. "She's joking."

"Don't worry, it doesn't happen very often. Shall we?" She led the way down the stairs and into the bowls of the hanger. "Much of our hands-on research with the H.S.T's is performed here. We call this The Pit."

Buffy peered down into it, noticing the demons inside. Mentally she took a note of their appearance, filing the information away for Giles later. "And what do you call those?"

"Tough," Riley answered. "It took eight of us to bring those two down."

"They'll be under our control soon enough," Walsh added. "Doctor Angleman! Head of our science team. He's a leader in the field of zenomorphic behaviour modification."

"Behaviour modification?" Buffy asked, though part of her already had an idea of what Walsh was referring to.

"We've made significant advances in reconditioning the sub-terrestrials. Bringing them to a point where they no longer pose a threat."

So I've seen, Buffy thought silently. "What's over there?" She asked.

"The armory. You'll have to be cleared for use on each of these weapons. The more advance arsenal can be complicated, but I'm certain, in time, you'll pick that up." She turned and saw Buffy fiddling with something else. "Don't pick that up."
"What is it?" Buffy asked.

"About twenty-thousand dollars," Walsh replied.

"It's a prototype for a com-cam," Riley explained. "Communications camera. Soon to be standard issue. Gives us a direct comlink to Control when we're out in the field."

"Also monitors the heart rate of the wearer," Walsh added. "A valuable tool for research in stress in combat condition. If you'll follow me, I'll show you the H.S.T containment area. We have a few more things to give you."

They were passing the door to the restricted area. "What's in there?" Buffy asked.

"Research area," Walsh answered. "Very restricted for security reasons. Here is your security card and your pager."

Buffy held the pager, which was very similar to the one Giles had issued to all of the Scooby gang during the summer before college, along with a mobile phone and walkie talkies. "Been thinking about getting one of these," she commented.

Walsh was stern. "We're the only ones with the number and it stays that way."

"Right," Buffy nodded.

"Lose either one of them and there's hell to pay and down here we mean that literally," Walsh added. She shook Buffy's hand. "Again, welcome to the team."

She walked away, leaving Buffy standing with Riley, who turned to her. "So, what do want to do now?"

"Actually, I have a prior engagement," Buffy remarked before walking to the stairs which lead to the lift. She felt the sudden urge to be out of the hanger which in her mind bore a terrifying resemblance to a twenty-first century concentration camp, except for demons not persecuted Jews.

And the similarities were not the one bit reassuring. Not in the least.

"How did it go?" Willow asked.

The Scoobies had moved from Giles and Jenny's place to the Bronze, a semi neutral environment where she could pass off that she was out hanging with her friends just in case the Initiative happened to wander in.

Buffy shivered, causing Xander to comment, "that bad, huh?"

She nodded. "I know you warned me, but I had no idea it would look like that. The place was literally out of some documentary on World War II, only frighteningly hi-tech and catering to demons. I know I kill them, but surely I'm not on a par with that level of horror."

"You're not," Anya assured her. "Speaking as a former demon, I'd rather be killed than vivisected by doctors for experiments. At least your way is a fair fight."

"We've got to bring them down," Buffy decided, leaning back into the arms of her Angel. "As soon as we possibly can."

"What happened to the softly, softly approach?" Tara asked.
"It was shot down as soon as I stepped into that hanger." Buffy paused. "I know we need to find out what's in Room 314, but once we've done that, can we break from them? They're giving me the creeps."

"Well, if there's an op tonight, I could find out what's in there," Xander volunteered.

"Are you sure you can do it without getting detected?" Wesley asked him.

"We've got the fake surveillance feed, the key card and the proper access code," Xander ticked the items one by one off his fingers. "What else do we need?"

"The distraction to draw attention away." Buffy remarked, her eyes on the entrance as it admitted some new people to the club. "Xand?"

"I see them," Xander withdrew from the gang and walked a circular route to the bar where the manager was supposed to be.

The slayer adopted a casual pose and leaned into the arms of her boyfriend, who kissed her hair, half his attention also on the new arrivals. "Just as well Spike is at the Mansion and Giles and Jenny are at home," she uttered softly to him, watching Riley and his friends cast their eyes around the place. "God knows what they would do if they found out I was hanging with Hostile Seventeen."

"They're coming over," Willow warned them softly, as Oz placed an arm round her shoulder. Anya and Tara stayed close to Wesley, while Cordelia claimed Doyle who prayed he would not sneeze at this crucial moment.

"Hey Buffy," Riley remarked as he and his friends came to a stop before her full booth of nine people who had spread out to make sure there was no possibility of anyone else trying to join them.

"Hey, Riley," Buffy returned, taking Angel's hand in her own. "I didn't realise anyone at the college knew about this place."

"Oh, one of our members is the manager of the place." Riley indicated Xander with his finger, grinning in the hope it would impress the slayer.

Buffy took a glance at Xander, holding back her smile. "Oh, Xander Harris. Yeah, he used to attend Sunnydale High. I don't remember what happened to him after graduation. But then we lost track of a lot of people."

Riley nodded disappointed, then he and his group moved away.

The slayer smiled at their departure. "Mission accomplished." She relaxed in Angel's arms, who smiled at her.

Just then a beeping sound began, causing the Initiative guys, Xander and Buffy to reach into their pockets.

"Just what the slayerettes ordered," Buffy remarked softly before kissing her soulmate farewell. "I'll meet you back at the Mansion."

At the Initiative headquarters, Walsh slid her key card through the entrance to the restricted area, then Room 314.
"How did the tour go?" Dr Angleman asked her as she entered.

"I'm not sure. She's unpredictable," Walsh walked to the surgical table which contained their most secret of projects.

"She's an unnecessary risk," Dr Angleman commented with conviction.

"Possibly." Walsh paused, her eyes on the project. "How's our baby doing today?"

"Adjusting nicely. Reflexes, motor-functions. All off the charts."

"That's what I like to hear." She bent down, looking at the amalgamation of demon and human body parts that they was their own Frankenstein. "Almost time to wake up, Adam. And take your first look at the world. I know you're gonna make me proud."

A knock sounded on the door, causing her to turn and exit the room. She stared at the technician. "Yes?"

"The team is here for briefing, ma'am."

"Right."

Walsh walked back into the main part of the hanger. Her eyes fixed on the team, singling out the only one not dressed in military green. A possible problem for her operation. Or not. At this point she was not sure.

She advanced to stand before the projection screen. "This is your objective. Sub-T: 67119. Demon class: Polgara species. Though visual confirmation has not yet been made, we're confident of the target's approximate position as it leaves behind a distinct protein marker. Dr. Angleman will brief you on its defences."

"When threatened," Angleman paused to place an overlay of a slider on the demon to reveal the new weaponry he was about to explain, "bone skewers jut from the creature's forearms during battle. It's imperative when ensnaring it not to damage its arms. That's all you really need to know."

Buffy looked to Xander, who nodded his acceptance to the strategy which the Scoobies had decided on when she was confronted with her first operation with the Initiative. Ask as many questions as she could without causing risk. "Question."

"Buffy?" Walsh asked.

"Why exactly can't we damage this polka thing's arms? I, uh, not that I want to, it's just in my experience when fighting for your life body parts get damaged and better its bits than mine. Or . . . ours." She added, making the latter word sounded unnatural to her, keeping with the story that she worked on her own.

"We wish to study the physiology of every subterrestrial's natural defences," Dr Angleman answered. "It's part of the research we do here. Uh, Yes?"

"What do they want?" Buffy asked.

"Want?"

"Why are they here? Sacrifices, treasure, or they just get rampant? I find it's easier to predict their responses if I know....."
Angleman cut her off. "They're not sentient. Just destructive, I believe."

"They do have keen eyesight, however," Walsh added, with a direct reference to what she was wearing; a orange halter top and jeans. "You might want to be suited up for this."

Buffy smiled. "Oh. You mean the cammo and stuff? I thought about it but, I mean, it's gonna look all 'Private Benjamin.'" She paused as chuckles passed around the commandos. "Don't worry I've patrolled in this halter many times."

Further laughter. Walsh grimaced and added, "why don't we give our attention to Dr. Angleman and save all questions until the end."

"Actually, I'm finished."

"Oh. Uh, well, Agent Finn, deploy the teams."

"Okay, listen up. We'll be going in a four squad set-up. Team Leaders: Gates, Taggart, and Stavros. Alpha Team, you're with me."

"Report for TLs for assignment and weapons requisitions," Walsh added. "Reminder: this is a zap-n-trap, people. Capture not a kill. Any questions?" She sighed as she saw one. "Buffy."

"So," Riley remarked as he and Alpha team accompanied the slayer, "how does your briefing go with Giles?"

Buffy smiled and took out her mobile, causing Xander to hide his own smile. "Like this." she pressed speed dial and waited for the line to be picked up. "Giles, got a situation. Demon called Polgara. Has bone like swords popping out of its arms. Anything you can give me?" She paused to listen for the reply, hearing Giles pretending to rustle through the books when in reality they had sent a picture of said demon back to them via the mobile as a listening device during the meeting. "Right, no reason, just a general visit, okay. See you later." She paused and turned to Riley. "So I guess she hates me now, professor Walsh. Questions. An Initiative faux pas, yes?"

"It's... a little unusual," Riley admitted. "She's just not used to it. Maybe because you barely ever opened your mouth in her classroom. But I know she likes you. In fact, she liked you before I did. Can we talk about this later? There's a dangerous hostile out here and since I don't have your reflexes, I kinda need to focus."

"Okay," Buffy said, inwardly smiling.

Then the demon came up, causing Buffy to drop her interrogation tactics and go into her slayer mode.

The team fought the Polgara demon, careful to avoid its arms, trying to surround it and get a clear shot for their tasers. Buffy easily put it down to the ground, though she thought it was struggle due to it's strength, height and the fact that she could not hurt it's arms, or take it alone as the Initiative insisted on helping.

Finally with a roundhouse kick it was winded enough for the taser. Riley, out of breath like team, in comparison to Buffy who was just breaking a sweat, turned to her and asked the following: "So, what do you wanna do now?"

Buffy smiled at him, then pointed ahead of them. Riley looked up to see a talk dark figure waiting for the slayer, who smiled in farewell then ran to join the figure. He grimaced in annoyance before
ferrying the demon to base.

"I think we've got a situation."

Dr Angleman looked up from his work, and pulled down his surgical mask so he could talk. "The Slayer?"

Walsh paced the floor. "She's becoming a liability."

"We knew that was a danger," Angleman reminded her. "We prepared for it in fact. Does she know about the project?"

"I'm not sure, but she has too much influence over Agent Finn." Walsh paused. "It's only a matter of time before she asks the question."

"So we move to the contingency scenario?" Angleman sought to confirm.

Walsh nodded. "Right away."

Angleman sighed. "That's too bad. She could have been a powerful ally. Even after the first condition was resolved."

"I know," Walsh murmured. "I wish now I not made that so gradual. The progression of symptoms seemingly strange and slow."

"Agent Finn will take it hard," he reminded her.

"That's why sooner is better." Walsh paused and took a look at the new arm their Frankenstein had, from the Polgara demon. "Soon, Adam, soon," she whispered.

They ran back to the Mansion, stopping to stake a couple of vampires out on the way, upping levels of endorphins for both of them.

Buffy jumped Angel as soon as they were through the door, causing Spike who could see them from his place on the sofa to groan, then breathe a sigh of relief as Angel took the slayer in his arms and raced up the stairs with her.

Once in their bedroom things slowed down. Angel switched on a slow song, while Buffy seductively undid the lacing's of her halter top. He watched the display with a smile, then pulled her into arms.

They kissed as though neither had tasted each other in months, drinking up the touch of skin to skin, mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue, saliva and arousal combined as a wanderer in the desert would coming across an oasis of water. Buffy almost ripped his shirt off, while Angel showered her neck and bare front with kisses, then groaned when she had gained access to his chest and returned the favour.

Jeans were lost under the haste and mounting desire, and the couple moved to the bed, relishing the feel of silk on their naked bodies as they slowly and powerfully became one.

Angel and Buffy took turns in rolling each other until both of them had been on top, then sighed in bliss as they came.

A few moments later, Angel took her into his arms, and smiled as she chuckled softly, the sound
vibrating against his chest.

"Did you see his face?" She asked through her soft laughter, speaking of Riley. "I really wish he'd get the hint, but its amusing to witness all the same."

"So how was the fight?" Angel asked her.

"Tough. I'd forgotten how hard it is not to work with someone who isn't attuned to your every move and can compliment it magnificently." She stroked his chest, confirming that the praise was meant for him alone. "I'm concerned though," she added, in afterthought.

"Why?" Angel asked her.

"Walsh did not seem happy that I asked so many questions. I know that was the whole idea of the plan, but I'm not sure if she'll wait. She's already annoyed with Riley's interest in me."

"Well, just remember, anything suspicious, page us, and we'll be there in a heartbeat," Angel kissed her hair.

"I know," Buffy answered, reassured, and turned to kiss him, intending for a repeat performance of their love making.

Then a pager beeped, causing her to groan and pick it up. She grimaced, reading the message. "Speak of the devil. I'll be back."

"It's a small job. Reconnaissance. Probably a waste of a Slayer's abilities, but my boys are on assignment so I......."

Buffy interrupted Walsh with a polite voice. "No. It's okay. I'm up for some action."

"I doubt you'll get any on this one." She led her to a map and pointed to the search coordinates. "We have a reading of a class three subterrestrial moving through the sewer tunnels just on the edge of town."

"Class three?"

"It's a low-level threat. Minimal aggression. Meagre defences. They barely show up on the scanner and occasionally turn out to be raccoons." She handed Buffy a taser.

"Wow. You're not crazy about raccoons, huh?" Buffy commented casually, while her mind scented a trap.

"We always take precautions." Walsh picked up the expensive com-camera and handed it to her. "All we need you to do is get a visual on this thing. This will feed me back an image and I can advise you from there. I don't want to put you in any unnecessary danger."

"Oh. That's okay. Danger's my birthright." She paused then put on a nervous tone. "Um, Professor Walsh. There's, uh..... There's still some stuff about all this that I'm not clear on."

"Well, when you get back we can have a talk," Walsh replied. 

*Yep, definitely a trap.*

Buffy nodded. "Good. Okay. When I get back. Am I supposed to salute you?"
Walsh frowned. "No."

"Okay."

Buffy turned to leave. As she passed the restricted area, she nodded at Xander, who was just slipping inside, disguised in a technician's white coat. Then, when she was outside the building and away from any surveillance but the com-camera, she slipped her hand into her pocket and pressed the prearranged message on her other beeper.

By the time Buffy had moved into the sewer section in question, she was on the alert for the trap. Carefully she kept her pulse calm, knowing the Walsh would be watching and spoke into the mike.

"Professor Walsh, are you getting this? Possible H.S.T?"

Something emerged out from a corner ahead of her.

"Make it a definite. And he's brought along a friend. They seem," Buffy paused, about to say controlled by something, but then remembered where she had seen them before.

Abruptly, instinct took over. A trap had been sprung on her and the next phase of Operation 314, though earlier than anticipated, had to be launched. She started to fight the demons, making moves until the com-camera slipped off in the fight and her pulse on it read a flat line, as did the surveillance.

Then she drew on her full slayer strength and defeated the demons, using the booby-trapped taser to electrify one, and slicing the other with one of their axes. Then she rose up and took out her mobile.

"Giles, it's me. I'm afraid we're gonna have put my exit from the Initiative forward."

"God, Buffy are you okay?" Giles asked on the other end, hearing her out of breath voice, clear signs of exhaustion.

"Yes, just. Those demons took a lot out of me."

"Angel's on his way."

"Thanks. Should I proceed as we originally planned?"

"Yes. Good luck."

"Thanks," Buffy uttered and ended the caller. Then she turned, casting her gaze around until it settled on the com-camera.

She picked it up and got to work.

"Riley," Professor began to say, her tone being appropriately concerned, after having watched the pulse rate of the slayer's heart go to flat line, and convinced she was dead, "something's happened. I-I don't know what to say. It-it's about Buffy."
"Buffy?"

"Two of our hostiles broke free and escaped into the tunnels. She . . . went after them on her own. She's dead, Riley. I did everything I could to stop her. I told her to wait for a back-up team, she kept insisting she didn't need any team. She could handle it by herself. I-I'm so, so sorry. I know what she meant to you."

"How could this happen?" Riley asked, lost.

"She was a very, very special girl. I didn't understand at first. But she had something. I don't know . . . maybe I could have stopped her. It's hard not to blame myself."

Right on time, the com-camera suddenly came back to life, to reveal a fully alive slayer, who was staring down and Walsh and Riley.

"Professor Walsh. That simple little recon you sent me on . . . wasn't a raccoon."

Walsh gasped and faced the camera.

"Turns out it was me trapped in the sewers with a faulty weapon and two of your pet demons. If you think that's enough to kill me, you really don't know what a Slayer is. Trust me when I say you're gonna find out."

She dropped the camera, letting it go static again, and walked out of the sewer system unseen, into Angel's arms.

Walsh looked at Riley, who gave her deadly look, then walked away. "Agent Finn. I order you to stop! Agent Finn! RILEY!!"

"So. All right. Fine. If she wants a fight, we'll give her one."

It was later in the day, and Walsh was inside Room 314, alone, talking to her pet project. "Won't we, Adam? I've worked too long. Too long . . . to let some little bitch threaten this project. Threaten me. She has no idea who she's dealing with. She may have succeeded in foiling this contingency plan, but I doubt she even knows about the first one we arranged to kill her. Once she's gone, Riley will come around. He'll understand. It's for the greater good. He'll see that. And if he doesn't . . ." she paused to a surgical saw back in its proper place, turning her back on the listener. "Well, first things first. Remove the complication and when she least expects it......"

Suddenly she felt a sharp pain. She glanced down to find a bone saw in the middle of her torso. She only had time to say one word.

"Adam?"

Before she collapsed to the ground dead.

Adam drew his bone sword out of her chest. "Mommy." He uttered mechanically.

Xander, watching from a small gap between the opened door, quietly backed away, closing said door as softly and as hurriedly as he could.

He rushed out of the hanger, not stopping until he was outside in the fresh daylight which covered Sunnydale campus. Shaking he took out his mobile and pressed a number on his speed dial.

"Giles? It's me. We have a very serious problem."
Buffy stood before the mirror in the ensuite bathroom next door to the master bedroom on the first floor of the mansion on Crawford Street, silent and contemplative. Pressing a damp towel to her mouth, she gazed at her reflection bleakly thoughtful. A phrase seemed to repeat itself in her mind over and over again. How was this possible? The answer was simple; it wasn't. This was not supposed to happen, she had been assured of that by the best authority on the subject. Yet she could not deny the symptom, for it was impossible to ignore.

She hadn't told anyone, not even Angel, who still lay fast asleep in the bed next door. At first the incident appeared to be a one off. It freaked her out, but she put it down to the stress she had been going through, and fighting. Now, though, it seemed to pronounce that something darker was lurking beneath the surface.

Of course, she could be jumping to conclusions. Twice did not make the incident commonplace. And so far, she had no additional symptoms. Pressing the damp towel to her forehead, she closed her eyes and sought for clarity, for resolution. When she reached it, or something similar, she put the towel on the heated hand rail and exited the bathroom.

Her gaze settled upon her soulmate, sound asleep, unaware of her troubles. Buffy had not the heart or the will to burden him with this problem yet. And hopefully, it would fade away, turning out to be nothing at all.

The End.
To Be Continued In
SERPENT TO STING YOU
Serpent to Sting You

**Author's Note:** Dialogue taken from the original episode 'Goodbye Iowa', but with various changes, including an additional plot, as my reworking cut a lot of the original storyline. *Enjoy.*

**Serpent to Sting You.**

You seek for knowledge and wisdom as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been.

*Frankenstein* (1818) Letter 4
Mary Shelley (née Godwin) 17971851
English novelist; daughter of William Godwin & Mary Wollstonecraft, wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley

"How come Walsh isn't here?" Buffy whispered to Willow as they sat in the lecture hall for Psychology, the hour for the start of the lesson five minutes gone. "She's normally as punctual as..... well, Giles."

"Where's Riley?" Oz queried the other side his girlfriend.

"I don't know," Willow replied. "But the other Initiative guys seem to be missing too," she added.

The door opened, making the general chatter in the room come to a sudden stop, and everyone looked up as a talk, dark and inordinately handsome man entered. He wore dark, tailored fitting clothes which clung to every inch of his slender yet toned body. His blue eyes seemed to take everyone in with welcoming, almost seductive warmth, which contrasted with his reddish fair hair, that was trimmed in long locks to the roof of his neck.

He walked to the desk, set down the brief case and scrolled paper he was carrying, before addressing the class. "Good morning. I'm afraid Professor Walsh is indisposed and I will taking the remainder of her lectures." His accent was cultured, rich, and difficult to place, lending another facet of mysteriousness to his character. "My name is Serperé Cerastes."

"Is it hot in here?" Buffy murmured to Willow, who fanned herself with her notepad. Around them other students seemed to almost swoon before the professor who appeared to hold their attention in the palm of his hand.

"Today, we are studying curiosity," Cerastes continued. "The human desire for knowledge is one of the unique aspects of the universe. All our lives, we strive to learn, to recover undiscovered truths concerning the origin of our planet, species. Our curiosity is as insatiable as our need to procreate. Anyone who has knowledge, or the key to a new understanding, appears to us as seductive, desirable. From the earliest days upon this earth, we have been taught that knowledge is the key to our existence. But we have also been told that too much knowledge, or the wrong knowledge, is dangerous. The word comes from old English cnãwan or the earlier gecnãwan. It is also of Germanic origin; from an Indo-European root shared by the Latin (g)noscere, Greek; gignoskein. For generations the Greek were revered as the most learned civilisation. Now twenty-first knowledge far out strips them, yet still they and other races hold the key to some mysteries which we do not. Knowledge does not come with a moral compass, how we acquire it or use it, depends
on our character, ironically also developed from knowledge. The biblical tale of Eve and the serpent is a cautionary one, telling us that if knowledge is placed in the wrong hands, it could lead to our destruction."

A boy stands alone in the road, looking straight ahead of him, calculating the distance he had travelled from home, and how best he might get back; the easiest route verses the fastest. Previously he had been looking at his bike, surveying it for any possible damage the ride on the rough surface of the road might have caused it, before examining his remaining travel options, but now his attention was arrested by something coming towards him.

It was not a person, he had seen enough horror movies to know that. And yet it had parts of a person, which was strange, for the real world at least. Other parts of things were mixed into the body too, like a patch work of different animals of nature.

Only nothing of nature that he had ever seen before.

To the boy it looked like something straight out of Frankenstein. He had never heard nor read Mary Shelley, but he knew the tale, knew of the monster. It sang through the ages, cautioning us to fear the grotesque, that which led the way to darkness, to ignorance.

"What am I?" The monster asked when it had arrived in front of him.

"You're a monster." The boy answered.

"I thought so," the beast said resignedly. "What are you?" He asked, curious.

"Me? I'm a boy."

"A boy," the monster mused. "How do you work?"

"I don't know. I just do." The boy pointed to a skewer which was in place of the monster's hand. "What's that for?"

The monster, whose name was Adam, looked at the skewer attached to his wrist, the last gift his mother gave him, then at the boy.

He smiled, as he realised that she had given him another gift with which to obtain knowledge.

Meanwhile, back at the Initiative headquarters, Dr Angleman was entering the restricted access rooms, having arrived for his usual morning hours of work at the experiments, before conducting the morning briefing for the army personnel.

After trying all the switches, he made the discovery that none of the lights in the lab area were working. Idly he wondered if something had tripped the circuit breaker again, which despite the wealth of government resources for this operation, was not as uncommon as one might think it could be.

"Dr Walsh?" He called out warily, remembering her often penchant to work late into the night, even the early hours of the morning.

He glanced at the examination table, noticing the absent outline of their most valuable and
therefore most secret pet project. He glanced at the wall on which hung the alarm system that was supposed to let them know if such an event as his escape occurred. The lid of the box had been ripped off, and the cables torn apart, their inner optical wiring destroyed.

"Adam?" He tried even more cautiously.

Suddenly he felt himself slip on the unusually dirty floor tiled floor. Normally, no matter who was working, it was swept clean, sterilised constantly to prevent contamination. As he recovered, slowly rising to a seated position, he noticed by the light of white walls and the metallic floor that the stain which had made him fall was red.

Blood red.

Slowly he raised his eyes to see Professor Walsh lying dead before him, a bone saw protruding at an ugly angle through her stomach. Her eyes stared frozenly at him, appearing to call from the grave for justice, for help.

And Dr Angleman knew, by staring around the empty lab, exactly who was responsible for this heinous crime.

And the knowledge scared the living daylights out of him.

"Sunnydale is still reeling from news of the crime. A source in the coroner's office tells us that the boy was stabbed with what looks like some kind of large skewer and his body was then mutilated. Police have not named a suspect and the killer is still at large."

The scooby gang were watching this piece of midday news with grim concern as they waited for Xander to return from the university campus, after news that he called Giles during Psychology class. During his telephone call he had not explained exactly why they were in very serious trouble, so all their imaginations were running wild as to what could have possibly been behind Room 314. It had worried them enough to make them switch the location of their headquarters and next meeting to the Mansion on Crawford Street which provided better protection than Giles and Jenny's apartment. As in large, thick walls and heavy, locked doors, and large windows of one way paneled glass through which they could see out but no one could see in while protecting the vampires whom they trusted from the deadly rays of sunlight during the day.

The news anchorman had switched to other items of interest concerning world events when the door to the Mansion opened and a shaken Xander finally entered.

"What's up?" Buffy immediately asked.

"We have a very serious problem," Xander replied.

"You said that in your telephone call," Anya pointed out, slightly irritated. "How serious can it be?"

"Extremely. Professor Walsh was making some kind of android, Frankenstein-like demon." Xander paused as he sank down into a spare chair. "It had the arm of that Polgara thing, along with various other demon parts." He paused again, to look at them all. "And it used a bone saw to kill Professor Walsh."

There was collective gasp as everyone digested this piece of news. Buffy then leaned forward and added, "It's also, by the looks of it, just killed a young boy."
"Oh god." Xander glanced at the television screen just as the news returned to the main headlines. "This is all my fault. I should have locked the door before getting the hell out of there and warning you."

"Based on what you've just described, I doubt that would have stopped it," Wesley added grimly.

Buffy rose from her chair. "I'm going to the crime scene to see what I can find out. Xander, work with Angel, to get a sketch of this demon. I want to know what parts of demons it has and what they can make him do when all put together. And I want to know where it is. When I find it I'm going to make him pay for taking that kid's life. I'll make him die in ways he can't even imagine."

The crime scene had all its usual appearance and paraphernalia; the yellow, plastic tape around a squared area, crime scene investigation officers dressed in white suits examining every inch of the ground for evidence. An inquisitive press a metre from the ribbon, flashing cameras and trying to push past uniformed police officers.

Buffy watched the scene from a distance, her mind and her expression grim as she tried not to imagine how the poor boy, whose body was still lying on the ground, a white sheet covering him, had met his death at the hands of this new demonic threat.

"Buffy. Hey." A voice said behind her.

She turned to see the missing TA. "Riley. Hey. Listen...." she began in a serious voice.

"Maggie's dead," he preempted her. "Happy now?"

Then he pounced on her.

Buffy had not been prepared, but it was without difficulty that she managed to dodge his first punch and then return one of her own on target.

Glancing at the crime scene, she calculated the distance, and used the temporary stunned effect her punch had on her opponent to run a bit further into the surrounding forest, out of the way of the prying eyes of the press and authorities.

Riley followed her, running to come closer, then struck again. She blocked his punching arm and returned with another strike.

"What's wrong with you?" She asked him.

"You killed her!" Was the response.

"She tried to kill me!" Buffy answered as she blocked another punch. "Not that it means I killed her. You saw the tape."

"I don't care. She's dead!" Riley punched again.

Buffy blocked it once more. She saw suddenly that her opponent was shaking. She stopped and looked collectively at him. He was sweating, and his eyes looked bloodshot, two symptoms, which when added to his intense display of anger, did not bowed well for his immediate health and wellbeing.

"Riley, something's wrong with you," she stated solemnly.

"You're telling me," he agreed, before passing out on the ground.
"So you brought him here?" Giles asked his slayer incredulously after he had witnessed her return to the Mansion with Riley and place him in one of the spare bedrooms.

I could hardly leave him out on the street," Buffy pointed out.

Giles frowned. "Why didn't you take him to the Initiative?"

"Because he's probably suffering from withdrawal of those drugs they take, and what with Walsh's death I didn't think they'd be in a fit state to deal with him," Buffy added.

"And the threat he poses here?" Her watcher reminded her.

"I think that's minimal now, don't you?" his slayer countered. "With Walsh's death and their secret pet project on the loose, the Initiative is basically shut down. Besides, all of you are here. I don't think he can get pass any of you in that state."

"Very well," Giles relented, "we'll look after him here. Where are you going?"

"To the Initiative, to see what the situation there is." Buffy walked into the main room, where the rest of the scooby gang was hard at work researching the possible demon parts of the monster who had escaped from Room 314. "I'll take Xander, for backup, just in case Walsh deleted my retinal scan."

"Be careful," Giles advised her as they exited. He turned to the rest of the occupants of the large living room. "Willow, Tara. Go to Jenny." He handed them an ancient, leather bound book. "And take this. There's a spell in here I want you to try."

At Giles and Jenny's apartment three witches sat around a square of twine created upon the floor, made to resemble a map of Sunnydale. Around it, sat Willow, Tara and Jenny, the three wiccans of the slayerettes. In their hands they each held a green coloured sand or powder over a thick circular candle, which burned gently in its holder.

"Thespia," Willow began, holding a handful of green sand, "we walk in shadow, walk in blindness. You are the protector of the night."

"Thespia," Jenny continued, "goddess, ruler of all darkness, we implore you, open a window to the world of the underbeing."

The trio closed their eyes. Tara took the opportunity to hide her powder, while the other two blew theirs over the map.

"With your knowledge," Tara uttered, "may we go in safety. With your grace may we speak of your benevolence."

They opened their eyes.

The map remained a blank bit of carpet and twine, with green powder scattered areas, as opposed to a glowing outline of evil hot spots, focusing on the most important threats to the hellmouth at this time.

"Or not," Willow remarked.

"If it's any consolation," Giles said after he had heard the news of Willow and Tara concerning the
failure of the spell after they returned to the Mansion, "we haven't fared much better here."

"Is Riley ok?" Tara asked.

"Well he's asleep," Giles replied, glancing at the bed which contained what he hoped a temporary guest, "finally. But he doesn't look good. He's suffering all the classic symptoms of withdrawal, high fever, temperature. If the rest of the Initiative are like this, they're in real trouble. I'm glad we made sure Xander didn't take them."

"Where's Buffy?" A voice asked.

Willow and Giles turned to see Riley up and about.

"She went out," Willow replied nervously. "Can-can I get you something?"

Riley shook his head. "Just tell me where she is."

"You're not well, Riley," Giles remarked. "You need to rest."

Riley punched Willow, flooring her. Tara knelt beside her, checking to see if she was okay. "I'm fine. And I'm going."

Giles stepped up to stop him.

And that's when everything went to hell.

In the bowels of the Initiative labs, Buffy and Xander eavesdropped on a conversation between Dr Angleman and a technician as they stood outside the restricted access area.

Getting into the lab had been a breeze. Professor Walsh had failed to remove the slayer's retinal scan from the database, enabling them to enter through the mirror in the room of the deserted frat house, empty because all of the members of the fraternity were currently in the medical bay below, being treated for withdrawal from the enhancing drugs all had been unknowingly consuming, and down the lift to the main hanger.

"How many of the men are still out?" Dr Angleman asked worriedly. "The longer they go without their meds....."

"Everyone's off their schedules because of the professor's death." The technician pointed out, unreassuringly.

"It's dangerous," Dr Angleman continued. "I don't want to think about the damage the guys could do under the stress of withdrawal, especially since they won't understand what's happening to them. These guys don't know they've been getting meds in their food, so we better get them in here stat."

"We've located all but a few," the technician said. "The last ones were in pretty bad shape, but we managed to stabilise them."

"But Finn wasn't one of them," Dr Angleman guessed.

"Right," the tech confirmed.

"Find him," Angleman ordered. "He's the one I care about. He's too important to our work to lose now."
The tech nodded. "Indeed."

"Keep me posted," his boss added, "I'll be in records."

Dr Angleman walked out of the room in to the corridors of the underground complex, only to be grabbed and lifted up by his shirt.

"Now I don't generally like to kill humans," the slayer informed him as she held him above the ground. "But I've learned that it pays to be flexible in life."

"I was wondering when you'd turn up," Dr Angleman remarked. He turned his head to see Xander standing beside her. "Harris, you need to report the medical bay. Stat."

"Sorry, Dr Angleman, but I didn't take any of those drugs you and Walsh proscribed us," Xander informed him. "Thankfully."

"Oh darn!" The Slayer added, still holding the doctor up, "so this isn't a surprise. Now you can tell me what drugs you have been giving your army guys and after that, well, we can take a tour of room 314."

"Somebody's coming, you know." Dr Angleman informed them. "I'm sure they've already seen you on the security monitors."

"Monitors are non-functional at this time, sir," Riley announced as he came upon them. Went down about ten minutes ago."

"Finn take this girl to the stockade immediately," Dr Angleman commanded.

"I'm more interested in conversation, sir," Riley remarked.

"Maggie wanted me dead, didn't she?" Buffy asked.

"She did," Angleman confirmed. "But understand the Initiative has no interest in eliminating the slayer. It was her own vendetta."

Buffy frowned. "Why?"

"I don't know," Angleman replied.

"That's enough," Riley admonished. "You're making her sound like some psychopath. She wasn't like that. She was a brilliant woman."

"She was," Angleman agreed. "It's not....."

Riley cut him off. "All she was trying to do was help people - and this is how you want them to remember her?"

"Riley, focus here," Buffy ordered. "What do you think, Xand? Vampire forms of torture? Or the demon kind?" She turned back to the doctor. "Honestly, the amount I've learnt from them in such a short time..."

"It was the project," Angleman confessed. "314. It escaped."

"We gathered as much by the evisceration of a young boy on the news this morning," Buffy remarked.
Riley was not listening. Instead he was looking at Xander. "You. How come you're here with her?"

"There's a lot of things you don't know, Riley," Xander replied. "Even more that you might find out about tonight. And what state did you leave those in the Mansion in?"

Riley ignored his question. "So I see," he said, before turning round and walking away, down to the deserted emergency exits.

Xander turned and took out his mobile. He dialled a number then put it to his ear. After five minutes of silence, he ended the call. "There's no reply."

"Go," Buffy told him. "Let me know if they're okay."

"On it," Xander replied as he ran out in the same direction as Riley.

"Finn!" Dr Angleman called out. "Finn!" He turned to Buffy with an urgent plea in his eyes. "He needs to come back. To be treated."

"That's not a priority right now, I think," Buffy said, as she let him stand once more.

Dr Angleman shook his head. "You don't understand. It wasn't just Adam Dr Walsh experimented with."

"Adam?" Buffy queried.

"The name for Project 314." Dr Angleman paused and then spoke in an awed tone. "He was meant to be a superhuman army machine. Capable of defeating any opponent. Walsh and I worked on him for months. He was supposed to be....."

"A biomechanical demonoid designed by Maggie Walsh," the demon in question continued, telling Dr Angleman's story. Not to the slayer, but to another, to whom the information mattered just as deeply. "In addition to organic material I'm equipped with GP-2, D-11 Infrared Detectors, A Harmonic Decelerator, plus D.C. Servo."

He paused and added in a somewhat wistful tone, "I've been thinking about the world. I wanted to see it, learn it. I saw the inside of that boy......" he trailed off as he mused on that memory, "and it was beautiful. But it didn't tell me about the world. It just made me feel. So now I want to learn about me. Why do I feel? What I am?"

Adam paused again, then continued telling the man standing before him in the caves of his current hideout, his story. "She pieced me together from parts of other demons. And man. And machine. Which tells me what I am, but not who I am. Mother wrote things down. Hard data, but also her feelings. That's how I learned that I have a job to do upon this earth. And that she loved me."

Adam stepped forward, closer to the man he was talking to. "She also made you. You had a birth mother, who raised you until you joined the Initiative, but she was the one who shaped your basic operating system. She taught you how to think, how to feel. She fed you chemicals to make you stronger, both your mind and your body. She said that you and I were her favourite children. Her art. That makes us brothers. Family." He examined the expression on the young's man's face. "That's pain, isn't it? Why? Because your feeding schedule, the chemicals, have been interrupted? Or do you miss her? Tell me."

"I'll kill you," Riley tried to vow.
"You won't," Adam assured him. "You haven't been programmed to."

Riley gasped. "I can not be programmed. I'm a man."

Adam shook his head, touching the man's shoulder with one hand, and held up a disk with the other. "The plan she had for us. What happens. How it ends. It's all in here. Do you want to hear?"

"Yes." Riley replied.

"Well that was informative," Buffy remarked as she entered the Mansion on Crawford Street, to find various members of the slayerettes scattered about the sofas and other plush furnishing, recovering from the Finn visitation. "How is everyone here?"

"Bruised, mostly," Giles replied. "Did you see Riley at the Initiative HQ?"

"Yes, but he took off before I finished interrogating Angleman," Buffy answered. "And what he told me isn't good. Adam is a killing machine. He was designed to be the perfect soldier, for demonic and human prey. The answer to draft shortages. Only now he's gone and done a Frankenstein on his creator before heading for the hills."

"Did he give any key to disabling him?" Angel asked.

"No," Buffy replied. "Apart from implying that it could be impossible." She sought the comfort of the nearest empty chair. "Well, at least we have a new psych teacher."

Giles frowned. "That was quick, the news didn't reach the faculty till this afternoon."

"Well, he taught us this morning," Willow added. "Very... informative."

Buffy nodded, a dreamy expression forming on her face. "He had a certain...... engaging style."

"Is that the tall, dark reddish blond guy?" Anya sought to ascertain. "I saw him on my way to class. Very sexy."

"Oh, yeah," Cordelia added. "I saw him too. What's his name?"

"Serpé Cerastes," Buffy replied, her voice acquiring the same quality as her face.

The boyfriends frowned at the reaction of their girlfriends, while Giles and Wesley glanced at each other in thought.

"Cerastes," the latter echoed. "Isn't that an old word for Serpent?"

"As is Serpere," Giles agreed. "Buffy, I think this guy could be a demon in disguise."

"One hell of a sexy disguise," his slayer murmured.

Giles directed a silent glance at Spike, who frowned, before understanding the message and abruptly delivering a slap to the slayer's face which had the both of them clutching their heads in varying degrees of agony.

"Oww!" Buffy held a tentative hand to her cheek. "What was that for?"

"You need to focus, Buffy," Giles replied. "Cerastes is a demon. I'll have to check my books to be sure, but I believe he's a snake designed to spread evil."
Wesley nodded. "He's existed since the dawn of time. Eve and serpent is not just a biblical tale, its also a cautionary one about Cerastes."

"Great," Buffy said. "Not only do we have a Initiative created demon on theloose, but we also have a handsome serpent to take care of. Sorry honey," she added as she caught Angel's injured frown direct at her. "How do I kill it?"

"Fortunately, all you need is a poisoned apple," Wesley replied.

"A poisoned apple?" Buffy queried. "But why does Cerastes give Eve an apple?"

"Symbolism and misplaced translations," Giles replied. "If anyone had bothered to properly translate rather than from the Polyglot, they would have seen that Eve tries to use the apple to kill the creature, but his seductive talents force her to use it on herself."

"We'll have to check the books to see which chemical combination to use," Wesley added as they slowly got up and headed for the door.

"Perhaps I better take care of this one," Angel proposed.

"No, I can overcome my attraction," Buffy objected.

"Still, it would be wise to have a backup," Giles agreed. "Come on you two, you can go to the campus from my apartment after we mix the potion and inject the apple."

"Be very very quiet. We are hunting Cerastes," Buffy mocked as Angel parked the car in his designated space at the campus an hour later.

Giles and Wesley consulted the book at the former's apartment, then mixed the potion before injecting it into the apple which Angel now held. Due to research, they had customised the poison to become fatal only for the serpent, whom she and Angel were now searching for.

They quitted the vehicle and made their way through the traffic of students to the faculty building, where Cerastes was likely to be as classes had ended half an hour ago. As they neared the location, the flow of students decreased, and the quantity of lecturers and professors increased. Those who knew Angel and Buffy dealt them slight nods of greeting as they walked pass them or came from behind on to ahead of them. Slayer and half souled vampire returned the greetings in the same vein, anxious that nothing delayed them in finding the demon. Cerastes was below Adam in the list of priorities, and had to be taken care of quickly if they wanted to concentrate fully on the latter.

Entering the faculty building, Buffy slowed her pace to level with her soulmate, who possessed a better familiarity with the complex than she, having over year now as Professor of Art History. Buffy allowed herself a brief smile as she recalled the time last year when he went for the job, from his first interview until the night they celebrated his new position in the normal working world. Although they had never discussed it, she could see how much of a positive effect acquiring such a job had on him.

His confidence in dealing with the world was better founded, along with a more secure inner confidence and trust that he could belong to her world as easily as she slipped into his. Since his return from hell they had gradually evolved in a duo of warriors working for the Powers That Be, as well as a normal relationship of a couple who worked and lived together. The professorship produced a respect not just from the slayerettes, adults and teenagers alike, but from the outside world, who had no knowledge of Angel's talents. And in gratitude for this respect her angel became not just a great warrior, but a great human as well.
They reached the room where Cerastes was relaxing, catching sight of him seated on a sofa as they gazed through the small square window in the top half of the door. Buffy glanced around the room, seeing the other teaching staff, and frowned.

"It would be so much easier if this poison was in a dart we could blow," she murmured to Angel as they stood outside the door.

"We should have anticipated that he wouldn't be alone," Angel agreed.

Buffy glanced around, and suddenly she found a solution. "There, that bowl of fruit. You put the apple in it and take in. No one will question your entrance."

"Good idea," Angel agreed before fetching the bowl. "But how will we make him eat the right fruit?"

"I'm hoping he'll want to grab the apple first before anyone else tries," Buffy replied. "At this moment, we don't have other options."

"Okay," Angel replied. He placed the fruit in the bowl, then Buffy stepped back to allow him to open the door and enter the room. She watched him walk in, nodding in silent greeting to some professors that he knew, then lay the bowl down on the table nearby Cerastes. She was surprised when he held out his hand to him. Quickly she slipped inside the room, hiding behind armchair to overhear the conversation.

"Hello, you must be Professor Cerastes."

"I am," the man replied. "And you are?"

"Angel O'Connor, Art History," Angel replied, shaking the man's hand. "My girlfriend was talking about you all through lunch. You've made quite a hit with the female student population. Looks like I'm in for some competition."

"Really?" Cerastes echoed. "I had no idea. Who is your girlfriend?"

"You mean you haven't heard the scandal?" Angel queried. "Gossip standards must be slipping. Buffy Summers. You teach her Psych classes, now that Professor Walsh has passed." He picked up a piece of fruit from the bowl, taking a bite and chewing slowly. He was glad his beloved had taken the time to convince him to acquire eating habits once more. Thanks to his half Shanshu, he was also learning the taste of things too.

Cerastes eyed the fruit bowl, the dark red apple holding his interest immediately. He noticed O'Connor take a piece of fruit, and suddenly he realised how hungry he was, and not just for young, curious minds. He reached out and took the piece of fruit.

Angel made sure he neither slowed his chewing or changed his facial expression as he watched and waited for Cerastes to take a bite of the poisonous apple. He had to stay with the professor long enough to make sure the chemical took full effect. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed his beloved hiding nearby. Careful not to draw attention from his companion, he traced the sign of a cross upon his face, trying not to flinch as he remembered Angelus craving such marks in the same spot upon his first victims in Ireland, so long ago. He took a look at Buffy, repeating the sign to make sure she understood. When he saw her retreating, he knew that she had. He turned to Cerastes in time to see him take the first bite of the apple.

It took some time before the serpent realised that the piece of fruit was drugged. When he, Cerastes gagged and choked, grateful that he wasn't alone, hoping that someone in the room would call for
the nurse. He was quite surprised at how quickly one came. He closed his eyes as he felt someone lift him into their arms and carry him out of the room. Unconsciousness reached him just as they emerged into the corridor. Death soon followed, returning him to his natural serpent-like form.

Buffy turned to Angel, who calmly put the demon in the bag she had handed him, tying the opening with a piece of string. "What do we do now?"

"Take it to Giles and Wesley," Angel replied.

They took the creature back to his car, then returned to Oakpark street, where Giles suggested a ritual burning of the demon, similar to the one they had used to destroy the Glove of Myhnegon over a year ago. When this was done, the angel and his beloved headed home.

Buffy willed her breathing to slow down and return to something approaching her normal resting rate. Pressing the damp towel to her mouth, she gazed into the mirror and silently calculated how many times she found herself in this position during the past two weeks. The answer terrified her, which was rare, for few things in this world had the ability to do that to her now. She still hadn't told Angel, though really the time for telling him had long since passed.

Hell, Giles had a right to know now too. But she wasn't ready to tell anyone. She couldn't justify the symptom, or identify a cause. Her visit to her family doctor, the first for many years, revealed nothing out of the ordinary, aside from mild stress levels and fatigue, not uncommon in teenagers, he told her. Yet this was uncommon, especially for her, and those who were called before her.

And still she hesitated to confess. Despite the countless opportunities, the moments just between her and Giles or her and Angel, or even the both of them, left her reluctant to the point of concealment. She ignored her conscience, the better voices in her head telling her to come clean, her woman's, even her slayer's intuition. When the moments passed, she told herself that it was better to keep silent, that they had enough problems to deal with, especially now they had the Initiative's pet project on the loose through the hellmouth.

Closing her eyes, she sought for clarity, resolution and peace of mind, a harder goal to reach as every morning brought more incidents. She pressed the damp towel to her forehead, then returned it to the heated rail before exiting the bathroom. As usual her gaze settled on her sleeping soulmate, still oblivious to these morning toilet breaks. Why did she shrink from telling him? Buffy wasn't sure anymore.

Yet, even as she imagined waking him up and coming clean, she felt herself fearful of the reaction, even though she could predict what it might turn out to be. Angel loved her, she was more certain of that than she had even been, and he would be upset that she feared confiding in him, that she wanted to protect him from this truth. Yet, though each morning's passing made the task even more difficult, Buffy kept her silence, and her counsel, softly praying that it would pass.

Because it had to.

*The End.*

To Be Continued In....

*Faith's Transcendent Dower*
Faith's Transcendent Dower

Author's Note: I have changed the ending for this episode, in order to give part two a proper extension. Other than that, is episode has some dialogue taken from Joss' cannon: This Year's Girl. A lot of the symbolism in the dreams was meant to be an allusion to my original plot line for Season Five, which was to make Buffy pregnant. I have however, changed that, as I felt that particular element has been used far too much, so I settled for bringing in a young innocent to be saved to play Dawn's role. Fortunately, the symbolism still works as a reference to where Buffy stabbed Faith, and the old biblical adage of an eye for an eye. Enjoy.

Faith's Transcendent Dower.

Enough, if something from our hands have power
To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,
Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent dower,
We feel that we are greater than we know.

'The River Duddon' (1820) no. 34 'After-Thought'
William Wordsworth 1770-1850
English poet; brother of Dorothy Wordsworth

It was the night before morning, and all through the mansion on Crawford street, not a creature was stirring, not even a vampire.

In the master bedroom, next to her half-human, half-vampire soulmate, slept the slayer. Buffy dreamt the dreams of her calling, dreams she had not dreamed since the night the Gentlemen arrived.

She was in hospital, standing over a bed she had not visited since graduation day, when the high school and the mayor had exploded into the mouth of hell. In the bed, hooked up to countless machines and saline drips lay her sister of sorts, the second slayer called after her brief 'death' at the hands of the master; Faith.

Peacefully asleep. Buffy felt her dream-self reach out and take her hand, watching over her in a way she would never have dared to do all those months ago during the chaos that was her high school graduation day. Faith had the paleness of those suffering from a long illness, the kind no one expects them to survive.

Buffy almost felt sorry for her.

"I know what you're thinking," a familiar voice said suddenly, causing her to look up. Faith stood beside her, attired in a short sleeve top and jeans. Another aspect of dreaming; doubles of beings in the same at the same time.

"She needs help," the Faith standing beside her continued. "The question is B; do you really believe you can bring her back?"

Buffy felt herself look from the one Faith to the other lying in the bed. But that Faith was no longer there. In yet another quality unique to the land of dreams, the location had changed too; she could
tell as much by the sheets.

They were in the Mansion, the third floor to be precise; in the third ensuite bedroom. Before her was the queen size bed that belonged to the room, waiting to be made.

"Catch me if you can."

She looked up to see Faith standing across from her, on the other side of the unmade bed. Just in time Buffy caught the oxford style pillow which her sister slayer had thrown to her. She felt her eyes examine the white cotton material that covered it, noting the bloodstain which seemed to appear out of nowhere.

She looked up to see Faith bleeding too, from the wound where she had stabbed her nearly a year ago.

"Damn," Faith said, "just when we'd made it so nice." She grabbed the dagger with both hands. "Aren't you ever gonna take this thing out?"

Buffy felt her dream-self walk round the edge of the bed to Faith. She watched her hands take hold of the dagger and slowly pull it out.

Just as the point had become visible, the location reverted back to that hospital room. Her dream-self was back by the bed where the unconscious Faith lay again, holding her pallid hand in her tanned one.

Then Faith opened her eyes, sat up and stabbed her visitor in the abdomen.

With the sound of a half-swallowed scream Buffy woke up. For a moment she sat still in the bed, regulating her breathing until the pounding of her heart had faded into its barely perceptible but normal rate. Then she lifted the duvet, and was relieved to find that her abdomen bore no scar or gushing wound from the attack which had felt so real.

The mansion that had been so deathly quiet before now woke with her, or rather before her, as the slayer realised she could hear the ringing of the phone. Just as she had gathered enough of herself to have the strength to answer it, another shock proved to be in store, in the form of a hand on her shoulder.

"Relax, its me," Angel said to her softly after Buffy felt herself touch the mattress beneath them both once again. She turned to look at him as he asked her, "are you okay?"

Buffy nodded. "I'm fine. But we need to get up."

"No we don't," Angel remarked just as the second line clicked in from the answer machine on his beside table, copying the ringing sound of the main phone downstairs. "I can answer it from here."

"There's no need," Buffy uttered, forestalling him with her hand on his, "I know who's calling. We have to get to Giles' and Jenny's."

Angel had known his beloved long enough to descry the expression which was on her face at that moment. Without further questions he obeyed her, rising from the bed and walking over to the wardrobe to change.
Buffy followed suit, grabbing her patrolling clothes from the night before. They rushed through their ablutions, calling for Spike to get up on the way.

Minutes later the roofed convertible was screeching to a stop outside the entrance of the apartments on Oakpark Street. Barely a second after that Buffy led the race to number 523B, Angel slightly behind, and Spike, with a large blanket to protect him from the 'sunny' elements following.

Giles opened the door just as she had raised her hand to knock. Still at his ear was the phone, from which she could hear the message she and Angel used on the mansion's answering machine.

"I've been trying to reach you," he greeted the trio with, before standing back, and holding open his front door to let them in.

"I know," Buffy answered as Spike dashed past them all into the relative safety of the living room.

"Faith's awake," she added, to the room at large as she entered.

Xander was the first to recover. "I'd say this qualifies for a 'Worst Timing Ever' award."

The rest of the scooby gang had already assembled in Giles' and Jenny's apartment, summoned by phone calls with no explanation, waiting patiently for everyone else to appear for this emergency meeting, before the news was broken by the last to arrive.

"What did the hospital say?" Angel asked Giles.

"That one minute she was in a coma, and the next she had just opened her eyes," the watcher answered. "Now she's in the middle of a verbal fight with the entire hospital staff on the ward, trying to convince them that she can be released on her own terms, without anyone coming to collect her, as we arranged."

"We'll have to collect her," Buffy remarked, "before the verbal fight becomes a physical one."

"What about Adam?" Willow asked.

"I'd hate to see the pursuit of a homicidal lunatic get in the way," Xander paused for emphasis, "of pursuing a homicidal lunatic."

"I think Faith takes precedence here," Wesley commented. "At the very least, we had can get her somewhere where she is not in a position to do harm to anyone."

"Oooh! I have an idea! Beat the crap out of her!" Cordelia commented.

"Good plan on paper," Wesley replied, "but we still have a decision to make. Do we hand her over to the cops? They wouldn't know what to do with a Slayer even if they knew such a being existed."

"What about the Council?" Tara asked him.

"Been there. Tried that," Xander answered for Wesley. "Not unlike smothering a forest fire with napalm as I recall."

"There's no way around it," Buffy said. "Faith is back, and whether I like it or not, she's my responsibility. We don't know what she's thinking, what she's feeling..."

"Who she's doing," Cordelia broke in with.
"Tad difficult in a coma, don't you think, Cordy?" The slayer countered.

"She's woken up," the former cheerleader pointed out. "I wouldn't give her being above using seduction to get out of hospital."

"She could be terrified," Joyce remarked, continuing her daughter's theme. "Maybe she doesn't even remember. Or maybe she does and she's sorry."

"Perhaps there's some form of rehabilitation we just haven't thought about," Jenny pointed out.

"There might be," Giles remarked from his seat by his desk. He pushed his chair back and opened one of the drawers from which he retrieved his address and phone book. "There's a contact I know from my pre-watcher days. He might be able to help us."

"Not called Ethan by any chance?" Oz asked.

"Don't worry he's not human. He's an expert in alternative therapy. He has the ability to read people's souls, their destinies." Giles paused to open the address book and begin searching for the number in question. "He's currently based in L.A, so he could be here in two hours."

"In the mean time," Wesley said to the room at large, "what do we do with her? We can't put her back into a coma, as helpful as that would be."

"We'll take her in," Angel decided, gesturing at himself, Spike and Buffy.

"I agree," Buffy answered, causing most in the room to look at her with surprise. "We have the space, and what with a slayer and two vampires, one chipped, the other half-human but still full strength, we can contain her well enough."

"She'll need picking up from the hospital then," Giles commented, still flicking through his address book.

Buffy rose up from the seat she shared with Angel. "We'll do that now."

The Art History professor followed suit, while Spike grabbed his blanket before doing likewise. "I suppose I'd better get the place ready. A psychotic slayer," he mused aloud, as he neared the door, "that should make for an interesting houseguest."

"Why do I think they'll get along like a house on fire?" Willow commented after Spike had dashed outside to access the sewer route home.

"Better not say that to Faith," Oz pointed out, "she might get ideas."

"I'll let you know when my contact arrives," Giles said to Buffy and Angel as he accompanied them to the door.

"Thanks. In the meantime, can you guys keep a watch out for Adam?" The slayer asked them all. "Thirteen of us should be able to look after two homicidal lunatics at a time."

"Are you sure you're okay with Faith as our houseguest?" Angel asked his beloved while they were in his car en-route to the hospital.

"I'm sure," Buffy replied, briefly touching his hand as he moved it from the steering wheel to the
“Whatever her motives were, she was acting under the orders of the mayor when she shot you. Any feelings of revenge which I had that gave me the desire to attack her, wore away when she gave the key to the mayor’s Achilles’ heel. All her troubles date back to the moment she killed his deputy and our failure to help her deal with it then. She may be a slayer, but she’s also something else. A girl who had to grow up too soon because of the responsibilities of our calling.”

Angel glanced at her for a moment before returning his gaze to the road view from his windscreen, checking her expression. "You think her actions were your fault, don't you?"

Buffy nodded. "In hindsight we could have done things differently when it came to dealing with her. Not calling in the Watcher's Council for one thing. And I should have gone to Giles the moment after I watched her kill the deputy mayor, instead of holding back."

"It's not your fault," Angel countered, causing her to look at him instead of the passenger side window. "I hold responsibility in this too. I could have counselled you more convincingly when you first told me what happened. And Faith for that matter."

"Let's not quarrel any more about who should be blamed when it comes to Faith," Buffy remarked, taking his hand once more. "Let's just try and help her now."

"Agreed," Angel nodded as he turned into the exit for the hospital.

They pulled into the semi-busy carpark and he put the car to a stop in one of the empty spaces reserved for visitors. Then he and Buffy got out and walked into the building.

"Pulling out an IV like that generally causes the entry wound to bleed. I'd advise you to wait until the doctor clears you."

"Clear me already, I'm five by five."

"Faith," the doctor began in a trying-to-calm-the-patient-down voice, "if you will just wait for the tests to come back, and someone to arrive to collect you, then you can have the IV taken out and you can go home."

"I don't need a babysitter, I'm perfectly well."

The doctor's expression seemed to portray that he believed otherwise, but then he happened to look up and find that his worries concerning his current patient were solved for now, by the arrival of one of the people who held power of attorney.

"You can go ahead and clear her, doctor," Buffy uttered, "we're here now."

"Miss Summers?" The doctor sought to confirm as he rose from the bed. "Mr Giles informed me of your future arrival a few minutes ago. Thank you."

"Is there anything she needs?" Buffy asked him. "Medication, or the like?"

"No, but you should check back with me in a few days when the tests are back. I'll have a clearer picture then."

"Hey B," Faith remarked.
"Hello Faith," Buffy returned.

There was a moment of silence as the two slayers stared at each other, trying to see what was hiding behind their eyes. "Are you gonna take this thing out then?" Faith asked the nurse abruptly breaking the stare.

The nurse obliged and extracted the end of the IV drip. Faith rose up and grabbed her jacket, having managed to dress herself before the staff had discovered that she was awake. She walked over to Buffy. "Let's go."

Buffy inclined her head in a goodbye to the doctor before leading her sister slayer down the corridor and outside.

"Wow," Faith remarked as they came upon Angel, who was leaning against his car in the visitors parking, waiting for them. "The tanned look suits you, Angel."

"Thank you," Angel replied before straightening up and opening one of the rear passenger doors. "I wasn't actually sure I would get one."

Faith halted in her tracks to look at the car. "Nice wheels. A 1967 Plymouth Belvedere GTX. If I'd know you had such great taste I wouldn't have tried to kill you."

"Thanks I think," Angel uttered as he ushered in and closed the door.

Buffy walked quickly round to the front passenger door and got in. Angel followed suit and there was an uneasy silence while he started up the car and drove it out of the hospital parking into the road.

"So, where's my prison awaiting?" Faith asked when they were on their way.

"The Mansion," Buffy answered. "And you're not a prisoner, you're our houseguest. Your old apartment was sold by the new mayor when he came into office."

"Yeah, so I heard from the doc when I asked what happened on graduation day. Gotta say I'm glad I missed my former boss turning into a snake. Loved to know who blew the High School up though."

"That was Giles," Buffy informed her.

Faith raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Really? Colour me stunned. So, you've moved into the mansion, now?"

Buffy nodded. "Yeah. There's also one other houseguest, by the name of Spike."

"And what's his trauma?" Faith asked.

"Angel is his grandsire," Buffy replied.

"Is he souled too?" Faith queried.

Her 'sister' shook her head while inwardly shivering at the thought. "No, just chipped. Turns out there's a secret army government project concerned with rehabilitating vampires that operates on Sunnydale campus. They're speciality is giving them shots of pain whenever they hit a human. Naturally, the vamps aren't too happy about this. And Spike is not renowned for his mild character. He used to drive railroad spikes through his victims, and he killed two slayers."
"Sounds like my kind of guy," Faith mused as the car pulled into the driveway of the mansion.

The trio got out and walked inside, to find the vampire in question waiting for them; in the disarmingly deceptive casual pose of leaning against the staircase newel post, a leatherbound volume in his hand.

"Writing poetry?" Angel asked him as they entered.

Spike glared at him before turning to the stranger. "You must be Faith."

Faith smiled and stepped forward to take his outstretched hand. "And you've gotta be Spike."

The vampire grinned. "Glad to see my reputation still has pull."

"Spike," Buffy began, making him turn to her. "Can you show Faith around and keep her company? I have classes, and Angel has lectures."

"Sure," Spike agreed, his eyes still on Faith.

Buffy and Angel reluctantly turned and walked out of the house.

"You think Spike will keep an eye on her?" She asked Angel as they got back into his car outside.

"I think so," Angel answered, only half-convinced himself.

"So, I guess I ought to give you the grand tour," Spike commented when the door had closed, leaving him and Faith alone.

Faith nodded curiously. "Please, I never got a chance to fully look at this place the last time I was here."

"Right, step this way." He walked into the living room, "Here we have your typical first floor open plan style which has become so popular of late. This is the living room."

"Very creature of the night," Faith mused.

"Isn't it just?" Spike agreed before continuing his estate agent spiel. "You'll be pleased to learn that all furniture is included in your stay as houseguest. Now if you follow me further into the open plan on this floor, you can see the elegant dining room. That door there leads to the enclosed garden, which features everything your modern vampire needs, including midnight-blooming jasmines. The dining table can seat fourteen, as well having the strength to withstand human weight should you at any time want to ravish a vampire."

The slayer raised her eyebrow intrigued. "Let me guess; B and Angel have put that theory to the test?"

Spike leered. "Correct. Moving on rapidly; here through this door we have the state of art kitchen, complete with all modern appliances. As you can see, it is large enough to hold a separate breakfast area."

He led her back through the living room. "If you look up, you will notice that part of the this floor has a double height ceiling. And here we have the grand staircase leading to the first floor."

They walked up the stairs.
"This floor holds the Master suite," Spike continued, his English accent turned posh to fit into the part of estate agent. "And master ensuite bath. Access to further floors is obtained by this spiral staircase.

"On the second floor are bedrooms one and two, both ensuite. These are currently unoccupied as the master suite has yet to be soundproofed. And here on the final floor, are bedrooms three and four, also both ensuite. Mine is the one to your right."

"I think I'll take the other one," Faith decided.

"Excellent choice," Spike remarked before opening the door and showing her inside. "As you can see room is nice and large and has built in wardrobe space, as well as a queen size bed and spacious ensuite, with shower and bath."

"Thanks. Any of my stuff from my old apartment here, you know?"

Spike shook his head. "No, its in storage. Angel and Buffy said they would pick it up on the way back from campus. Speaking of which, you wanna hear what's been happening in dear ol' Sunnyhell while you were sleeping?"

Faith smiled. "Love to."

The afternoon light was slowly fading into that of a summer evening when Buffy and Angel returned to the mansion at the end of their classes.

They walked into the living room to find Spike and Faith sitting in across from each other in the long sofas, chatting.

"Hey, B," Faith remarked. "Hey Prof." She got up and walked to stand before Buffy. "That for me?"

"Yes," Buffy replied, handing her the box she had been carrying. "There's more, but Angel's car couldn't carry all of it, so we arranged for one of the storage company's vans to bring it round tomorrow."

"Thanks. Mind if I go and have a look at this now?"

"No. We'll see you for dinner."

Faith nodded and walked up the stairs to her room, holding the box above her head when she came to navigate the spiral staircase.

Once inside her bedroom she put the box down on the bed. Silently she sat before it and began to empty its contents.

There were a few knickknacks, a couple of books, some scarves, a video tape, and a small, dark box.

Faith turned her attention to the video tape first. She put it in the VCR below the television set in her room and pressed the command for play.

The picture revealed the Mayor, sitting on his desk in his office. "Hello Faith," he remarked into the camera. "If you're watching this tape, it can only mean one thing. I'm dead. And our noble campaign to bring order to the town of Sunnydale has failed. Utterly and completely. But on the
Faith smiled, a sad nostalgia falling over her.

The Mayor's laughter faded. "But the realist in me tends to doubt it. Now, Faith, as I record this message you're sleeping. And the doctors tell me you might never wake up. I don't believe that. Sooner or later you will wake up, and when you do, you'll find the world has gone and changed on you. I wish I could make the world a better place for you to wake up in. But, tough as it is to accept, we both have to understand that even my power to protect and watch over you has its limits. See, the hard pill to swallow is that once I'm gone, your days are just plain numbered. Now, I know, you're a smart and capable young woman in charge of her own life, but the problem, Faith, is that there won't be a place in the world for you anymore. By now I bet you're feeling very much alone. But you're never alone. You'll always have me. And you'll always have this," he picked up the box which Faith was holding right now. "Go ahead. Open the box. Don't worry. It's not gonna bite. That's my job." He laughed. "Go ahead. Open it."

Faith obeyed, lifting the catch. A metallic, fold-away device was inside.

"Surprise!" The mayor continued. "You won't find these in any gumball machine! See, when you've been around as long as I have, you make friends. And some of them forge neat little gizmos. Just like the one you're holding right now. And here's the good news. Just because it's over for my Faith, doesn't mean she can't go out with a bang."

Faith looked at the device. Then she looked up and waited for the mayor to tell her the rest of his plan.

When the tape had finished, she knew exactly what she wanted to do.

"Dinner's served," Spike called out from the dining room, making Buffy and Angel look up, put down their assignments, and make their way over to the dinner table.

"You cooked?" Buffy queried as they cautiously took a seat.

"I'll have you know I was quite the chef in my day," Spike commented as he began to serve. "Plus this is in honour of our new houseguest."

"How was she?" Angel asked.

"On the road to recovery, I'd say, though I'm no psychiatrist," Spike replied as he continued to serve what actually looked a very edible meal.

"Speaking of which, I better go and get her," Buffy decided before dashing to the stairs to the third bedroom.

Spike continued to dish out dinner, until he and Angel heard the slayer's voice call them up. The underlying terror in her voice convinced both of them to abandon the dinner and rapidly join her.

They found her standing in an empty bedroom, the window open.

"Faith's gone," Buffy uttered.
"Do you think it's gonna rain?"

She was dreaming again. Somehow between the chaos that was involved in summoning yet another emergency meeting of Scoobies, this time at the Mansion, telling them what had happened, and then catching up on the discovery of Adam's latest victim; a vivisected Fryal demon whose body bore a startling resemblance to one Buffy had seen laid out on a mortuary examining tray when she had toured the Initiative complex, she had fallen asleep.

There were three, including her, in the park. She was standing, watching Faith and the Mayor eating food from a picnic basket.

"Nonsense," Richard Wilkins replied in answer to Faith's question. "It's a beautiful day. Now eat your sandwich."

"I don't know," Faith persisted. "It's just . . . it always seems like it starts raining right about now."

"You're too young and too pretty a girl to start wearing worry lines on your face." He paused to pick up a little snake which was slithering across the blanket. "Hey there, little fella. I don't know where you belong, but it's not here with us. There you go. You see? There's nothing that's gonna spoil our time together. Who wants cheesecake?"

"Yes please," Buffy heard her dream-self answering.

Faith rose up from the blanket and came to standing before. In her hand the dagger suddenly reappeared. "Sorry, we only have enough for two," she uttered, before thrusting it into Buffy's abdomen.

Buffy woke up with another half-swallowed scream, clutching the material of her top around her waist.

"Buffy?" Giles queried. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," She uttered glancing around, taking in the expressions of everyone there. "Where's Mom?" She asked her watcher as she found one missing.

Giles' expression turned grave. "Her phone line's been cut," he informed her as he set down his cell, having been trying to contact her for the past few minutes.

"Hi Joyce," Faith uttered before pushing her down and stepping inside 1630 Revello Drive. "Mind if I come in?"

Joyce woke to find herself handcuff to her bedstead. And Faith going through her lipstick collection.

"Ruby sunset... burgundy skyline... harlot. Mmmmmmm, way to go Joyce. Now, normally I wouldn't be going for something this dark. But I read in some magazine that eight months in a coma will damage a girl's natural skin tone. Good thing pale is in this year. Or was it last year? Anyway, for real now. I wanna ask you something, and I want you to promise to be honest, and to not spare my feelings just because I could kill you. You promise?"

"I promise." Joyce answered calmly.
Faith smiled. "Ok. How do I look?"

Joyce decided she had nothing to lose in lying so she opted for truth. "Psychotic."

The insult didn't even phase the slayer. "Mmmmmmm. I was shooting for sultry, but hey. Bet I know what you're thinking."

"Really?" Joyce queried.

"You're thinking 'You'll never get away with this!' Moi?" Faith guessed.

"Actually I was thinking my daughter is going to kill you soon," Joyce replied.

"That a fact?" Faith mused.

"More like a bet." Joyce assured her.

"Whoa. You got a mouth on you, Joyce, I like seeing that in a woman your age," Faith remarked. "Guess you can afford to talk that way. I mean, in the world according to Joyce, Buffy is gonna come crashing through that door any minute. And you'd think, with a crazy chick like me on the loose, crazy chick with a wicked grudge against her no less, she'd call, give you a heads up. But Buffy's too into her own deal to remember dear old mom."

Joyce shook her head. "You don't know the first thing about Buffy. Or me."

"Don't I?" Faith countered. "I know what it's like. You think you matter, you think you're a part of something and you get dumped. It's like the whole world is moving and you're stuck. It's like those animals in the tar pits. It's like you just keep sinking a little deeper everyday and no-one even sees."

Joyce frowned, wondering if Faith was starting to crack. "Were you planning to slit my throat any time soon?"

Faith ignored her. "Don't tell me you don't see it Joyce. You've served your purpose, squirted out the kids, raised her up, and now you might as well be dead. Nobody cares, nobody remembers, especially not Buffy fabulous superhero. Sooner or later you're going to have to face it. She was over us a long time ago Joyce. Too busy shacking with the love of her life to give a thought to the people who matter. I mean, you're her mother, and she just leaves you hear to die." Faith grabbed a knife.

Suddenly the glass of the window broke as the slayer landed in the first floor bedroom.

"Hi mom," Buffy said as she punched Faith.

"Hi honey," Joyce replied.

While Joyce called Giles, Buffy and Faith continued to fight, rolling down the staircase and picking up where the punches left off in the living room.

"I tried to welcome you," Buffy began, holding her sister slayer against the wall. "Took you into my home, gave you a room, a bed. But you just wouldn't learn, would you?"

"Sorry, B, but after having my own place, the mansion just kinda falls short," Faith head-butted her then used the opportunity to throw Buffy against the wall.

"And now," Faith added, holding up the metallic device, "it's time for me to demonstrate the
wonders of a little gift the Mayor left me. Thanks so much for having the courtesy to not take the precaution of checking the box first."

She opened the device out and clasped one part of it in her hand. Then grabbed Buffy's hand and closed it round the other end.

There was a bright flash of light, causing both of them close their eyes. When they opened them, Buffy found herself looking at her own at body.

"Surprise," her voice said from her lips before punching her.

"You okay?" Joyce asked as she came.

"All things considered," the slayer answered.

"What is that?" Joyce asked, gesturing to the metallic device which had fallen to the floor.

"Weapon of some kind," she replied pretending to study it. "Didn't work."

"You sure you're okay?" Joyce asked her.

"Five-by-five," Faith, in Buffy's body, answered.

"Good. Oh, and by the way, I'm sorry," Joyce remarked before grabbing her arm and thrusting a hypodermic needle forth.

What happened next Faith saw in slow motion. She watched the needle touch her skin, then she saw her hand sweep forward to knock it before it could inject the sedative into her bloodstream. Her hand seemed to have the dexterity to grab the needle and use it against her attacker, who slumped to the floor over her daughter, who still lay unconscious in Faith's body. For a moment she gazed at the couple from her position on the floor, the room around her settling into a hushed ominous silence.

Then she heard the unmistakable sound of an engine at full throttle racing down the suburban road. Faith rushed to feet and headed for the back door.

To Be Continued In:

BELL, BOOK & CANDLE.
Bell, Book & Candle

Author's Note: Some dialogue has been taken from the original episode, Who Are You? and Somnambulist, which for those of you reading this, gives you a clue as to who Faith runs into. I decided to delay the swap reversion, to lengthen the episode, and to give more of an insight into Faith's mind during this, and how she feels about the Mayor's gift to her, at least from my perspective, nonetheless true, I believe, and I hope I manage to argue such convincingly. Enjoy.

BELL, BOOK & CANDLE.

'Doe to the book, quench the candle, ring the bell.'

Traditional quote from the ceremony of excommunication.

Faith stopped running when she had passed four blocks. Catching her breath, she surveyed her surroundings, trying recall the geography of the town at night from her coma traumatised mind. She was about half way between Revello Drive and Crawford Street, the part of the hellmouth where houses bordered on that fine line between rich and comfortable. She could not afford to stay here long, even in this body, for obviously they knew who she really was. Anger and resentment flared inside her, each one struggling for sovereignty.

Wilkins had done her a disservice with this device. He had failed to understand that although she wanted to be the first and only slayer, she didn't want to be Buffy. The girl was too blond, too slender, too slight for her tastes, if she had been into that kind of thing. Nor did she want Buffy's life. College, Scoobies, hell even Angel were all too serious for her.

True the vampire had one heck of a body with the intelligence to match, but he was too safe now to attract her. Spike would be an interesting experience, but Faith was so used to roughing it that she doubted his chip would survive the sex.

She heard a scream rapidly muffled, causing her to glance around once more, just in time to see a bloke snatch the girl in his grip into the alley between to houses across the street. Her slayer radar identified the guy as a vampire and she broke into a silent run to trail the demon, coming to a halt on the threshold of the area in question.

He held the girl against the wall, his hand pressing hers behind her back against the wooden slats which covered the house. A steel gloved finger grazed the girl's cheek in the shape of a crucifix as he revealed his fangs. Unaware of his audience, he sank his teeth into his victim's neck, draining her blood.

"Love the tat," Faith commented by way of greeting, making the demon turn, causing the body behind him to slide to the floor.

"Good opening," he returned. "Care to follow it with a name?"

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours," Faith replied.

"Penn," he revealed. "Nice to meet you, slayer."

"Faith, actually," she corrected. "I'm thinking of a change in religion."
He stepped closer to her. "How about eternal life?"

"Without sunlight?" Faith mused. "I may like living dark, but night murders the complexion."

Penn shrugged. "With every gift comes a price."

"You're telling me," Faith agreed. "However, I do know of a way to get sunlight. As long as you can stand working with a slayer."

"I'm intrigued," Penn murmured. "How do we go about this?"

"First, we need wheels," Faith replied. "Then we need a base. Preferably with bling. And then I'll tell you what I have in mind."

When Buffy came too, she found herself under the close scrutiny of two chocolate pupils she knew almost as well as her own hazel ones. The memory of the previous minutes before her unconscious came rushing back to her as she realised that he held her gently but firmly against the floor. Doubt entered her mind as she met his gaze, instinctively praying that he would see through the darkness into the truth of her soul. Although they had known the possibilities of this device, they had never dreamed of testing it, for fear of being unable to return her to her body. She never thought Faith would use it. Her 'sister' had many faults and frailties, but body insecurity was never one of them. Buffy had envied her easy confidence, the raw if somewhat eerie sensuality she conveyed in every word or look. Now it seemed, she didn't know her as well as she previously believed.

Above her Angel seemed to come to a decision. His gaze lost the scrutiny, transforming into a look of tender compassion and devotion. "Buffy," he uttered, the one word coming like manna from his warm lips.

"I love you," she replied as he released her and helped her up, wrapping her into his comforting embrace as soon as she was standing. For a moment she closed her eyes and breathed in his scent, relishing the kisses he pressed to her hair, feeling them penetrate the strange mask she wore to the soul deep within. Then she drew apart to gaze into his face. "What happened?"

"Somehow Faith managed to inject your mother with the sedative," Angel replied, turning her gently in his arms so she could see that Joyce was sleeping safely on the sofa, under the watch of Giles, who offered her a cautious smile. "When we got here, she was already gone. Giles and I checked the both of you, then moved your mother, whilst I checked to see who you were you." He frowned at the last part of the sentence.

"Does it seem weird?" Buffy asked him softly.

"Incredibly," Angel replied. "I can feel you inside her, I look into her eyes and I see you hiding behind them, but Faith's standing before me. And I know it must freak you out just as much. This is gonna take awhile to get used to."

"Hopefully you won't have to," Buffy replied. "Cause I don't plan in staying inside this body for long. I don't imagine Faith wants me to either."

"How are you feeling?" Angel asked her.

"Strange," Buffy answered. "It's an out of body experience, literally. And one I don't want to repeat or prolong. So let's get about finding her."

A knock on the door caused them to look up, and Giles to move from his place before Joyce to
open the wooden barrier cautiously, speeding up when he recognised that it was Wesley standing on the other side.

"We have another problem," he announced, brandishing a newspaper as he walked inside. "One highly lethal vampire is also stalking the streets. The body of his latest victim was found just four blocks from here."

Buffy, Angel and Giles clustered round the article; the souled vampire blanched as he took in the drained corpse of a young woman, a crucifix scarring her cheek. He knew that mark well, all too well.

"I did some checking," Wesley added. "This guy has been doing this for centuries around the world, leaving the same gruesome symbol of his signature. He follows a pattern, the same type of victims every occasion. He's never seen, never captured. And these date as far back as the Puritan era."

"Great," Buffy murmured. "We've got three homicidal maniacs on the loose."

"You're kidding," Penn remarked as he surveyed the blond woman before him in their new digs; an empty second home several doors down from the murder scene. "Angelus is souled? I don't believe it."

"Trust me," Faith replied. "I've seen both examples and souled boy pales in comparison to the sadist vampire you used to know. But that's gypsies for you."

"Romania," Penn murmured in understanding. "I wonder why we didn't meet with in Italy like he promised. We were gonna set Turin ablaze. Darla must have been upset."

Faith frowned. "Who's Darla?"

"His sire and lover." Penn looked at her. "You never met her?"

"I think she did," Faith replied, recalling the information she heard from Willow and Xander once, over a year ago now. Another lifetime. "Dusted, by his new beau."

"Who's you," Penn replied. "Or rather your body."

"Right," Faith replied. "Believe me, I'm loathing the sit. But it was the only way I could escape from her. Now, on to the plan. We wait for them to return to their mansion, seize them, beat the crap out of them until they give up whatever it is he wears to go out tanning, then kill them."

"You were right m'dear," Penn drawled as she rose from the chair to stand before him. "demonic vampire would be lost in you. You're much more evil."

"Speaking of evil," Faith murmured, her tone sultry. "I'd say we have a few hours to kill before B gives up searching for me. I'm sure we can think of something to fill the time."

"I promise not to bite," Penn remarked as he clasped her waist.

"Oh you can bite," Faith uttered. "Just don't drain."

"There now, isn't that better?" An Irish cultured lilt queried.
His blond companion rose from his crouch and surveyed the victim lying on the pebbled alleyway before them. "Better."


Blond smiled, his human features belying the demon who resided within. "It's strange. She was my sister."

"And yet you feel nothing," Irish lilt astutely determined.

"No, I feel hungry," Blond corrected.

Irish lilt smirked. "Ah, you do learn very quickly."

Blond sighed. "My father would disagree."

His companion placed a hand on his shoulder and led him away from the body. "Ah, then perhaps it's time you shared with him just what a fine student you've become."

"My father, yes," Blond agreed. "They'll all be sitting down to dinner now."

Irish lilt grinned. "A feast. Excellent. When they invite you in, savour it, Penn. You'll not recapture the moment. Family blood is always the sweetest."

As the two vampires walked out into the world of eighteenth century Galway, centuries later one of them woke with a swallowed gasp of unneeded horrified breath, before turning to meet his beloved's eyes in another woman.

"Angel?" Buffy queried, Faith's voice coming from her and saying her words sounding strange to both their ears. "What is it? Faith?"

"Something worse," he replied, his hands falling to rest clasp on his half bent knees above the bed sheets. "I think another of my sired is in town."


He shook his head. "You haven't met them. His name is Penn. He's one of the first. Angelus taught him everything he knew. He's the one Wesley briefed on us earlier."

Buffy frowned. "A real psycho-wan Kenobi." She moved from the bed to grab her clothes, forced to borrow something from Faith as nothing she owned fitted. "You didn't connect the dots then?"

"I did," Angel confessed. "I just hoped I was wrong. I haven't heard anything about him since I was cursed."

"Blessed," Buffy corrected. "Your demon is the curse." She turned to examine the time. "We better make a move."

Angel followed her out of bed, grabbing his clothes. He paused when he had finished fastening his pants, a horrible thought penetrating his consciousness. "What if Penn is working with Faith?"

Buffy froze mid buttoning of her blouse. "You know, I wouldn't put it past her," she paused as the consequences of such a partnership worked through her mind. "What do you think they would do? Seize us?"

"Got it in one, B," Faith remarked as she and Penn grabbed the two of them from behind.
When the soulmates came to, they found themselves restrained; Buffy to a pillar in the double height living room of the mansion; her wrists secured behind her with rope, her body chained to the supporting stone stand; Angel chained to the hooks by the previously empty hearth in which a fire was blazing.

"You should be careful storing logs, lighter fuel and matches in the same house, B," Faith remarked as the slayer opened her eyes. "Put those things together and some one might get burned unalive."

"Faith, still the same penchant for initials," Buffy returned. "Isn't this a tad unoriginal? Giles will figure out something's wrong, and where the hell is Spike?"

"I persuaded him to go on patrol," Faith replied. "I was tempted to ask him up to my room, but I know you would never try with it him. Still little miss goody too slayer." She pressed the dragger she was holding to her check. "I gotta say one praise though; you've improved on the weapons. Raided your chest and there's some quality stuff. Even chains. I never knew you had it in you, B."

"What do you want, Faith?" Buffy asked. She felt strange seeing her body stare back at her, knowing it was not a reflection of herself.

Faith shrugged carelessly. "Little things. Money, fine clothes, palaces, cars. Penn here would like the charm which Angel uses to acquire that fine tan he has. As for me, I'd like my body back."

"Feeling's mutual," Buffy replied. "But I don't have the device. Giles does."

"Oh really?" Faith queried, her free hand going for the pocket of her prisoner's jeans, watching her face fall as she clasped something metallic. She smiled as she drew the talisman out to see. "No longer the actress. Loosing your touch."

"So are you," Buffy replied. "If you switch back now, I'll be free."

"Oh I'm well aware of that, B," Faith replied. "Which is Penn and I will be torturing your souled vampire first."

Buffy wrestled with the chains which tried her, as she watched Faith join Penn by Angel, who remained splayed before the fire, his gaze fixed on her, as if somehow he drew strength from seeing her restrained but unharmed. Buffy did not like the expression on his face. She had seen that grim determination only once before, when he declared that he would rather die than let harm come to her. She hoped that he would not put that vow to the test tonight.

"Well, I can see why you surrendered if this is what having a soul brings you," Penn remarked to Angel as he reached behind him for something.

"Actually, Angelus fought quite hard against this," Angel informed him.

"Oh I have no doubt of that," Penn replied. "He was probably envious that he never thought to use this torture against someone else. He did have quite the sadistic mind. I enjoyed learning from him. Though I you'll find I have far surpassed him by now. The student has become the master."

"I'm sorry for what I did to you, Penn, for what I turned you into," Angel remarked with gentle compassion.

Penn smiled. "First class killer? An Artist? A bold re-interpreter of the form?"

"Try cheesy hack," Angel replied. "Look at you. I bet you've been getting back at your father for
over two hundred years. It's pathetic and cliched. Probably got a killer shrine on your wall, huh? News clippings, magazine articles, maybe a few candles? Oh, you are so prosaic.

"You're right Angelus, my work was getting stale," Penn replied. "I appreciate the critique. So I thought I try this for something new, innovative, something shockingly original. Just think of the worst possible thing you can imagine, and you'll experience it tonight."

"I already did once," Angel replied. "I have no desire to experience it again."

Faith performed a mocking gagging motion. "Oh please, don't treat me to the star crossed lovers thing again. I thought you two would be better at now you can actually have it without him losing his soul."

"I think m'dear is eager for this to begin," Penn remarked, bringing the object his hand had reached for into view. From her place before the pillar, Buffy blanched as she saw the glowing poker.

"Penn don't," she pleaded. "I'll give you what you want."

"How can you possibly do that?" Penn asked.

"Because Angel's talisman that protects him from the sun isn't on him," Buffy replied, suddenly realising her chance. "It's on me."

Faith frowned as she glanced at herself. "How is it on you?"

"Actually, it's in me," Buffy replied. "His soul is anchored to mine, and with it comes my humanity."

"Red's grown into quite a wicca," Faith murmured. "So we can't replicate it?"

"I'm afraid not," Buffy replied.

"In that case there's only one thing left to do," her 'sister' decided, walking towards Buffy once more. She came to a halt before her and untied the chains. "Penn, grab her before she escapes."

"Why should I?" the vampire countered. "They have nothing to give me as protection against the sun. Our agreement is null and void."

"You're right," Faith agreed. She turned and with one deft flick of her wrist, a stake was thrown across the room, on a direct course to his chest. Penn dodged the wooden implement, causing it to glance Angel's abdomen instead, making him growl in agony. His childe leapt towards the slayer, causing Faith to turn from Buffy, who negotiated her fingers to the back pocket of her jeans, where the real talisman was secured. She was grateful Giles had the thought to produce a fake copy, although she wished that they had substituted it for the real one in her hand into that box when they first discovered the Mayor's parting gift for Faith during the summer. Juggling the object in her fingers, she guided it to the rope which secured her wrists together and began to tear at the coils of hemp, hoping she would be able to undo them in time.

Faith directed her fight with Penn towards Angel, punching his demon's childe before grabbing the stake and wrenching it out of his body to use as a weapon once more. Angel growled again at the violent removal of the object, before closing his eyes and summoning what was of left of his strength to try and snap the chains which secured him to the wall. All three warriors struggled with their obstacles, feverishly trying to overcome each one in less time than would normally be possible, and to her surprise Faith was the first to succeed grabbing Penn by the hand which held his metal gloved finger, raising it to the sky as she thrust the stake into his chest. He transformed
into a rapidly rotting corpse before the dust and poker fell harmless to the floor.

Faith turned back to Buffy, just in time to receive the full impact of her leg aiming a roundhouse kick to the midsection of the body she resided within. She doubled over and fell to the floor as darkness claimed her.

When Faith came to, she found herself still in Buffy's body, but tied to a chair in the living room of the Mansion on Crawford Street. She looked up to see her own body with Buffy inside sitting next to her, also tied up, while in front of her stood Angel and Willow, and another girl she did not recognise. Barely had she time to realise all of this, before she felt the metal talisman being placed in her hand again, and a bright flash of light erupting in the space between the two chairs, whereupon she was welcomed back to the blackness the hypodermic needle which Joyce had tried to send her to before.

"I think this Draconian Katra device is designed purely for switching souls," Willow remarked aloud while Faith's body was still inert.

"How long would a soul survive in someone else's body?" Buffy asked as she helped Angel untie her from the chair.

Willow shrugged. "Depends on the body's strength and if it accepts the soul. Could be for only an hour, or it could be forever."

"And if the body the soul belongs to dies?"

"The switch is permanent," Tara informed the slayer solemnly.

Buffy rose from the chair and glanced at her sister slayer's inert body. "I didn't think she'd do it," she whispered softly.

"You mean you knew about this Katra?" Tara asked.

"We learned of its existence during the summer, after the new mayor announced he was selling her apartment," Buffy revealed. "Plus certain rumours amongst the demons and vampires who were eager to tell us anything if we could in return provide them with the chance to escape from the clutches of the Initiative." She paused as she reached out and smoothed down Faith's brown hair. "We left it in the box as a kind of test, in the hope however, that she would never use it." She turned to face Willow and Tara. "I think you better destroy it, if you can."

The two girls nodded then turned and headed to the entrance. As they opened the door to leave, they were greeted by the arrival of someone else. A green coloured demon with red horns and a flamboyant dress sense.

"Hey, Giles said you were expecting me? Name's Lorne."

Buffy was surprised but stepped forward. "Hi, I'm Buffy." She indicated the person on the chair. "Do you think you can help her?"

"When she wakes," Lorne remarked, "we can but try."

Meanwhile, back in the sewers, some other types of evil were deciding to create mischief for the Slayer and her clan, in the shape of four vampires.
"It was too crowded," one, clearly the leader, remarked. "We gotta hold out for a few hours, pick up a straggler, some drunk. Can't be calling attention to....." he trailed off as they turned a corner and encountered someone. "ourselves," he finished.

"I've been thinking," Adam remarked. "About vampires."

"This is my place." The leader remarked.

"Your place," Adam agreed. "Yes. The sewers. You hide from them, crawl about in their filth. Scavenging like rats. What do you fear?"

"Kill this guy already," the leader said to his underlings.

One vampire charged forward, only for Adam to grab it in a choking by its neck. "You fear the cross. The sun. Fire. And, oh, yes....," he paused to rip the vampires' head from it shoulders, turning it into dust. "I believe decapitation is a problem as well."

"You can have the place," the leader vampire capitulated. "I mean, we don't have to stay here anymore."

"You fear death," Adam continued. "Being immortal, you fear it more than those to whom it comes naturally. Vampires are a paradox."

The leader sighed. "Ok, we're a paradox. That's cool."

Adam ignored his sarcasm. "Demon in a human body. You walk in both worlds and belong to neither. I can relate. Come. We have a lot to talk about."

The vampires shrugged and followed him into the darkness.

Adam led them into one of the conduits and motioned for them to sit down.

"I have a gift," he began, "no man has. No demon has ever had. I know why I'm here. I was created to kill. To extinguish life wherever I find it. And I have accepted that responsibility. You have lived in fear and desperation because you didn't have that gift. But it's time to face your fear."

"Tell us what to do," the lead vampire said.

"You are here to be my first. To let them know that I am coming."

The lead vampire looked at the surviving members of his gang, received agreement, then turned to face Adam. "We're ready."

"Then ask yourself, what is it?" Adam asked. "More than man, more than anything else. What is the thing you fear?"

Faith opened her eyes to find herself back in her body, and her sister slayer crouching before the chair, looking at her. She fixed her eyes on B, returning the gaze steadily, assuring her that she was awake and ready to listen to whatever it was B wanted to say.
"I'm not going to ask why," Buffy began, seeing she had Faith's full attention. "I'm not even going to wait in silence for to say why you did this. Instead, I'm going to tell you a story. After that, you can talk.

"We discovered the Mayor's little party trick after the new one informed us that he was selling your flat and needed someone to clear out the stuff. During said clear out, we found the little box of horrors and watched the video. We put them back in storage, deciding to leave the decision of whether or not to use it up to you. At the time, we thought all we had to worry about were the usual numbers of vampires and demons which came to Sunnydale attracted by the mouth of hell. Boy, were we wrong.

"During the summer after graduation, we discovered that the possible after effects of blowing up the hellmouth was the least of our worries. There was a new fighting force, operating on the campus, run by a government committee and a college professor, calling themselves the Initiative. As oppose to staking vampires and killing demons, they preferred to capture them and conduct experiments on them, turning them incapable of attacking humans, by inserting a chip inside their brains, which sent shocks of pain to their nerves, every time they tried."

Buffy rose up from her knees and sat down on the chair facing Faith before she continued. "The college professor in charge of the Initiative was not content with experimenting on demons and vampires. She gave steroids and enhancing but highly addictive drugs to her men, and gathered parts of demons to create her own Frankenstein. This creature, called Adam, came to life last week. His first act of existence was to kill his creator. His second was to eviscerate a small boy, just to see how his body worked. Since then he had been running rampant over Sunnydale, killing and dissecting wherever he goes." Buffy paused to lean forward, clasping her hands together. "I'm not angry with you for what you did. I'm not sure I understand why you did it, but I'm not asking you for explanations. All I'm asking, is that you agree to wiping the slate clean, and help us with this new problem."

"And then what?" Faith queried, trying to sound unaffected by the speech she had just heard. "You'll send me to jail?"

"That's something you can't avoid," Angel said from his place by the large, well-lit fire and surrounding hearth. "You killed a man. Whether accidentally or deliberately, you cannot go on escaping justice. You tried to hide his body, to avoid the magnitude of what you, a slayer, had done. You need to deal with it, else you'll never be free."

Faith turned to the demon in the room. "And what are you here for?"

"Lorne's anagogic," Buffy answered. "He reads the destinies of souls, through music. He and Giles are old friends. He mainly runs Caritas, a violence free demon and vampire bar in Los Angeles."

"You want me to sing?" Faith asked him sceptically.

"Normally, yes, but you darlin', I can read loud and clear." Lorne rose from his seat to stand by the Slayer. "All your life, you've wanted to be special. You thought the slayer gig made you so. And when you discovered you weren't the only one, you resented your predecessor. Since your coma, you've become ashamed of what you did, you want to change, but you also feel that you can't trust us to believe in the new you. So you keep your old self up front to protect yourself."

Lorne paused here, just as the phone began to ring. Buffy rose from her chair and picked it up. "Summers and O'Connor residence."

"Turn to Sunnydale CNN," Giles replied without preamble.
Buffy picked up the remote and switched on the television, before tapping in the number required.

The anchorman was in the mid-sentence when the picture came up; "...and barricaded themselves in the church with at least twenty parishioners. One of the few who escaped described the three men as frighteningly disfigured, almost inhuman. So far, one escapee has since died of severe neck wounds."

Everyone in the Mansion fell into a hushed silence. They knew what neck wounds and frighteningly disfigured meant.

"There is no report on the condition of the parishioners still trapped inside," the anchorman continued, "but their assailants have vowed to kill all of them if police attempt to storm the church."

Buffy spoke in to the receiver. "Giles, we're on our way. I think we'll need Spike for this one too. That's if you can find him. Faith sent him on patrol."

"He's here," Giles replied. "Watching Passions. I'll be glad to get him out of the apartment and back to you."

Buffy smiled. "Thanks I think."

She put the phone down and opened the weapons chest stationed behind the sofa which back on to the dining room. Angel moved to stand next to her, taking the weapons she handed to him and storing them in his jacket.

Faith watched as Buffy and Angel armed themselves for the fight, thinking over everything that had happened. "Buffy," she uttered softly, making the slayer look up. "I want to help."

Buffy did not hesitate. She handed her a dagger. "That should cut through your rope. When you're free I'll fix you up with some stakes."

Inside the church, the twenty parishioners were huddled together in the pews, staring fixedly at the vampires who wandered up and down the altar area, and spoke to each other in awed tones.

"It's hard to believe," the vampire leader said as he walked before the large glass-stained windows. "I've been avoiding this place for so many years, and it's nothing. It's nice! It's got the pretty windows, The pillars... lots of folks to eat. Where's the thing I was so afraid of? You know, the Lord? He was supposed to be here. He gave us this address. Well, we'll just have to start killing off His people, see if He shows up."

The congregation muffled screams, each one of them praying that they would not be the first. The vampire gestured to his minions, who went into the huddle mass and picked out three victims.

Each vampire grabbed the chosen victim of his choice by the neck and raised them up off the floor. Then they lowered them down and laid the neck before their fangs.

"Amen," the lead vamp uttered.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the large double doors opening to reveal.... a vampire with bleached blond hair.

"Hey," he remarked. "I saw this on the news, wondered if I might join ya."
The lead vampire paused before beginning his feast. "The more the merrier."

"Good," the bleached blond said. "Cause I brought along some friends."

Spike opened the doors to reveal Buffy, Faith and Angel, stakes at the ready.

"I told the cops," the lead vampire said, "they send any one in, I start the whole massacre thing."

"Well, we're not the cops," Buffy replied. "We just come to pray."

The vampire grinned. "Really? Well, now's a good time to start."

"Is it?" Faith asked before grabbing vamp number three and tossing him up into the air. He landed smack against one of the pillars, and slid to the floor. He did not even attempt to get up.

The lead vampire looked at Faith with a new respect. "You're the slayer."

"Not just me," Faith remarked. She gestured at Buffy. "Today you get two for the price of one."

"Plus two arse kicking vamps for free," Spike added.

"You think we're afraid of you?" The lead vampire asked rhetorically. "We're not afraid of anything anymore."

"Then let all these people go, and all three of you can take us on," Buffy remarked.

"I got a better idea." The lead vampire said before swinging at her.

Buffy dodged the swing, and hit him in the stomach. She turned to Angel and Spike. "Get them out of here," she said, gesturing at the parishioners.

The vampire leader bent from the punch, then straightened up as his still standing mate came forward.

Buffy glanced at Faith. "I'll take the one on the left."

"And I'll take the one on the right," Faith replied.

The advanced forward and performed a high kick with their legs moving simultaneously to strike both vamps at the same time.

Spike reverted back to his human face and helped Angel get the parishioners out. When the church was empty of its congregation, they barred and locked the large double doors, before turning to watch a sight which neither of them had ever seen before; that of two slayers at work.

The vampires were back to back now, exchanging hand to hand punches with Buffy and Faith, who blocked and deflected every one of their attacks. The strikes changed to kicks with their legs, which were returned. The slayers were in perfect sync; watching them was like watching something which had only been perfected after many takes of film, constant editing and camera angles until the director was satisfied with the final cut.

A noise diverted Spike and Angel from watching the fight. Vampire number three began to rise from his place by the pillar. He opened his eyes, saw what his comrades were doing, then spotted the spectators. He made his way over to them.
Spike and Angel glanced at each other as vampire number three came to a halt before them. He growled, then spoke.

"Prepare for your deaths," he uttered, before throwing out a punch.

Angel caught his fist, while Spike took out a stake and shoved it through his body. "Been there, done that, mate."

They watched the pile of ashes crumble to the floor.

"Too easy," Angel commented.

"I entirely agree," Spike added.

They turned their attention back to the slayers.

Positions had reversed since they last watched them. The vampires were now outwards, while the slayers were standing back to back, calmly deflecting each attack as it came at them.

Suddenly they glanced at each other, and then launched themselves into the air, pummelling the chests of the vampires with their booted feet.

"Where did they learn that trick from?" Spike asked.

"The Matrix," Angel replied. "Buffy and I saw it during the summer. Then we took the rest of the slayerettes for tips on fighting techniques. I think she told Faith about it on the way down here."

"Remind me to rent it," Spike murmured as he continued to watch.

The slayers landed back on the floor of the church, hands still at the ready. The vamps continued to fight, not letting up for a moment.

No one noticed how long the fight took, no one even cared, as long as the vamps continued to resist the onslaught.

As if by magic Faith and Buffy produced their stakes. The former managed to strike hers first, turning him into dust.

The lead vampire drew back from his fight with Buffy. "I have strength you couldn't dream of. Adam has shown me the way, and there is nothing you can do to stop us."

"Really?" Buffy queried before taking a risk and throwing her stake at him.

It landed square in his heart, turning him into dust, leaving Buffy and Faith regarding each other steadily.

"I'm not sure why I did it," Faith began. "When I woke up, I wanted to change, hell, I just wanted to be a normal slayer. But as I watched him on the tape,...... I don't know, something just came over me."

They were back at the Mansion, Faith, Buffy, Angel, and Spike. With them were Lorne and Giles, who was conducting a telephone conversation with the Los Angeles police department and a friend of his who also happened to be a district attorney, trying to get Faith suitable arraignment deal.

"I wasn't even too sure what it would do," Faith added. "Wilkins was pretty vague on the details."
When you and me fought and the switch happened, I was stunned. No offence, but as much as I wanted to fit in, I didn't want to take someone else's body over to do it. I'm pleased you were prepared, 'cause I sure as hell wasn't." Faith paused, then added in a different tone. "He treated me like a daughter, you know. I thought he knew well, but as he gave that gift, I guess I was wrong. He was some father figure. But, all the same, he was the only one I ever knew. I wanted him to be proud of me, even if that meant sliding deeper down the dark path that I was ready or wished to." Her voice dropped to a mere whisper. "I just wanted to belong."

"Thank you," Giles remarked into the receiver at this moment before setting it down and switching off the conference call button. He walked over to where both the slayers were sitting.

Faith looked up at him. "What's the verdict?" She asked.

"Five years maximum," Giles informed her. "With the option to be granted parole in two, providing you plead guilty to the charge of manslaughter."

"Where will she be held?" Buffy asked him softly.

"In L.A."

Faith nodded her head. "Five years," she mused. "I thought it would be longer."

"It would have been if they hadn't heard of your heroic actions in the church today," the watcher replied. "The freeing of the hostages spoke well in your favour."

"Will there be a trial?" Buffy asked.

Giles nodded. "Yes, in the summer."

"I'll come as a character witness," Buffy promised her.

Faith looked up and touched her hand. "Thank you, for everything."

"One final thing," Giles said, making them look up. "Wesley said, when you get released, that there's a place for you at Pryce Investigations, if you want it."

"And you'll always be welcomed to the Scoobies," Buffy added.

"Thank you, I'd be honoured." Faith smiled at them, feeling, for the first time, like she actually belonged.

"You like her," Angel remarked.

It was the early morning of the next day. Faith had just been driven away by Giles to the Los Angeles police court where she would be officially sentenced and escorted to jail. Buffy and Angel had risen to see her go, then returned to their bedroom.

The slayer turned her gaze from the window in front of her, to the face of the half-human, half-souled vampire who held her in his arms. "I do," she replied. "I always have. Despite the little incident with her and Penn last night." She groaned. "God was it only last night?" She shook her head. "We're sisters of fate, of our callings, born to do things no one else can do. I also know, that I could turn out like her, if I don't make sure everything I kill is demonic, not human." She turned her gaze back to the window. "I'll miss her."

Angel smiled, in awe of her compassion, at how much she grown from the sixteen year old he fell
in love with. "I'm sure you can arrange to see her while she serves her time."

"I know, but it won't be the same," Buffy objected. "We could also do with her on the team. Adam is going to get worse, I can feel it."

"We are going to have to find a way to deal with him," Angel agreed.

"The worry is," Buffy added, "what will happen if we can't?"

"Every problem has a solution," Angel reminded her. "And we have thousands of occult books to hand. One of them is bound to have some key to defeating him."

"We just need to find out what he wants. And what his weakness is." Buffy turned in his arms to face him completely. "Now, let's think of better things."

Angel raised eyebrow. "Such as?"

"The fact that we both have an extra hour before our first classes today." She ran a finger down the buttons of his shirt. "And you were hauled up before a fire for a long time yesterday. Why I don't you make it up to you."

"Thank you for reminding me," Angel remarked before kissing her. He drew her into him, deeply and powerfully, breaking off only when he felt her short of breath. "And you were chained too. Plus in someone's else body. I feel I need to get to know your truth self all over again."

This time it wasn't the luxurious comfort of the mansion on Crawford Street, but one of the more public restrooms located within the depths of the college campus.

Buffy peered into the small mirror before the sink, a wad of damp toilet paper pressed to her mouth, partially hiding the expression grim determination which had settled on her face shortly after she had been forced to seek this temporary refuge. The wad pressed against her mouth was slowly transforming into mulch, white changing into pale red as remnants of what she had coughed up lingered on her lips.

Her skin was pale, her eyes a little bloodshot, and exhausted, a state she was fast becoming accustomed to. She had hoped that Faith might have noticed something, the brief time she swapped bodies with her, and blurted the symptoms out to the gang, saving her the trouble of trying to find the words. But they had been too prepared for the swap, and thus Faith was sedated before she even had time to adjust to a new body.

Dumping the wad of mulch in the nearby bin, Buffy ran the cold water, cupping her hands to contain the liquid before splashing it upon her face. Blinking as the water dripped down her face, she sought for her clarity and resolve. It was past time for concealment. She should have told Angel and Giles long ago.

She had to tell them soon.

Before it was too late.

_The End._
To Be Continued In
_Nutrisco et Extinguo._

_Note:_ The popular phrase for ceremonial excommunication—banishment from the Roman Catholic
Church. The ceremony traditionally concludes with the words; 'Doe to the book, quench the candle, ring the bell' whereupon the priest closes the book, snuffs out the candle and rings a church bell as though someone is dead. The book symbolises the book of life and the candle the soul being removed from the sight of god and of man.
Author's Note: Superstar was one of my few favourites for Season Four, despite the B/R scenes. When coming to rewrite the episode, I decided that the main plot concerning Jonathan, while funny, was not relevant to my new plot for the season, so I did this instead, which includes a lovely B/A scene and keeps continuity with the Initiative developments. Enjoy.

Nutrisco et Extinguo.

I nourish and extinguish;

Motto of Francis I of France (1515-47).

"And now for the weather. Latest predictions from our meteorologists report that the heat wave through certain parts of California is set to continue this week, and we advise all viewers to take extra precaution with regards to sun exposure. Particular warning is given to all residents in Los Angeles and Sunnydale, as there is the additional risk of forest fires in those areas, with temperatures rising to....."

Thanks for stating the obvious, Buffy thought to herself as she turned off the television set and collapsed back on the still warm cotton covered mattress of their bed. She turned to see if her boyfriend was still asleep, and blushed at the sight, even though they had been dating for nearly two years, and living together for almost one. Angel was lying on his side, his front facing her, completely devoid of clothing. His eyes were closed, his demeanour looked relaxed, but if one were to cast their eyes further down, they would discover that one part of him was definitely awake.

With a small smile, she reached across and began to stroke it. Barely had she begun to touch him, when his hand came down and clasped her wrist, causing her to look up and meet his eyes. "Hey."

"Hey," he replied, before leaning forward to touch her lips with his. When he had kissed her thoroughly, he added, "good morning."

"With you, always," Buffy replied, "with today's weather, however, not so good."

"I know, I think its the first time since my part Shanshu that I've actually felt the heat," Angel replied, before his eyes lowered to find her fingers still moving. "Do you intend to finish what you started?" He asked her softly.


"And we both have early lectures," Angel added.

"Later, if it cools?" She suggested.

"Even if it doesn't, I have a few theories on ways to keep us cool," Angel smiled at her, making her blush.

Buffy nodded, and withdrew her hand from his clasp, then rose from their bed. She made her way over to the walk in wardrobe. Angel watched her as she selected the most cooling items of clothing that would be considered decent by Sunnydale UC; a short pleated skirt and short sleeved t-shirt. She grabbed her undergarments out of the drawer and walked into the ensuite bathroom before he chose to rise also.
Her ablutions over, Buffy returned to find him dressed in a short sleeved shirt with slacks, and matching light jacket, no tie. He turned as she closed the ensuite door, and did a double take as he realised she would be wearing a bikini underneath her clothes.

"Are you deliberately trying to make us late?" he asked her as she finished dressing.

"No, the girls and I will probably sunbathe during recess and lunch," she replied. She kissed him. "I'll see you downstairs."

Buffy made her way downstairs, thankful that the living room of the mansion held a double-height ceiling, making it slightly cooler. She walked into the hot kitchen to find Spike already up, tucking into what looked like wheatabix and blood, his usual choice of meal.

"Why haven't you made Angel install aircon?" Spike practically growled at her as she entered the room.

"I thought vampires didn't have body heat?" Buffy countered, as she went to get her breakfast and prepare Angel's.

"Still feel the warmth, luv," Spike informed her.

"Is that's what's making you grumpy?" She asked him.

He frowned at her, before performing a double take grin of evil and smug appreciation. "Love the outfit."

Buffy shook her head and ignored his leer, before sitting down to eat her meal. Angel came in just then, and his look to Spike made him take his eyes off her and return them back on his breakfast.

"Seen the news?" The slayer asked Spike.

"No TV in my room," was the chipped vampire's reply and subtle hint.

"Well, the forest fires are likely to hit here today, so avoid the woods," Buffy informed him, ignoring the hint.

"Oh don't worry, I'm only going as far as the garden," Spike said, "or the nearest electrical store for fans, if I had any money," he added.

"No demon poker night wins lately?" Angel inquired.

"As it happens," Spike answered curtly. "And Pryce has had no cases requiring my services lately either."

"Only because the last time he asked you refused to lift a finger," Buffy pointed out. "Despite being your job," she added.

"I'm freelance," Spike replied, "and I refused nicely."

"If I remember correctly, your exact words were, I'm not getting covered in green slime for those wages, mate," Buffy quoted.

"Be that as it may," Spike said, "I'm still broke."
Angel rose from his chair, reached into his pocket, took out his wallet, and tossed a few notes in Spike direction. "If it will stop you moaning, and as long as you get a couple for the ground floor and mine and Buffy's bedroom."

Spike caught the notes. "Can't I have your credit card?"

His souled grandsire glared at him. "Don't push it."

"Thanks mate," Spike replied, as he counted the notes. "Hope you both have a nice day," he added in a fake American accent as the couple left.

Buffy and Angel arrived at the University in time for their first lectures, and parted with the arrangement to meet during recess.

By the time that morning break occurred, the Slayerettes had learned along with the rest of the students on campus, that the university's air conditioning had broken down, causing fans to be placed in lecture halls and professors' rooms. Everywhere else on campus was practically baking.

The new psychology professor had just arrived, causing an impromptu meeting of Operation 314 members at lunchtime, in a shady secluded part of the campus, away from lecture halls and frat houses.

"Well, I didn't get any vibes from him, so I think he's okay," Buffy remarked, finishing her judgement on Maggie Walsh's replacement.

"God, its even hot in the shade," Anya commented before copying the rest of the girls and taking off her top.

"Xand, have you plans to visit Lowell House?" Buffy asked him.

There was a moment of silence.

"Xander?"

Still silence.

"Xander!" The slayer repeated, more forcefully.

Her friend finally took his eyes off Anya's bikini top and turned to her. "Er, what sorry?"

"Do you have plans to visit Initiative HQ?" Buffy asked again.

"Yeah, I was gonna pay a quick visit this afternoon. I haven't received a page lately, but I assume that's because of Walsh's death and Adam's escape."

"Has he killed anyone else?" Cordelia asked.

"I've found nothing on my patrols," Buffy replied, "and the news hasn't reported anything, so either he hasn't, or he's more careful." She paused before adding, "anyone seen the other Initiative guys today? Only Riley didn't show up for Psych."

"Now that you mention it, no," Cordelia replied, while the rest shook their heads.

"I'll check the absentee list after lunch," Giles informed them. "It is a concern if they're all missing, and Xander hasn't been paged."
"What do you think's happened to them?" Willow asked.

"I don't know," her best friend replied. "But I have feeling that we're not gonna like the answer when we've found it."

Xander was surprised to receive a page from the Initiative just as he stepped into their underground headquarters after lunch.

"Harris, what are you doing here?" Dr Angleman asked him as he saw him enter.

"I was paged," Xander replied as he walked past the doctor's station to the briefing room.

"I've gotta a good mind to inform the review committee that you're a double agent," Angleman informed Xander, as he fell into step with him.

"Yeah, well, since I think I'm the only one of your initiative members likely to answer their page, I don't think that knowledge qualifies as blackmail material," Xander replied before opening the door into the briefing room.

As suspected, there was one person in the room, looking very annoyed. "Dr Angleman, where are these guys?" He asked angrily. "And who are you?" He asked Xander.

"Agent Harris reporting, sir." Xander said, saluting and standing to attention, his undercover mask in place.

"At ease. Harris, do you know where the others are?"

"No, sir. None of them have shown up for classes today, and their beds haven't been slept in either, I checked," he informed the man truthfully. After Giles had checked the absentee list, he had told Xander to be truthful with anyone at the headquarters regarding the disappearance of the other members of the Initiative, just in case the officers at the HQ had more information than they did.

"Right, so we'll just have to assume they're missing until further notice," the officer motioned Xander to a chair. "Angleman, fetch everyone else, we're having this meeting now."

When everyone had arrived, the man began. "For those of you who don't already know my name is Colonel George Haviland. I'm commanding officer here until such time as the facility review is completed. This review does not mean our primary mission is changed in any way. Recovery of the hostile known as Adam is our first and most important job. Men, before we can locate Adam we need to understand him better. I have studied some of Professor Walsh's original design schematics and I've found something - his power source is not biological at all. The design attempts to hide it, but I believe that there's a small reservoir of uranium 235."

"Sir, how long will it last?"

"Indefinitely," the Colonel revealed. "It also means that cutting off his head is useless. Killing Adam means annihilating him completely. But first we have to find him."

"What about the missing members?" Dr Angleman asked.

"Their pagers contain tracking signals, I believe?" Colonel Haviland asked. When he had received a nod of confirmation, he added, "then we shall put a trace on them."
At the end of the final classes, the members of Operation 314, including Joyce, Wesley and, more reluctantly, Spike, arrived at their usual meeting place; Giles and Jenny's air conditioned apartment.

"So none of them have any idea of their whereabouts either?" Giles questioned Xander when the meeting began.

"No, and so far the tracer's coming up with nothing," Xander replied.

"Any idea when this heat is going to end?" Anya asked as she took her iced tea from the tray, the drink which Giles decided to serve instead of the usual hot variety.

"There's a storm being predicted on the Weather Channel, for later this evening," Jenny replied, having had a light day, due to the heat and her pregnancy, thus time to catch up on the latest news.

"And what do they plan to do with Adam?" Giles asked Xander.

"At the moment they're trying to trace him via the uranium power source, but it's having little success," Xander informed the group at large. "And Angleman's threatening to tell Colonel Haviland that I'm working against them, so I doubt I'll be able to get back in."

"Don't worry, Oz and I think we have the means to hack into the place now," Willow replied. "Walsh's death and Adam's escape left the security systems in a mess."

"Where do they think he's likely to be?" Buffy asked Xander.

"Haviland said anything that masks uranium signatures."

"Most likely the caves," Willow replied, after tapping away on her laptop for a few minutes.

"I don't think we should go in search of him in there," Giles decided, "we have no idea what we'd be up against, especially if he's still trying to recruit vampires."

"So, in other words, we do nothing until we can find some way to defeat him, then lure him out into the open?" Buffy sought to confirm.

"I'm afraid we have little choice," Giles informed her.

The Slayerettes fell silent at that news, and the apartment joined them in the silence, until a loud crack of thunder startled everybody.

"Thank god," Spike declared as he glanced outside and saw the rain starting to come down.

"I believe on that note, this meeting should come to an end," Giles announced. "Drive safe, all of you."

"What are you doing?"

Adam looked up from stance before the cave's entrance. "I am listening to the weather, brother," he replied.

"Why, it's only a storm," Riley remarked.

"I am as alive as those electrical currents this weather pattern sends out, known to you as lightning," Adam remarked. "I am more alive than any of the humans. Shadows they are to me. I
know how they work now, how demons work. My resources are capable of defeating them with a single blow. But these electrical currents, they are of a different nature. They have the ability to affect my circuity, like the rain, if I did not have my water resistant coating."

"It won't harm us in this cave," Riley assured him.

"Like the forest fires," Adam mused.

"Which this storm will end."

Adam looked out into the night. "I doubt that," he remarked.

"That tickles," Buffy managed to utter.

"Do you want me to stop?" Angel asked.

"No," she confessed, and watched him as his fingers continued to roll the ice cube down her body.

After returning to the Mansion Spike had hijacked the television in the living room to watch the latest episode of Passions, leaving Buffy and Angel the chance to retire to their bedroom. Angel had nipped into the kitchen on their way, and brought up a bucket full of ice with which he was now cooling her off with.

As well as arousing the hell out of her.

Now he paused in the rolling to lick off the trail of water the ice cube's journey had caused, his tongue lingering on her bare skin.

Buffy sighed and then arched her back as Angel began to move the ice cube once more. The combination of the ice and the fan were cooling her down, but the Mansion still felt warm despite the rainstorm which had not stopped since beginning two hours ago. Both of them had shed their clothes since returning to their bedroom, and now a combination of water and sweat glistened on their bodies.

Angel rose up and leaned over her to fetch another ice cube. He rolled it gently over her breasts, pausing to press it against each of her hard nipples, and the sensation it produced caused her to shiver with pleasure. Then he balanced the cube on her abdomen and crushed it between their bodies as his mouth replaced the pressure of the ice on her breasts.

Buffy gasped at the sensation of the crushed ice, and her soulmate's ministrations before uttering a groan when he suddenly stopped. She heard some more rustling in the ice bucket and opened her eyes to him looming above her with an ice cube in his mouth. His lips touched hers and together they sucked the ice cube between them. She thought she had been inventive during her turns with the first half of the ice bucket, but Angel had surpassed her in his attempts. She smiled at him as they continued to suck the cube, while her mind thought up another journey for the ice once her turn came again.

The cube slowly disappeared, causing them to exchange a proper kiss, which led to the ice being temporarily forgotten, as Angel wrapped his arms around her. Buffy used the moment to roll them over until she was on top, then parted from him to sit up on his thighs.

"My turn," she said softly, before reaching into the ice bucket.

Her hand had just clasped one of the cubes, when the phone rang, disturbing both the peace and the mood.
Both groaned, and Buffy sat up, placing the ice cube on Angel's stomach as they waited for the answer machine to click in.

"Buffy, Angel," a voice remarked after the beep, "pick up."

"Hey Doyle," Buffy answered as she held the receiver to her ear. "What's up?" She asked, and then blushed as she caught Angel's grin and his motion to his sex, which was currently rising between them.

"I just had a rather disturbing vision," Doyle replied, oblivious to what was going on at the other end. "And then I checked the news, and it was confirmed. The forest fires aren't being affected by the storm."

Buffy stilled, her mind suddenly serious. "They aren't? How come?"

"The fire is not caused by the heat," Doyle answered. "It's been caused by the Initiative."

"How?"

"I'm not sure entirely, the vision wasn't very clear on that," he replied. "But it's definitely of a mechanical nature."

"Call the others and warn Giles we're all coming over," Buffy said before ending the call. She put the receiver down and then sat back up.

"What's wrong?" Angel asked her.

She told him, chucking the ice cube back in the bucket, before reluctantly rising from the bed. Both of them tossed on the nearest clothes they had to hand, and then made their way to the mansion.

"No, it was more lizard like," Doyle said.

Angel grabbed an erasure, rubbed out the mistake, and corrected the sketch. "Like that?" He asked the seer.

"Yeah, that looks about right."

Angel turned the pad round and showed it to the rest of the Scooby gang who had all turned up for the meeting at Giles' apartment.

The Watchers took one look at the sketch then abruptly closed the books each of them had been studying.

"Definitely man made," Giles confirmed while Wesley put the volumes away.

"Looks like something out of James Bond," Xander commented.

"Except this is a heck of a lot more dangerous," Buffy remarked. "How do you suppose we put a stop to it?"

"Why should we?" Anya asked. "Isn't the Initiative using to defeat Adam?"

"Once that and his uranium power source meet," Buffy replied, "a nuclear explosion will occur. Not to mention the damage it will do to the people and the environment." She looked at Anya. "Haven't you learned about nuclear in your chem classes?"
"Barely started on the elements," Anya replied.

"Oh. So, suggestions on how we take this fire-breathing thing down?" The slayer asked the group at large.

"Well, assuming we won't have time or the chance to get near enough to disable it," Willow replied, "I suggest a spell." She turned to Jenny. "Can it be done?"

"I believe there's one which might suit," Jenny answered. "It's in the red wiccan bible on the third shelf."

"I'll get it," Tara volunteered. She took the tome out and handed it to Jenny.

Professor Calendar-Giles flicked through the pages until she found it, then handed the book to Willow. "There's a list of ingredients you'll need too."

Willow nodded as she and Tara studied the volume. "I should be able to get most these tonight," she added. "Good thing the Magic shop doesn't close till midnight."

"Me and Angel will meet you in the forest when you're ready," Buffy decided.

"Be careful," Giles advised them before he drew the meeting to a close.

It was just after midnight when the chosen warriors met Willow in a clearing of the woods of Sunnydale, away from the fire crews who were trying to contain the fire away from the town, and just in front of one set of flames.

"You sure this the right place?" Willow asked as she took out the potion bag.

"Positive," Angel replied. He reached out and pointed with his hand. "You can just see it beyond that tree."

Buffy flashed the torch she carrying on it, and Willow shuddered when she caught sight of it. "Looks a lot more fierce in the man-made flesh," she uttered.

"How close does it need to be for the spell to work?" Buffy asked.

"Very close, unfortunately," Willow replied.

They stood still, watching the flames catch the trees which surrounded the front part of the clearing that they were standing in. The black shape loomed closer and closer towards them, until they could hear the whining of the fire-breathing mechanism. Until they could see the red lights of its glass bulb eyes.

Willow opened the potion bag, reached in and handed them each a handful of the mixture within. In one motion they stepped forward and chuck the mixture onto the head of the black lizard-like shaped machine.

Stepping back, Willow chanted the spell. "Nutrisco et Extinguo. I nourish and extinguish. This potion claims your flames and kills your breath. Destroys your flesh and renders you vanquished."

The machine gave the equivalent of a cough, then packed up and collapsed before the trio, its parts scattering to the forest floor.
Buffy and Angel put the heat resistant gloves on they had brought with them, and Willow held the bag open she had brought with her to collect the evidence.

Together the warriors filled it, making sure they found and tidied away all the pieces they could see via the help of flashlights before leaving the forest.

Reaching the edge which lay on the boundary of the university campus, the trio came to a sudden halt.

The light of the dawn had yet to reach the city, but their still alive flashlights betrayed all that they needed to know of the sight just in front of them.

It was a disgusting vision, one of reality, complete with horrific sights that few expected to ever see, even on the Hellmouth.

Before them were the remains of the Initiative members, dead. Even more gruesome, all had been completely eviscerated. Adam, in his violent quest for knowledge, had clearly not decided to begin and end with just a small boy. He also did not seem to care about who he killed, including the Initiative who were now sent out after him to try and kill him.

"Any missing?" Willow asked as Buffy and Angel grimly examined the mutilated bodies one by one.

"Yes," Buffy announced. "Riley."

"Why hasn't Adam killed him?" Willow wondered.

"He was Walsh's favourite," Angel pointed out. "May be the professor wasn't just experimenting with steroids and drugs."

"You think she did something to him?" Buffy asked.

Angel nodded grimly. "I think Walsh was capable of anything she put her mind to. And Riley meant a lot to her. More than any of us perhaps realised."

"I dread to think what Adam has in mind for him," Buffy murmured.

"We'd better get these parts back to Giles," Willow proposed. "Inform him what we else we found too."

"What about the Initiative?" Angel queried. "Do we inform them what has happened to their men?"

"Through Xander, yes," Buffy replied. "That's if he can still be counted as a member. Dr Angleman was threatening to expose him. I doubt they trust the information."

"Still, it would cause them to search, wouldn't it?" Willow pointed out. "It might help us narrow down where Adam and Riley are hiding out."

Buffy nodded, then coughed abruptly, causing them to glance at her as she put her hand to her lips to contain it. "You guys mind taking these back? I think I should patrol, see if the vamps have decided to capitalise on this heat wave."

"Are you alright?" Angel asked her.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Buffy assured him, brushing her hand away to kiss his lips, the affectionate gesture erasing his concern. "Don't wait up."
"I always will," he murmured, kissing her again before walking away. Buffy waited for Willow to follow, watching them until they were out of sight, then turned and ran to the nearest graveyard, where she finally gave full release to what had caused her coughing, the result falling from her mouth to soak the consecrated ground below.

Buffy tried not to cough, but it was impossible. Red liquid dripped from inside her mouth, slowly down her lips, before soaking into the scarlet towel which she had now resorted to carrying with her. First the Mansion, then in between classes, now during patrols as well. She was just grateful Angel offered to take Willow home while she checked the town for vampires. A wave of guilt flowed through her at that thought, but one she was becoming used to, ever since the first symptoms of whatever this was occurred. The justification not to confide in him and or Giles was fading away every time she felt like this. Now that it was affecting her during patrol, she could not afford to keep silent any longer, lest she wind up having her blood drained by a vampire instead.

If they chose to drink from her that is. Buffy recalled when Angelus had grabbed one of the fish boys to take, but then pushed him back to her protection, spitting the blood out of his mouth in disgust. Later they had found out that the steroids caused him to reject the normally unlife giving nutrients which the blood provided. She wondered if her thing would produce the same reaction. Not that she fancied trying it out any time soon.

The blood dripping from her mouth ceased, causing her to wipe her lips, then step around and away the small puddle soaking into the grass in front of her. Resolutely she avoided looking at it, not wanting to compare the quantity to the previous occasions. Already her mind was adding this incident to the others, summing up the answer and not liking it. Why had she not told Giles and Angel already? It wasn't because she feared their disappointment in her concealment, she realised now. Revealing this to them would make it real, push it past the point of denial. And if they researched, would they find a cure? She doubted one would be forthcoming. Not if the cause was who she thought it was.

Silently she refolded the towel and shoved back in her jacket pocket. Wrapping Angel's leather gift around her, she headed off into the night.

_The End._

_To Be Continued In Exorcism._
Exorcism

Author's Note: Being a B/A fan, naturally, I hated Where The Wild Things Are. Even when I tried to rewrite the episode, I found the events rushed, although it was easy to change the B/R scenes into B/A. When I put it up before we moved, I felt dissatisfied with it, but I was not in a position to do anything about it, with the internet going off in a few days, stuff in boxes or at the new house, and my muse in a galaxy far, far, away.

When we were finally sorted at the new house however, my muse briefly emerged from hyperspace to present me with an alternative, which is a rewrite of the Angel series episode I've Got You Under My Skin. During a brief foray on dial up net, I managed to retrieve the script, from which most of the dialogue is taken, and the Angel guide book was also extremely useful. Somehow, it ended up being a Wesley and Tara episode.

I had neglected the two throughout Season Four, and this seemed a good episode to put them in, given their past history which I had invented for them,- which I am being deliberately vague and mysterious about here, as I wrote in detail during S5 Family - and Wesley's own demons in the original. I tried to include scenes for the others, but my muse returned to hyperspace, so I hope that aside from the end Buffy scene, their absence is not sorely missed. Enjoy.

Exorcism.

"Yes, thank you for calling me back," Wesley began nervously, trying to project a mixture of business, confidence, slight concern and diffidence into his tone, no easy task on any usual day. "I just thought I should let you know that I'm afraid I can no longer keep the case of your missing daughter as an active one. I have used all resources available to me to find her, but my efforts have been in vain. My advice is that you just wait for her to make the first move. I have ruled out all, shall we say, unusual explanations for her disappearance." he paused as he listened to the reply.

"Yes, I'm well aware of that, sir. But I have ruled them out. The only avenues left open are human ones, and if she doesn't want to be found...." he let the sentence peter out, the ending silence more than eloquent. "Well, other than to inform you of this, which I thought wise, as it would not be fair to keep charging you when I can do no more." Another pause as the client offered perfunctory gratitude. "Well, thank you for bringing the matter to me. Again I am very sorry that I can do no more to help. And that I failed to find your daughter. I hope she contacts you soon. Goodbye."

He put the phone down with a sigh of relief, then turned to the young woman who had been waiting patiently and silently ever since the number was first dialled. "There, that distasteful business is over. Are you sure you don't want to call them and let them know that I made a mistake and that I have found you?"

Tara shook her head. "No, their.... concern," her tone belied a different meaning other than familial affection, "is what caused me to come here in the first place. And for you to be looking for me."

Wesley smiled at her kindly. "Well, I'm grateful I found you." he reached out and clasped her hand across his desk. "Now, as to the other matter, when are you going to tell the others how you came to be here?"

She withdrew her hand, causing him to regret that he had ever asked. "I can't, Wes, not yet. It's too soon."
"I'm sure they would understand," Wesley persisted. "It's hardly a typical group. And the concern may be unfounded. Your father was positively reluctant to give me too many details. Which means it may turn out to be nothing more than a family myth."

"Even if that's the case, I can't tell them yet," Tara replied. "Let me wait, Wes, please. At least until it's closer to the date when it might become a concern."

Wesley rose from his chair to walk round the desk and kneel before her, taking her hands in his. "I'd never force you of all people into doing something you don't want to, no matter my belief in the outcome. And I swear to you again, never to betray your confidence."

Tara smiled at him. "Thank you," she said, her tone eloquently conveying feelings which he knew went deeper than simple gratitude.

His business line rang again, breaking the moment, causing him to rise from bended knee and return to the chair behind his desk. "Wyndam-Pryce Investigations, how my I help you?" He paused as the caller stated the case. "Of course, let me check my diary," he added, before opening the appointment book before him. The ensuing pause was a deliberate move, to imply that he was busier than he seemed. Wes knew without looking at the blank pages before him, when his next case was. "As it happens, I am free this morning, sir, if you could name an hour which is convenient for you. Eleven is fine, I'll see you then. Thank you." He put the receiver down. "I have a new client. Fancy staying to help?"

"If I can be useful," Tara replied. "I don't have classes till this afternoon."

"Your assistance would be most welcome," Wesley assured her, smiling.

The client arrived promptly at eleven, entering the offices of Wyndam-Pryce investigations with hesitation and nervousness, pausing before he opened the exterior door, then the internal one to where Wesley and Tara were waiting. He froze at the sight of the couple, directing his gaze to each one, trying to decide if he trusted them.

Wesley rose from behind his desk. "I am Wesley Wyndam-Pryce," he began, before gesturing a hand to Tara who had risen also. "This Tara, an expert whom I consult on a regular basis," he added, bringing a smile to the shy young woman, who felt honoured that he considered her knowledge to be equal, even superior in some aspects to his.

After shaking their hands, the man chose to remain standing, casting his eyes nervously around the office, his caution and hesitancy not lessened by their kind manners. "I'm Seth Anderson," he replied. "I never thought there would someone who could help me with this. Professional, I mean. I thought priests usually took care of things. But then I never believed that movies about such things were based on truth."

"Exorcism needs a firm character, a knowledge of demons, and a fluency with Latin," Wesley replied. "Most priests nowadays rarely believe in the benefits of the practice." He gestured to a seat. "Please, Mr Anderson, sit down and tell us who you believe needs our help. I can assure you that whatever you have to say will be believed."

"It started years ago," Seth replied. "At first my wife and I put it down to rebellious behaviour, stress. But when he started setting fire to things, hurting his sister, himself, us, we realised something was seriously wrong with him. But we didn't know what to do. We moved several
times, lied to Social Services, to the police. But last night was the final straw."

"What happened?" Wesley asked.

"My son, he tried to kill himself." Seth swallowed a howling cry. "He just ran out into the middle of the road. If it hadn't been for a passerby, the car would have hit him." He put his hand to his mouth, breathing deeply for composure. "Can you help, please?"

Wesley leaned forward, clasping his hands together and resting them on the wood veneer of the desk. "I think so. But the process will be difficult, traumatic, not just for your son, but for you and your family. It might bear some similarity to the film and the book from which it was adapted, but not the worse symptoms they described or depicted."

Seth nodded. "I can't take much more of this, nor can my wife. And we don't want it to damage his sister either. What will you need to do? Will any harm come to my boy?"

"I cannot guarantee that," Wesley answered quietly to the last. "It depends on the species of the demon, which I will need to find out. May we come over, Tara and I, tonight?"

"Sure," Seth replied, puzzled. "Why?"

"Before we can exorcise the demon, we need to know what we're dealing with," Wesley explained. "Without arousing its' suspicions. We need to bring a dish over which everyone can eat, but which includes an ingredient that will make the demon manifest itself. Then I'll perform the exorcism."

Anderson nodded once more, his concern for his family still making him nervous about the whole business. He grabbed a piece of paper and a pen from the desk and wrote down his address. "This is where we live. We'll see you at half six for dinner."

Wesley rose from his chair, Tara following, causing Seth to rise also. "I promise you, Mr Anderson to do all I can to help your son and your family," he remarked before opening the door and ushering him out.

Tara waited until the exterior door was closed before speaking. "You realise that you'll need to know what species it is before dinner, as each one needs a different manifest herb?"

Wesley nodded. "Which is why I need to go over to the house now and see if I can find any excretions." he turned to his office cabinet to retrieve a clear plastic evidence bag, latex gloves and large tweezers. "Can you come with me tonight?" He asked her.

"Yes, if you're sure I can be of help," Tara replied.

"Of course," Wesley assured her. "Besides offering comfort to them, you can help me with the protection spells which I'll imagine we'll need."

During the afternoon recess, Tara was walking to her next class when her cellphone rang. She retrieved the device from her pocket and answered. "So what is it?"

"A Ethros," Wesley answered at the other end.

"Ethros," Tara echoed. "I don't believe I've heard of an Ethros before?"

"You know the nursery rhyme about Lizzy Borden?"

"Lizzy Borden took an axe and gave her mother forty wacks; when she saw what she had done, she
gave her father forty-one," Tara quoted. "She was acquitted, in June 1893, from the charge of murdering her father and stepmother at Fall River, Massachusetts on August 4th, 1892."

"Well she was possessed by an adolescent Ethros," Wesley explained. "The amount of excretion I found though, means its a fully grown one." He flicked through the volume nearby, grabbed a pen and paper, and wrote down the ingredients. "We'll need Psylis Eucalipsis powder in order for it to manifest itself. Its bitter to the palette, so something sweet should be used to hide it. There's something else we'll need as well. When an Ethros is expelled, it immediately tries to possess the next warm body. Even if we wanted them to, the new initiate rarely survives the experience."

"What can we use to contain it then?"


"The Magic Box has one, I think," Tara informed him. "I'll pick it up, along with the Psylis Eucalipsis powder."

"Are you sure?" Wesley asked. "I have little else left to do other than bone up on my Latin for the ritual, and I know you have classes."

"I know the owner well," Tara revealed. "I can probably get a discount, as I'll need to pick up some binding powder and protection spells. I'll change before I go, and you can pick me up from there, if you like."

"It would be a pleasure," Wesley replied. "I'll see you this evening then."

"More Brussels sprouts, Tara?" Paige Anderson asked.

Tara shook her head. "No! Thank you, I'm full. Everything was very good."

Natural awkwardness concerning the occasion had faded away by early evening, leaving a pleasant, if a little too polite atmosphere, the calm before the storm. Tara and Wesley tried to appear more confident than they really were, while Paige and Seth displayed an attitude of kind but formal manners, trying to act normal for the kids when in reality they felt anxious about what was to come from their guests. As for the children, their natural innocent curiosity won out over their parent's uneasiness.

"The roast was a little dry," Seth remarked.

"No. It was full of roasty goodness," Tara assured Paige.

"I think we're ready to try your brownies, Wesley," Paige declared.

Seth rose to help clean up the table. "I'll get the coffee."

As soon as their parents had left the dining room for the kitchen, Ryan leaned forward to confess something to Tara. "I didn't like the Brussels sprouts. They're gross."

Tara smiled and turned to his sister Stephanie. "You seemed to like yours."

Stephanie lifted the fold in her napkin, revealing one hidden Brussels sprout.

Tara leaned forward to confide in her. "I buried one in my mashed potatoes, too," she whispered,
making the kids laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" Seth asked from the kitchen.

"Tara's funny," Stephanie replied.

Paige and he emerged from the kitchen, placing the brownies and the coffee on the table. "Look kids. See what Wesley and Tara brought over for us?"

Everyone eagerly went for the brownies, Tara and Wesley included, covering for the fact that the secret powder which Tara had purchased from the Magic Box was planted inside them to reveal the demon which possessed the boy.

"Hmm, it's uhm very good," Paige complimented. "What's your secret, Wesley?"

"It's an old family recipe," Wesley replied. "I use, chocolate. That's why they're brown which gives them their name brownies."

"No hot chocolate for you kids tonight," Seth decided. "This is your treat tonight."

Ryan frowned. "Dad."

"That's not fair," Stephanie added.


Suddenly Ryan choked, before a growling scream emerged from his mouth. Tara and Wesley slowly rose from the table as Paige jumped up from her chair to go to her son.

"Oh God, Ryan, what's wrong?" She asked.

Wesley turned to Seth. "Your son is possessed by a demon."

Stephanie bowed her head. "Ryan's bad. Ryan's always been bad."

Paige turned a shocked face from him to her child. "Baby, - can you hear me?"

Wesley walked over to her. "Paige, listen to me he's okay."

"What do you mean, he's okay?" Paige asked.

"I had to get the demon to show itself first," Wesley explained.

Paige looked at him in horror. "You did this to him?"

Wes shook his head. "The demon was already there, I just used the brownies to..."

"You put something in our food," Paige realised. "You poisoned him? What were you thinking? I thought you were here to help us."

"Paige, it's okay," Seth began.

She turned her incredulous gaze to her husband. "Seth, he did this to Ryan."

"We both know that that is not true," Seth replied, rising from the table. "What was wrong with Ryan has been wrong for a long time. That's why I asked Wesley over this morning. He turned to him and Tara. "For the last three years - it's been all I can do to hold this family together. Now you
confirm for me that there may be a reason for all the terror and confusion, and a way to end it. What do you need?"

Wesley glanced at Tara who nodded her assistance. "We need a room with a bed, and space around it with which to work."

"What are you going to do?" Paige asked.

"Free him from the demon," Tara replied.

"Like the movie?" Paige sought to confirm fearfully.

Tara shook her head. "It shouldn't be as bad as that. It depends on how far the possession extends."

"We'll place a binding circle around him to protect you," Wesley added. "Once that is do, you cannot cross it. He will try to tempt you, pretend he is your son, but it will be the demon who is calling you, asking you to break the circle, so he can jump from your son to you where he believes we will fail to get him without great risk to yourself."

Carefully Wesley and Tara took Ryan out of his mother's embrace and followed Seth upstairs to their bedroom. He placed him in the bed, while Tara retrieved the bag of binding powder from her pocket and spread it around the frame.

"Done," she announced to Wesley.

"Thank you," he replied to her. "I'll make a start, you make sure they stay down stairs. This is will be a painful and long process."

"Mommy?" the demon cried out, causing the parents to rush to the hall. "Where are you? Mommy, I'm scared. - I need you. - Are you there?"

Tara walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

"Couldn't I just take him his toys, please?" Paige asked.

"You heard what Wesley said, Paige," Seth replied. "We have to wait."

"But why do we have to wait?" Paige asked. "Things were going really well this time, weren't they? - Couldn't we just keep on like it was?"

Seth shook his head. "Paige, no. Not after Ohio."

"Ohio?" Tara echoed.

"A friend of ours the kids used to call him Uncle Frank, died in a fire," Seth replied.

Paige sobbed. "That was an accident. It wasn't Ryan!"

"Mommy, I'm scared," Ryan called out. "It's so cold in here. Mommy?"

His mother tried to go to the door, but his father grabbed her arm, holding her back. "And that isn't Ryan either. - Paige?"

Paige sighed. "I'm not going to him, okay? I'm playing by the stupid rules."

"Mommy, I need you," Ryan cried. "I'm so scared. Come here."
"This is just too cruel," Paige said to Tara. "Can't we just see him?"

Tara looked at her. "This will be less hurtful for both of you if you just stay away. Ryan is not the one who is crying out for help, the demon is."

"I won't cross the circle," Paige said. "Please, just let me see him."

Tara nodded, and opened the door. "How are doing Wes?"

"I am about ready to begin," Wesley replied.

Paige looked at her son. "See, honey? Mommy's right here. I'm not going anywhere. Nobody is going to hurt you, sweetie. It's going to be okay."

"Paige, come away," Tara urged.

Seth nodded. "You wanted to see him, there he is and he's gonna be fine."

"He's not fine!" Paige cried. "Look at him, Seth. Look at him. He needs me."

"Mommy?" The boy in the bed, demon features still visible, suddenly called out.

Paige took a step forward.

"No," Tara began. "No one steps beyond this circle. Its too dangerous."

"I can't see, where are you?" The Ethros continued in a childish plea.

"He'll do this to trick you," Wesley added, "make you break the binding, then he will kill you."

"Mommy, please."

Paige dashed to her son, brushing past Wesley and Tara to take the boy in her arms.

"Mommy. I'm so glad you're here," Ryan cried, before taking her by the throat and proceeding to choke her. "So glad."

Seth cried out in shock as he realised what his son was doing, while Tara rushed forward into the room to help. "Ryan, no! Ryan, stop it! Ryan, no. Let her go. Ryan, stop it! Stop it! Let her go!"

Tara tried to separate the mother from the son, the demon's strength inside the boy making him a fierce opponent. Suddenly a cross appeared over her heads.

"Omnis spiritus in munde. In nomine deti!" Wes cried out.

Tara pulled Paige away, returning her to her husband's arms.

Wesley observed the boy as he fell back. "It's retreated back into the boy."

"It's gone deeper," Tara mused.

The private detective, and former watcher nodded. "That's likely." He turned to the parents outside. "Look, from now on you do exactly as I'm telling you, understood?"

Paige nodded from the sanctuary of her husband's arms.
"Your Latin sucks," Ryan, with the demon's voice in his undertones, remarked to the former watcher as Wesley shut the door behind him.

"I know your tricks," Wesley replied, opening the book. "You'll not deter me from doing what must be done."

"You?" The boy mocked. "Do something? What makes you think you could do anything?"

"In odorem suavitatis. Tu Autem effugare, diabo," Wesley recited. "Aproppinquit enim judicium dei."

"You couldn't even watch," Ryan added. Everyone knows you got fired because you couldn't do anything right. Nothing is going to make him proud of you."

Wesley ignored him. "Omnis spiritus immunde. In nomine dei."

"All those hours locked under the stairs and still weren't good enough," the boy suddenly announced. "Not good enough for Daddy, not good enough for the council."

"What?" Tara uttered, the words catching her by surprise, looking at her companion. Since the attack she had left the parents alone downstairs, joining Wesley in case the boy tried to attack him, so she could take over.

Wesley took a deep breath, then looked back at the boy. "Skimming the surface of my mind. Very clever. But a mere parlour trick. Here's one for you." He put aside the holy water he had in favour of the crucifix once more. "How many crosses am I holding up? Tu autem. Effugare, diabo."

Hours later, and Wesley was able to recite the final words of the ritual to exorcise the demon from the little boy.


A cloud flew from the boy's head, hitting the open box which Tara held ready to contain it. To their surprise, it broke through the wood and then through the panes of glass in the window behind her.

Wesley checked the boy over, then nodded at Tara. "It's long gone from him. Though not into the box as we had hoped."

Tara looked at him. "Do you think it might attempt to repossess the boy?"

"I don't think so," Wes replied. "Not right away."

"What are you thinking?" Tara asked.

"Well, it had to expel a lot of energy to escape like this," Wesley replied as he rose up to collect the rest of their supplies. "It'll need time to recharge."

"You're thinking the demon has taken on corporeal form," Tara remarked.
Wes nodded. "That's my guess. It can only absorb the elements it needs if it manifests itself physically. Which means, if we can find it in time we can kill it. He'll be looking for a hostile environment somewhere damp. Probably returning to primordial volcanic basalt for his regeneration."

"The sea caves by the beach." Tara added.

Wesley bowed his head in agreement. "That's our next stop."

Having reunited Ryan with his parents, who thanked them for their help, Wesley and Tara left the house and drove to the coast, before parking the car and taking the path across the sand to the sea caves.

"You," the Ethros demon said as they came upon him.

"Didn't think this was over, did you?" Wesley asked.

"You are a fool," Ethros taunted. "You think to destroy me? You're dealing with forces beyond your comprehension."

Wes was unfazed. "Yeah? Well, it's a hobby of mine. You great putrescent bully! Pick on an innocent child! You think you're impressive?"

The demon grinned evilly. "I am Ethros! I corrupted the spirits of men before they had speech to name me. The child was but the last among tens of thousands. One more pure heart to corrupt. One more soul to suck dry."

"Well, chalk up one exciting failure," Wesley replied. "You didn't get that boy's soul."

"What soul?" Ethros. "Do you know what the most frightening thing in the world is? Nothing? That's what I found in the boy. No conscience, no fear, no humanity. Just a black void. I could wait to get out; I never even manifested until you brought me forth. I just sat in him and watched as he destroyed everything around him. Not from a belief in evil, not for any reason at all. That boy's mind was the blackest hell I've ever known."

Back at the Andersons' house, everything seemed to be normal for the first time in a long while. In light of the eventful night, Paige and Seth relented on the hot chocolate for the children, giving them one each before bed time.

"She has nine marshmallows, and I only have seven," Ryan whined as his mother gave him and his sister their rewards.

"Well, we'll just have to write the Nestle bunny about that," Paige replied. She kissed them both on their cheeks. "Drink up. It's way past bedtime."

Later having seen them both to bed, she joined her husband down stairs, pleased that her boy was unharmed. "He doesn't seem to remember any of it."

"Good," Seth replied, raising his arm as she sat down next to him on the sofa, wrapping it around her waist. "Let's hope this horrible thing is finally over."
"When he slept, I could whisper in him," Ethros continued. "I tried to get him to end his life, even if it meant ending mine."

Tara stilled as she remembered what Seth had said when he visited them. "You sleepwalked him in front of the car."

Ethros nodded. "I had given up hope. I know you bring death. I do not fear it. The only thing I have ever feared is in that house."

Tara turned to her companion. "Wes, he's with his family. We have to hurry."

"Yes, you do," Ethros replied.

Wes raised the axe he had retrieved from the car, and went forward to do what he must.

At the Anderson's house, Ryan walked from his bedroom into that of his parents, taking the box of matches from his father's night stand.

Seth stirred as he walked back out into the hall. "Ryan?"

Ryan made no reply to his father's inquiry, instead he closed the door and placed a wedge under it to prevent it from being opened.

Paige woke at the sound of her husband's voice. "What is going on?"

Seth rose from the bed to try and open the door. "I don't know."

Outside in the hallway, Ryan picked up a can of gasoline which he had fetched from the garage only minutes ago.

"Ryan, open the door!" Seth cried.

"Ryan - Stephanie?" Paige called out.

As his parents continued to shout, Ryan ignored them and walked into his sister's room. While his father threw himself against the bedroom door in an attempt to force it open, Ryan poured gasoline on the floor of Stephanie's room. Setting the can down, he opened the matchbox, took out a match and struck it against the edge of the box.

When the match ignited, he dropped it to the floor.

The gasoline lit up, the flames reaching high, causing Stephanie to wake, screaming at the sight of the fire, and the smoke alarm to sound.

At last Seth broke down the door and he and Paige rushed up behind Ryan, to find him watching silently as the flames grew around his sister.

"Stephanie!" Her father cried out.

"Mom, dad! Help!" the little girl cried in terror.

Abruptly the glass panes in the window broke into shards as Wesley burst through to the grab the little girl.

Tara appeared behind the parents, lifting Ryan off the floor into her arms.
"Everybody out!" Wesley shouted. "Lets go! Go! Go!"

He turned to the window and jumped out, as Tara urged the rest from the room.

Fire engines and police arrived, clustering around the house as the flames continued to be fanned by the gasoline and the weather. The sunshine state was usually prone to such fires, brought on by heat, humidity in combination with a lack of rain providing a variable tinder box of forest flames, but the emergency services saw the unharmed neighbouring buildings and forest straight away, realising immediately that this was arson.

The Andersons stood a short distance from the police car in which sat Ryan, beside Tara and Wesley, watching as the firemen set to work on damping the flames within and outside the house.

"Social services will take over from here," A police officer announced to Mr Anderson. "They'll want to speak to your son alone first."

"When will we get to see him?" Seth asked.

"Not until tomorrow," the officer replied.

"Well, what's gonna happen to him?" Seth demanded.

"We won't know until after the evaluation," the office informed him.

Seth watched the man return to the vehicle, get in and drive his son away from the crime scene. "I won't be able to cover for him anymore. They're gonna want to know about Ohio and everything. I wanted to protect him."

Wesley glanced at him steadily. "I know."

"I was just trying to hold my family together," Seth finished.

Tara looked at Stephanie and Paige, huddled in blankets nearby. "I think you did."

Seth turned to Wesley, still in shock by the horror of the night. "All this time I thought I was protecting my family. I've lost it for good now."

Wesley looked at the girls wrapped in blankets before the house. "No you haven't."

"What happened with you and your father?" Tara asked, as they returned to the campus in Wesley's car.

"It's nothing," he murmured, his eyes on the road, his hands tightening their grip of the steering wheel as they turned into the curve.

"No, it isn't," Tara replied. "I could tell. Wes, you and I have known each other too long for there to be any secrets between us. You know what my father is like. The damage it has done to me, to my mother, to my family. I can see in your eyes that you have no difficulty in believing that a person doesn't have to be possessed in order to terrorise their family."

They reached the parking spaces outside her residence hall. Wesley turned the engine off before turning round to face her. "Yes, I had a violent, abusive father," he confirmed. "It was something I had to deal with all of my youth, then later as he was a highly respected member of the Watcher's Council. But then he was diagnosed with a terminal illness. I watched him gradually become a
pale, sickly frail man before my eyes. And somehow his methods of parenting no longer seemed to matter any more." He paused, casting a gaze down to the floor of the vehicle, his left fingers tapping against the curve of his right palm. "He died a year before I came to America. When I said goodbye to him for the last time, I realised that despite all he had done to make me hate him, he was still my father, and I would have no other." He looked up into her gaze, his eyes dark and distance, his mind suspended between the present and the past. "But there are moments still when I would give anything to hear him say that he was proud of me."

Tara found she could say nothing, so she settled for clasping one of his hands in her own, and exchanging a meaningful, eloquent look. She reflected on the man before her, when they had met, how they came to be so close, and what it had done to her life. Now she had heard about the dark past of his youth, she still admired him for whom he had become despite his trauma, and the compassion he held for her family, even if he did not support their actions regarding herself.

Then he let go of her hand to open the car door and the moment passed.

Buffy stared angrily into the mirror, the rage pouring off her in waves, but the reflecting glass felt none of it. She pressed the damp towel to her lips, resisting the urge to fling it against the mirror, knowing the action would disturb her sleeping soulmate in the next room. She just had the most amazing sex of her life, which capped off a wonderful hour where she and Angel had done nothing but become one body, one soul.

Allowing herself to think that one morning without this unpleasant ablution might mean her body had healed itself, her reaction to finding that it was still not cured made her want to scream. What had she done to deserve this? Why did her worst case scenario have to be proved a truth? Why couldn't they just have killed them all during the summer after graduation and be done with it?

She stilled as she heard a muffled call coming from her beloved, who was obviously no longer asleep and oblivious to her whereabouts. Splashing her face, she returned the towel to the heated rail and exited the bathroom.

"Is anything wrong?" Angel asked her.

"Nothing," she replied softly. "Nothing at all."

_The End._

To Be Continued In

_SHADES OF GREY._
Shades of Grey

Author's note: As Oz never left this season, he had no reason to return, so I had to come up with a completely different plot line. I decided to focus on the Adam arc, as we're four episodes away from the end of this season, which meant advancing some scenes further than JW’s canon, which is why there is dialogue here from Primeval as well as New Moon Rising. I have also focused more B/A than the last episode, to which there is a slight reference, but with the assumption that the slayerettes know of the case, even though they didn't have a hand in it. As with Joss, there were often moments we never saw, and here there will be moments referred to that I may not have written. Cliffhanger ending, as Buffy's illness will be revealed in the next episode. Enjoy.

SHADES OF Grey.

Buffy jumped down from the wall, landing with a forward roll before returning to her upright attack stance. Her opponent waited patiently, letting her make the next strike; an outward thrust of the stake arm, which he grabbed by the wrist and squeezed, making her drop the weapon. He wrung her hand, using the grip to flick her back on to the ground.

Anticipating the move, Buffy hit the grass rolling again, this time performing a back flip before resuming her stance once more. She rushed at the vampire, knocking him to the ground, then jumping back up, using his body as a springboard before retrieving her weapon. Stake in hand, she backed away from her opponent, letting him recover. This was the first slay she had had in a week, and she wanted a real workout from it.

The vampire rose up growling, hissing at her. Buffy put up her hands, and beckoned him forward, grinning. Seduced by the idea of killing a slayer, he came forward willingly. She let him thrust a leg at her, aiming to kick her abdomen, but then grabbed his boot before it could make any kind of impact.

Buffy twisted his ankle, then yanked his leg upwards, making the vampire lose his footing. He landed flat on the ground, hitting his head. She jumped on his chest before he could rise, and pushed the stake into his heart.

Her opponent dissembled into ashes beneath her, and she jumped up, letting the remains settle among the grass. Dusting herself off, she glanced around, surveying the campus, letting herself become accustomed once more to the sounds of the night. For a moment she savoured her body's apparent return to fitness, the excursion unusually not causing further damage to the internal injury she presumed was behind her recent daily retching.

A car revving alerted her to new dangers, and she hurried towards the road, only to find a dark and familiar vehicle waiting for her.

"Hey," she said leaning slightly forward and resting her arms on the open window on the passenger side. "How was it?"

"Surprisingly well attended," the driver replied.

"How did you know where to find me?" She asked him as she strapped herself in.
Angel shrugged. "I may be half-human, but I can still sense a slayer when she's on the hunt." He smiled at her and turned the steering wheel, moving the car back on to the road.

"Find any prey tonight?" He asked her.

"Just the one. I'm beginning to wonder if they're deliberately letting themselves be captured by the Initiative. Can't be that many volunteers to Adam's crusade."

Angel looked at her, taking in the brushed down appearance, the fire in her eyes, the wildness of her long blond hair. "Just the one?" He queried.

"I may have gone a little terminator on him," Buffy confessed. "I've hadn't a slay all week. I needed the workout."

"I don't give you enough of a workout?"

She smiled at him. "You give me plenty workout, honey. Just sometimes a girl needs to vent her other frustration." She paused and then asked, "so are they making this night class thing a regular event?"

"Once every two weeks, for now," Angel replied, having agreed to teach to join the list of night class lecturers available when he was asked a week ago. "That okay with you?"

"Provided the vamps level keeps so low, its fine," Buffy replied. "Though its unsettling when you're not with me at the Mansion. And not because Spike persists in freaking me out with those absurd additions to his blood diet."

"You could always come," Angel offered. "And you've been alone in the Mansion before."

"I know, but that was when you had to bring back Jenny, and you were risking life and limbs in that trial. Plus, I miss you."

Angel reached out, clasped one of her hands in his and brought it to his lips. "Same here," he returned huskily.

"Come on, let's go home," Buffy said softly after he had returned her hand to her lap in order to clasp the steering wheel properly. "We have that dinner for Giles, Jenny and Joyce to prepare and serve."

"Is Spike joining us?" Angel asked as he manoeuvred the car back on to the road from his temporary parking space.

"No, he has another poker night." Buffy sighed. "I dread to think what happens to all those kittens. Do you know?"

Angel shook his head. "When I was evil, money was still the only thing to wager with." He paused to turn the car. "At least we can be assured that he can't harm them himself."

"True," Buffy agreed. "He seems to be adjusting to the chip inside him. I wonder if...." she trailed off, thinking.

"What?" Angel asked her.

"Oh, its just that, what if Walsh decided to experiment on other chips as well?" Buffy remarked. "One for every demon, or one for each of her soldiers."
"That's a frightening thought," Angel murmured. "But possible."

Buffy nodded solemnly.

Deep in the outskirts of the forest of Sunnydale, in the depths of the surrounding caves, a evil master explained the nature of the universe to his newest partner.

"Your thoughts are troubled. In turmoil. I understand, brother. We have a lot to discuss. Speak."

"I think you're going about this the wrong way," Riley remarked. "Recruiting demons and vampires. That wasn't in Professor Walsh's plans."

"When our enemy is the natural prey of vampires and demons, then it becomes necessary to have them on our side," Adam reasoned.

"I still don't see why you killed Forrest and everyone else except me."

"They were just boys. Imperfect. Incapable of understanding Mother's plans."

"And do you think you're any different?" Riley queried. "You're a botched science experiment. A patchwork Frankenstein."

"I am what mother intended me to be. A human demon hybrid. The perfect combination of human and demon strengths, with none of the weaknesses." Adam turned to face him. "I was her son. As are you."

Riley swallowed hard. "I don't understand."

"Mother implanted a behaviour modifier within you. She had plans for both of us."

"A chip in my head," Riley uttered, shocked.

"Actually, the chip is here," Adam replied, touching his chest. "Tied directly into your central nervous system through your thoracic nerve. This is Phase One of your preparation. It lay dormant until the time came. I simply activated it, brother. You have no power. Not yet. Once you forget your old life and embrace your destiny as I have, you will know power you've never dreamed of. I think you're going to like it." He paused to step away and patrol the confines of the cave. "Humans cling to old ways and ancient feuds. And they're hopeless with technology. Unworthy."

"Not really wanting a lecture right now," Riley muttered, still focusing on the chip inside him, and its possible consequences.

"Disappointed by demon-kind, we turned to humans. Smart, adaptive, but emotional and weak. Blind. There's imperfection everywhere. Something must be done. Who will deliver us?" When he received no reply, he answered the question himself. "Mother. She saw our future. Yours and mine. She saw that you were necessary. She saw the role you will play by my side. Stand up."

Without warning, Riley felt his body obey the command.

"You see, we are brothers after all," Adam said dangerously. He walked deeper into the caves. "Come with me, there's more for you to see."

"So, are you enjoying your maternity leave?"
Jenny looked up at Joyce. "Not really. I'm feeling energised. I keep running out of things to do."

"Didn't Giles give you the chance to catalogue the spells?" Buffy asked.

They were at the Mansion on Crawford Street, Angel and the slayer having invited Joyce, Jenny and Giles over for a non-slayer, vampire, demon or Adam talk dinner.

"He did," Jenny acknowledged, with a smile to her husband. "But I finished it a couple of days ago."

"Found anything capable of defeating Adam?" Angel asked.

"I thought we agreed no shop talk?" Giles queried.

"The subject's not very avoidable these days," Buffy reasoned before finishing off her desert.

"No, I didn't find anything," Jenny confessed.

"What's happened with the Initiative?" Joyce asked.

"Well, with the bodies of most of them being eviscerated, there was no evidence on them," Buffy recapped for her mother had been in Los Angeles, supervising the transfer of some museum acquisitions the weeks before. "And Lowell House's entrances to the underground complex have been sealed up and destroyed."

"What?" Joyce questioned. "When did that happen?"

"We're not sure," Buffy answered her mother. "Anyway, I think the Initiative have been shut down and withdrawn from Sunnydale. Which is all to the good."

"What about the computer files?" Joyce queried.

"Still accessible, according to Willow and Oz. I think they're still hunting for Adam, but with a skeleton team," Giles concluded.

"Considering their numbers are pretty thin on the ground, they're doing well in the vamp and demon capture quota," Buffy remarked. "I'm rarely slaying anything these nights."

"At all?" Giles queried.

"A vamp a night, at most," Buffy replied.

"And what's left of the Initiative is capturing all of them?" Giles sought to confirm.

Buffy nodded. "Pretty much."

"Strange," Giles mused, concerned.

"I'm starting to think Adam is recruiting," Buffy admitted. "After all, the Initiative remnants can't be catching all of them."

"It would account for the scarcity," Giles agreed. "But do you think that's what Walsh had in mind when she made him?"

"Well, if she was rendering vamps useless, she had to have something up her sleeves other than drawn out starvation and suicide," Buffy argued. "We did agree that the chip could control other
behaviour, not just aversion to human blood."

"I do believe you're right," Giles murmured. "And I don't like the thought of it."

"Nor me," Buffy added. "It was bad enough when the Mayor recruited. Adam's already a demon, which probably increases the inducement."

"We also wondered if her experiments were not just directed towards the demons, but to the soldiers as well," Angel said.

Giles' cup of Earl Grey froze mid journey to his mouth as he considered that potentially gruesome revelation. "If that is true, then Riley would be as important to her as Adam was," he concluded. "Which explains why she tried to kill you, Buffy."

"Something bothers me about that," Buffy confessed as she rose from the table to begin tidying things away. "Sending a couple of demons after me isn't her style. She's usually far more subtle than that."

"You think that was just a test?" Jenny asked.

"A dangerous one," Joyce remarked. "How did she know if you would survived? Assuming she even intended you to."

"I don't think she did," Buffy replied. "I just think that it was her contingency plan. Before Adam, we were all worried that perhaps what lay within room 314 was something designed to combat or control a slayer. I wouldn't be surprised if she had another, far more insidious plan in mind."

"This is where it all happens. Where the new race begins."

Riley glanced around the lab, mystified. "Where are we?"

"In the Initiative," Adam replied. "There are areas no one knew about beyond those that needed to. Mother kept her secrets well. Didn't you?"

Riley took a closer look at the woman Adam was talking to. Her identity shocked him. "Professor Walsh?"

"This is all how she planned it, except she thought she would be alive," Adam continued.

Riley took a look at the other zombies, noticing Dr. Angleman. "Is that what you were gonna do to me?" He asked Adam.

"They're just workers. You know your destiny is much greater."

A zombie sat up on his gurney, startling Riley. He gazed at him, shocked. "Forrest? Oh, God."

"God has nothing to do with it," Forrest replied.

Riley turned to his old once living mentor. "Professor Walsh. Professor Walsh, it's Riley Finn. Can you hear me?"

"She's dead." Forrest explained. "Artificially reanimated with basic to moderate brain activity. Mommy can hear you, but she's still a walking corpse."

"So are you," Riley countered.
"No. Got that wrong. I'm surging with life....... and strength. Adam made me to be nearly as bad as he is. Really looking forward to trying out the slayer again."

Riley looked at him sadly. "I'm sorry, Forrest."

His former friend and comrade managed a grimace of a smile. "Don't be. This is the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm free of all my weaknesses....... my doubts. He's gonna fix you up too, soon as we got some choice parts. Then you and me will be back on the same side again. Moving toward a new future."

Riley stepped back. "I'll never let that happen."

"You don't get it brother, you don't have a choice. Your will belongs to us now."

"No. That's not true."

"Then why don't you just walk out of here?"

"Maybe I will," Riley added before turning around and doing so.

Forrest went to restrain him, but Adam held him back. "No, let him go. He'll be back."

"So, any leads?"

Willow looked up from her laptop into the face of her best friend. "Not about Adam no. It does make reference to some files, but as far as I can tell, they're stored somewhere externally."

The Scoobies had gathered at the Mansion, Giles calling them all over after he had discovered the lack of kills during Buffy's recent patrols.

"No doubt they're on disks, buried deep in the bowels of the Initiative complex," the slayer declared gloomily.

"Don't suppose you remember the way in from the ground?" Angel asked his grandchild.

Spike, whose only contribution to the meeting so far had been turning up, took another slurp of his wheetabix and O positive, before shrugging. "It was a very traumatic experience for me, being zapped and all. I doubt if I'd remember where the entrances were. Plus, shouldn't nightclub manager here know better than I?"

Xander jumped down from the mid-height bookshelf that stood against the wall which supported the stairs to the first floor. "Worth a shot. I'll go check them out."

"Don't go alone," the slayer advised. "We don't know what's down there. And take one of the mike's aswell."

"I'll come with you," Wes volunteered. "My field skills could use a little brush up. Apart from the exorcism last week, cases have been few and far between, for the same reasons as patrols."

Instead of heading there first, Riley did a thing he hadn't done in months. He patrolled. Sunnydale Campus had been scarce of vampires recently, due to not only the Initiative but the slayer becoming an undergraduate aswell. Yet he had barely walked past the first residence hall before he encountered one. A girl, attacking a male victim. Strangely they always fought harder than a man and more viciously too, as she tried to bite him when he prised the victim away.
A grateful 'thanks mate' was expressed before the student rapidly cleared the area, leaving Riley free to focus only on the killer. His routine might have been a little rusty, but his skills certainly weren't. He went straight into attack, slayer style, with nothing more than a piece of broken wooden branch, which he had taken from an obliging tree upon exiting the caves.

Riley matched her move for more, punch for punch, thrust for thrust. He stared at her amber eyes, his gaze never moving from her ridged forehead, hard boned eyebrows, and white glowing fangs. Deftly he managed to pin her to the ground, stake pressed to her chest. As he gazed at her, the face changed, startling him. The forehead ridges softened, the fangs retreated, leaving Riley for the first time face to face with the vampire's first victim. In all his time as a member of the Initiative, he had never seen the human, innocent face of the demon. It made him reflective as he thrust the stake home, turning the body into ash, making his body fall a short distance to the ground. His clothes were dampened by the wet grass, for it had been raining earlier that evening, but he paid it no mind as he rose up and tossed the wooden weapon aside.

Riley walked away from the supernatural crime scene, heading out of the university campus. He had done some research after encountering the slayer, trying to learn the mythology behind the prey he had been trained to hunt. He had discovered much, including the fabled- but now true, as he had just witnessed for himself -human face of the demon, but not enough to understand completely the motives or makeup of both slayer and vampire. The information had given him a desire to know more, causing him to turn on to Crawford Street. Guided by the lights emanating from the living room, he found himself outside number 1902, knocking on the front door, almost before he was even aware of it.

The slayer opened the door. "Riley?" She uttered in surprise.

"Can we talk?" He asked her.

Buffy merely nodded in reply and widened the gap of entry, stepping aside to allow him access. Once he was in the hall, she locked the door and led him into the large double height living room.

Nine pairs of eyes met their entrance. Riley took their gaze in, returning it as he looked at each one. The bleached white blond hair attracted his attention immediately.

"Aren't you Hostile 17?" Riley accused.

"Me?" Spike countered innocently, falling into a ridiculously fake Irish accent. "Must have me confused with someone else, mate. I'm Angel's cousin."

"Why are you here, Riley?" Buffy asked after she returned to her seat beside Angel.

"I didn't know where else to go. I had some questions I wanted answered." He paused. "Adam's recruiting demons and vampires to fight you. I can't understand why he would associate himself with them."

"Perhaps because he is made of them," Angel murmured.

"'Monsters begetting monsters,'" Riley quoted.

"Monsters are rarely wholly monsters," Buffy revealed. "Humanity is their prey, to hunt them well they must have a human intelligence. None of them are pure demon. All descend from the one who was the last of their race to inhabit the earth, that bit a human, who bit another, who bit another. Vampires inhabit human bodies, take over their memories, their intellect. Werewolves are only wolf three nights of the month, human the rest of the year."
"But they're all evil, aren't they?" Riley sought to confirm.

"Not all," Buffy disappointed him. "A lot of races are harmless. Some even mate with humans. Most lead ordinary lives. Including vampires. Their bloodlust can be controlled, even eliminated, as your chips have proved. One has been cursed with his first victim, the soul that inhabited the body he stole."

Riley shook his head in disbelief. "They're nothing more than monsters. Evil in its various forms." He shook his head again. "You're the slayer. You're supposed to kill them, not psyche them."

Buffy shook her head. "That attitude's fine for the young ones. But those who are older, who have been around for centuries; to kill them you have to understand them. Why they've survived for so long. They're not just killers, they're masters at their craft. Adapted to the times they live in, learned to stay hidden, invisible. To seduce as well as kill."

"You sound like you admire them," Riley said slowly.

"I respect them," Buffy corrected. "We're alike in many ways. Great strength combined with fatal weaknesses. If you don't respect your kill, you will underestimate their skills, and they can easily overpower you."

"This conversation has shifted direction," Riley remarked after a length of silence at that opinion. "We were talking about Adam working with demons and vampires."

"Yes we were," Buffy agreed.

"How all demons and vamps are nothing more than killers. Monsters."

"You include werewolves in that category?" Buffy asked.

"Evil is evil, no matter what face it wears. I learned that tonight. After I saw the human face of a vampire. It didn't stop me killing her."

"I'm surprised that tonight is the first time you have seen their human face," Buffy said, before adding, "you're a bigot, Riley. You think all supernatural is evil. You don't understand them, you don't even want to. They're demon, therefore they're evil, therefore you must kill them." She turned to her companion. "I think its time for a demonstration."

"Buffy...." Angel uttered cautiously.

"We've come this far, Angel," she interrupted. "We have nothing to lose or gain by hiding them anymore."

"Very well," Angel assented. He closed his eyes and breathed in.

Riley gasped when he opened them; the irises changing colour from brown to gold. The forehead became a mass of ridges, his fangs displayed. Despite his half-human convergence, Angel could still put on a good show for the horror factor, as well as still possessing the strength to back it up.

Riley stepped back in fear.

Spike chuckled at his reaction, before adding his own game face to the display. Angel put away his as Doyle showed his father's heritage.

To their surprise, Riley suddenly chuckled. "Adam suspected as much," he explained tellingly.
Still in game face, Spike growled. "We've been played," he ground out.

"Yes, well and truly," Riley confirmed. "I'll be going now," he added, before walking back out into the night.

"Did we lose anything?" Buffy asked her soulmate, hours later after everyone had left, and they were preparing for bed. Xander and Wes' search for entrances to the underground complex of the Initiative had yielded no results either, causing the evening to end on a despondent note. "Apart from what little advantage the mystery behind yours, Spike's and Doyle's source of strength gained us?"

"No," Angel assured her, his arms wrapping themselves around her waist from behind. "They would have been found out eventually. If not from us, from the vamps and demons they're recruiting."

"True." Buffy leaned back against his chest. "I'm still worried though."

"About what?" He asked her before kissing her hair.

"How we're gonna defeat then. There's so much we still don't know."

"We'll find out all we need to know soon. And defeat them."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I have faith."

"In us?"

Angel nodded. "Surviving against all who try to defeat us."

"When did you get so certain?"

"Everytime I'm inside you," Angel replied huskily, making her turn around in his embrace.

Buffy blushed, then forgot her embarrassment, as he caught her lips in his. Her arms came around his neck as he swept her up into his and carried her to their bed.

He put her down and she pulled him down to the luxury of silken sheets, their lips still melded together. Their mouths and tongues duelled playfully as they shrugged off what little was left of their clothing. Then the slayer deftly flipped them so she was on top.

Buffy broke from his kiss and displayed herself before him. Blond hair caressing her bare skin, slightly bronzed by the spring pre-summer sun. Breasts jutting out, nipples hardening from the cold air and the pleasurable sensations created by their foreplay. She ground her sex on his thighs, her arousal dampening his skin.

Angel's manhood rose up, straining towards her. She ran her fingers down his chest, then circled his sex, the touch making it hard and rigid. She teased him with her hands until he could stand no more, and surprised her by grabbing her butt and pulling her up and over it, impaling her.

As her sex closed around his, Buffy sighed in pure bliss. His hands rose from their resting place on her hips to her breasts, pressing her nipples in, teasing them out with finger and thumbs, then circling them until they became pebble hard.
Buffy pressed herself against his hands, while she squeezed him and shook her hips, grinding herself against him until their combined arousal reached each other's peak and over flowed into orgasmic ecstasy. She collapsed against him in the afterglow, his arms clapping and caressing, exploring the planes of her back.

"I think," she said, after her breathing had returned to normal, "that I'm beginning to believe in your certainty."

Later, as the morning quietly began to dawn on the hellmouth, Angel woke from slumber to find Buffy absent from his arms. Unbeknownst to her, he had come to realise that this was a common feature of their mornings; too common for his liking. However, he had kept his counsel silent on the subject, not wishing to confront her, knowing she would tell him whatever was bothering her when she was ready.

It had crossed his mind that she wanted to surprise him, until a few days ago when he was forced to rule that particular event out. Not that he had expected such a thing to occur, he was only half human after all, but he could not deny that he wouldn't have been overjoyed at hearing confirmation. He knew she didn't believe herself ready for it yet, but he also knew that she was more capable of dealing with the unknown than anyone he had ever met. Plus she would have some experience as godmother when Giles and Jenny became parents soon.

Angel rose from the bed, grabbing his pants on the way and slipping them on. Fastening the zip, he walked towards the bathroom door, stretching out his senses to see if he could hear what was going on behind that wooden barrier.

When silence met his ears, his concerned factor raised itself from mild to full blown paranoia. His hand reached out for the doorknob, praying she had not locked herself in. To his relief, the handle turned quite easily.

However, any relief he might have felt faded away as soon as he had opened the door and caught sight of pale, unconscious figure of the slayer, slumped by the toilet. Rushing towards her, he checked the contents before tenderly reaching to cradle his beloved in his arms. He blanched at the sight of the blood, an unusual reaction for him, except where the chosen one was concerned. Carefully he picked her up and moved her out of the bathroom to rest on their bed, reluctantly leaving her the embrace of the sheets before picking up the phone and calling Giles.

*The End.*

*To Be Continued In Consumption.*
**Consumption**

*Author's note:* Considering how long I have been building up to this, the episode was something I struggled with, probably due to my muse being in hyperspace, and RL stresses. Due to my decision to begin Spike's redemption earlier than canon, I could hardly give him the same role he played in *The Yoko Factor,* without it seeming out of character. So I added another motive to his decision, which I think was further improved when I decided to give Buffy something to make her ill. Which is why half this episode has dialogue from the original episode, while the other half has an original idea which I have had put the additional references/scenes to in previous posts. I should also mention that my knowledge of medicine extends only as to the English History of it, and watching of ER. So I have tried to be vague rather than detailed. I hope it lives up to expectations. *Enjoy.*

**Consumption.**

Giles braked his car violently as he forced the ancient and battered classic vehicle to a halt outside 1902 Crawford Street. Despite the daylight of early morning, the mansion appeared as foreboding as the first time he had ever laid eyes on it, when Angelus captured him to torture him into revealing how to unlock Acatha. It still amazed him at how far his relationship with Angel had changed since then. But now was no time to dwell on nostalgia. He turned the engine off and climbed out of his car, slamming the door shut in his haste to enter the house.

He could hear voices emanating from upstairs as he walked inside to the double height living room. Mounting the stairs at a sprint, he reached the hall which lay to the master suite quickly, coming to a halt outside the open door to that chamber, where he could see his slayer, whom he loved like a daughter, lying in the massive bed. Her figure, so normally slight but strong, seemed awfully fragile and swamped by the sheets and soft furnishings. With difficulty he tore his eyes from her to see Joyce by her beside, and ahead of them, immediately in front of him, Angel and the physician, deep in conversation.

"What is the diagnosis?" Angel asked.

"Uncertain," the doctor replied. "She has all the symptoms of consumption, or TB as it's more commonly known nowadays. But the results were negative, along with every other known disease. We did find something disturbing in her bloodstream however. A collection of molecules the lab could not even begin to identify."

"Molecules?" Giles echoed.

The doctor nodded. "And there's something else. She has been suffering the affects of this infection for quite some time. Has no one noticed?"

Angel shook his head. "Buffy's usually so healthy, sickness rarely troubles her. But I've never known her to hide something like this before."

"What is clear, that she has lost a lot of blood," the doctor added. "The indications from her mouth suggest that it has passed through there. It is a symptom which she should have been unable to ignore."

"Should she be in hospital?" Giles asked.

The physician shook his head in a decided negative. "There is little we can do with her there, and
given her last reaction to staying over night when she was suffering from the flu, I think it advisable that she remain where she is for now."

"Thank you, doctor," Angel uttered. "I'll show you out. Let us know when you have more information or any thoughts of treatment."

"Of course," the physician replied, and Giles let them pass by him to go downstairs. He turned his head back to where his 'daughter' was resting, her skin for the first time looking unusually pale. He recalled the last few days, trying to search for any occasion when he might have noticed her struggling or concealing this illness. But he could find none.

Angel returned to his side, his solemn, worried, guilty, brooding and conflicted expression somehow serving to trouble the watcher even more.

"I noticed her early morning visits to the bathroom," he confessed, "But I thought it was something else. A much happier event, although I didn't think it possible yet."

Giles understood the condition which he alluded to but did not say. "No, it's not possible yet." his shaking hand went to his glasses, taking them off his face, a gesture meant to calm his nerves. It had no effect whatsoever, other than to blur the image of the bedroom before them. "Have you called anyone else?"

"No one except the campus," Angel replied. "I suppose the rest of them should be informed, although I don't see what they can do except offer moral support."

"Maybe," Giles murmured, causing his companion to turn and observe him.

"You suspect something?" Angel asked.

Giles replaced his glasses. "Something the doctor said troubles me. Unidentifiable molecules in the bloodstream. It indicates that this disease was implanted, genetically designed for rendering the slayer into this state."

Angel stilled. "And who do we know capable of such a scientific travesty?"

"Exactly," Giles replied grimly. "I'll go and round up everyone, get them working on this straight away. If it does turn out to be the Initiative, there has to be something in their files relating to an antidote, just in case they committed an error in transmitting to her. We'll also rule out anything in the slayer lore, though I'm sure there's nothing relating to mysterious illnesses there to begin with."

"But how did the Initiative give this to her?" Angel asked. "Assuming we can trace the source to them. We caught Xander's steroid supplements before he even took a dose of them, how could we miss this?"

"If it was designed just for the slayer, then it could have been injected by simple touch," Giles remarked. "From Professor Walsh, or indeed any of the Initiative staff, lab personnel, soldiers. Or a piece of equipment, like that video headset device she used during Walsh's other attempt to kill her."

The souled half vampire nodded thoughtfully, his eyes moving from the watcher to his beloved, who now moved restlessly in the bed, indicating that the sedative which the doctor had given her was wearing off. "I've seen what Consumption can do to a person, Giles, and whatever Buffy has, it isn't that. In my time, the disease was fatal. I will do anything to make sure that is not the outcome today."
"And so will I," Giles vowed, laying a hand on his shoulder, before summoning the strength to turn away and inform the rest of the slayerettes.

She dreamed of many things; events from her past, visions of the future. The images flowed like a river through her mind, changing from one to the next, never allowing her fevered mind more than a brief glimpse as to their events or their meanings. She saw herself in a different reality, one where her return from Los Angeles treated with distrust and suspicion, increasing upon the return her beloved, whom she never discovered to be bound to his soul. She saw Angel leave her side after graduation, at her mother's instigation. She saw herself dating Riley of all people, shutting out her friends, watcher and family, isolating herself as she had hidden the illness raging through her body. She saw Jenny never being brought back from the dead, never even mentioned as existing. She saw Doyle and Wesley never arriving, the two joining Angel in Los Angeles, one dying a heroes death. She saw Oz leaving, Tara and Willow forming a relationship, Faith waking from her coma and after causing chaos on the hellmouth, running to Los Angeles to Angel, who fought with her to protect the brunette slayer from her vengeance. Then all the altered events of the past faded away, merging into a future with all her friends as she saw herself and them leading a band of young slayers against an army of demons, fighting Armageddon.

She tried to cry out, as if her voice could change these visions, free herself from them, but it was as if the Gentlemen had stolen her voice once more, for no words emerged from her mouth. She reached out with her hands, not sensing the real owner whose grip anxiously clasped them, not hearing the gentle comfort his hushed voice attempted to deliver, only the despair of nothingness, helplessness which was threatening to close in on her. Unable to do anything but stare into the abyss, letting the abyss stare back, calling her with eloquent, deadly silence, a mortal siren more powerful than the call of the slayer.

Angel sat before her on the bed, clasping her hands, his voice soft and soothing, all to no avail. Buffy was beyond his reach, trapped in her fever, waiting for a cure that, he prayed to all he still held faith in, they would find.

Shocked outrage were the first emotions which possessed the rest of the slayerettes when Giles informed them of the news, after summoning them from their various locations to his and Jenny's apartment. Once they had expressed how angry they felt concerning who ever was responsible for giving Buffy this disease, their concern for their best friend and leader committed them into an intensive research session. The watcher had never seen them so hard at work before, not when Buffy had been infected with an aspect of the demon, and was lying on her death bed a year ago, while a potential killer was loose abroad the High school campus. Even Spike, who had moved from the vigil at the mansion to give the slayer some peace, was unusually thoughtful and bookish at the news, volunteering his services as quickly as the rest of them.

It did not take long to rule out slayer lore being the source of the illness. Even the most thorough in depth study of Giles' vast collections of volumes rendered that theory impossible. Mixed emotions met such a result, as a part of each of them had wondered that if slayer lore did indeed contain her illness, it might also contain a key to a cure, which would be far easier to gain possession of than raiding the headquarters of the Initiative, or Adam's lair, wherever that was. There was too much uncertainty in this latter and now only possible theory, along with the worrying possibility that Walsh never had time or the inclination to give thought to a cure for the illness they probably implanted.

Willow and Oz turned on their laptops and began working on a way to hack into the secret government's group database, in the hope that like most scientists they had kept meticulous
records, which contained some reference to the disease. A few moments later however, and their efforts were thwarted, by the discovery that although the records existed, they were backed up by encrypted disks, and wiped from the online database the minute Professor Walsh was found murdered. A previous search the week before, conducted by Wesley and Spike as they attempted to gain access to the underground complex of Lowell House from the outside, the interior entrances having been boarded up some time ago, had turned up no findings of backup files, by floppy or c.d., leaving the group only one available avenue which could give them some information.

"We'll just have to raid Adam's lair then," Giles remarked when the two announced their discoveries.

Spike chuckled at the Watcher's matter of fact tone about what was, with or without the slayer, a suicide mission. "Is this thing Blondie has catching, because you must be ill too to think we can manage that."

Giles turned a dark Ripper glare on the bleached blond vampire, who did not even seem in the least perturbed. "What do you suggest then?"

"Something a bit more subtle, mate," Spike replied.

"I didn't know you were capable of such flair," Giles murmured sarcastically.

"Been known to have the talent," Spike remarked with a shrug. "Now and again."

"So what did you have in mind?" Giles asked, curious despite himself.

"I walk into his lair, pretend that I've finally had enough with you lot, and ask him if he'd fancy having a vampire whose killed two slayers on his team," Spike replied. "Then wait to see what he's says."

A moment of silence surrounded the living room of Giles and Jenny's apartment as everyone inside contemplated the surprising intelligence which existed within the chipped vampire's plan.

"It may be the only avenue we have open to us," Giles decided. "Go ahead."

"I'm so sorry I didn't tell you earlier," Buffy uttered during one of her more lucid moments in the master suite at the Mansion on Crawford Street.

Angel sank on to the bed before her. "Don't worry. I'm not angry, I just want to know why you hid this from me, from Giles, from everyone."

"I didn't want to worry you," Buffy replied. "It wasn't something I couldn't cope with. And I thought at first it was something else."

"Something you were unsure about?" He guessed, causing her to nod. "Beloved, you know I would have been overjoyed if such an event had occurred. Even though Giles told me that it's impossible in my current state."

"I know, but I wasn't sure for myself," Buffy replied. "A slayer, a college girl and a mother? I didn't think I could handle all three. And then when I realised I wasn't, not only was I disappointed, I was puzzled. I know when you cough up blood, its internal bleeding, but I thought my slayer powers would eventually heal it."

"They can't heal everything," Angel remarked gently. "I wish they could."
"So, what do I have?" Buffy asked, voicing the question which Angel had dreaded hearing from her before he had an answer.

"I wish I knew," he whispered, unable to lie to her. "The doctor said you have all the symptoms of Consumption, but that's there also a bunch of molecules in your system which he could not identify."

"Consumption," Buffy echoed. "Costume drama death. And hear I thought I was a twenty-first century girl." she tried to smile, but a cough broke the attempt. Angel wiped the blood which seeped from her mouth with the back of his hand. "Have the gang found anything out?" she asked when she had recovered.

Angel shook his head. "Yes and no. They've managed to rule out slayer lore as a cause. But we think the Initiative might have had something to do with it."

"I thought so too," Buffy revealed. "I've been like this since we had that Candy which turned Giles and everyone into kids."

Angel withheld himself from directing a glare at her over how long she had kept this hidden from him, suffering in silence. "We never did find out who hired Ethan to make them. It would make sense if it was the Initiative. But it doesn't explain why Walsh was infected."

Buffy shrugged. "She probably did it to rule them out to anyone who might be suspicious. And none of us actually saw her revert to her childhood. Not even Xander. She just didn't turn up to class."

Her soulmate nodded as he realised this truth. "And what we did hear was from Riley," he murmured, the events concerning that candy suddenly clear.

"I dreamt of him," his beloved uttered now, causing Angel to look up in surprise. "Before I woke to find you near. I dreamt of many things. Events I knew never happened, yet, frighteningly, could. And then they all merged into my real past, and I saw us leading an army of slayers against an army of demons."

"Do you think it was a vision?" Angel asked her.

"I don't know," Buffy replied. "And I'm not sure if I want it to be."

She rolled over on to her side then and closed her eyes, an abrupt ending to an unusual conversation. Angel reached out and gently touched her cheek, a careful caress designed not to disturb her. His hand moved to her forehead, relieved to feel cool skin instead of the fever which had raged inside her earlier.

Reluctantly he moved his hand and grabbed the phone handset from the upstairs port. Moving into the balcony hallway which over hung the double height living room, he dialled the number for Giles and Jenny.

"Giles, it's me. Any developments?"

The answer concerning Spike would surprise him.

"That's it, I've had it!" A voice cried as he entered the now not so secret hideout of Adam's headquarters, the door slamming behind him.
Riley looked up at the unexpected entrance. "It's customary to knock, Hostile 17," he remarked.

"That's Spike to you, mate, although I'm feeling bloody hostile at the moment. I've had it, I tell ya, I've had it."

Riley ignored him, turning back to the view screen of the computer he was currently working on.

"That bloody girl," Spike cried, grabbing one of the chairs littered about the room, and using it as a venting instrument. "Just because she's the slayer, she thinks herself holier than thou!" He smashed the chair against the concrete floor, breaking it into bits.

"Careful," Riley warned him, with not so much as a glance from the screen. "Those bits of wood could hurt someone."

"Do you think I'm an idiot!?!" Spike growled at him, before kicking the remains of the chair away. "What kind of leader with vampires in his gang keeps wooden chairs anyway?"

"You were saying?" Riley prompted him. "About the slayer?"

"Slayer!" Spike growled. "I've had it with her! All I get is fetch this, fetch that! She thinks that just because I've got your bloody chip in my head that I'm harmless! That I'll just sit idly by while she shags Angel and plays college girl. Well I'm not fangless! I've killed two slayers in my time, and blondie's got nothing on either of them!"

"You've killed two slayers?" A voice questioned, prompting Spike to turn and face the one part of the room which the light did not reach.

"Yeah, what's it to you?" Spike asked the dark.

Adam emerged out of the shadows. "A useful piece of information." He regarded Spike carefully. "How old are you?"

"You know in some circles, it's not polite to ask for age," Spike shot back.

"He's one hundred and nineteen," Riley answered.

"How the hell do you know that?" Spike asked him.

"We did our research on you when we captured you," Riley replied.

"How did you kill two slayers?" Adam asked.

"How do you think?" Spike grinned and licked his lips, allowing a hint of white, gleaming fangs to show, rendering the inference eloquently and immediately understandable. "The blood of the slayer. There's nothing like it." He jumped into the nearest chair and sat down. "Anyway, that's not why I'm here."

"Why are you here?" Adam asked.

"Two things. I'm sick of how I'm being treated by the slayer and her gang. Pitied, that's what I am. All because of your dump chip. And I figured you knew how to get this chip out of m'head."

"Yes." Adam reached out and touched his scalp, making Spike flinch. "Your behaviour modification circuitry. I know what you feel."

"Not likely," Spike scoffed.
"You feel smothered. Trapped like an animal. Pure in its ferocity, unable to actualise the urges within. Clinging to one truth. Like a flame struggling to burn within an enclosed glass. That a beast this powerful cannot be contained. Inevitably it will break free and savage the land again. I will make you whole again. Make you savage."

"Wow," Spike uttered, all anger gone, moved by what he had just heard. "Yeah. I get why the demons all fall in line with you. You're like Tony Robbins. If he was a big scary . . Frankenstein looking. . . . You're exactly like Tony Robbins."

"I will restore you to what you once were," Adam vowed. "When I have the Slayer . . . how and where I want her."

Spike grimaced. "Easier said. She's crafty. Her and her little friends."

"Friends?" Adam echoed.

"There's your- what do you call it -variable. The Slayer's got pals. You want her evening the odds in a fight you don't want the Slayerettes mucking about."

"Three witches, two watchers, a vampire with a soul, a werewolf, a half-Bracken, two powerless girls and a mere boy?" Adam sneered. "They are nothing."

"You wanna try hearing them speak sometime, mate," Spike remarked. "Their bloody idealism alone could kill you."

"Words have no power over me," Adam informed him.

"Is there any weakness we can exploit?" Riley asked.

"Blondie is sick," Spike revealed. "Dying, so I heard."

"Mother's plan succeeded," Adam murmured, causing Riley and Spike to glance towards the demon in surprise.

"What plan?" Riley queried.

"Mother put a chemical into the candy bars," Adam explained. "One designed to infect the slayer with a debilitating disease. Harmless to ordinary mortals."

"I'll say one thing for Walsh, she was an ingenious mad professor," Spike said appreciatively. "Did she think to create a cure as well?"

"Yes, the ingredients were in one of her files," Adam replied, his glance directed towards the large pile of floppy disks which stood next to the CPU of his computer.

Spike paid them no more than a cursory glance. "Don't suppose I could take some of the useless ones to con the Scoobies, could I?" He asked.

"Help yourself," Adam replied. "Mother encrypted all."

"Even better," Spike remarked, as he searched through them, secretly pocketing the vital one. " Gives me longer to fool them. I'll take this, and use it to split them up, making sure they're too busy fighting each other to bother about us."

"We can't trust him," Riley remarked to Adam as soon as the vampire was gone. "I hope whatever you gave him wasn't useful to them."
"What would the point of that be?" Adam queried. "And as for Hostile 17, we have something he needs. To have a power over someone, is to control them utterly."

"Got it," Spike announced as he walked back inside the living room of the Watcher's apartment, causing everyone to look up from their research.

"That didn't take too long," Giles murmured.

"Like taking candy from a monster," Spike remarked, brandishing the disk before presenting it with a flourish to Willow. "Here you go, Red. He said it's encrypted, but that shouldn't be a problem for a hacker of your talent."

Willow blushed but then her resolved face appeared and she took the disk, inserting it into her laptop. She waited for the device to recognise what was in it's drive, then scanned the window for the correct file, before double clicking with her cursor to open it. Anxious seconds passed, feeling to take much longer than they should, before the screen was filled with incomprehensible script. Willow minimised the document and opened up her numerous hacking programs, some given to her from Oz, others of her own creation. One by one she tried them on the file, waiting for the type to be legible. As the first ones failed, so dimmed her hope that they would find a cure for her best friend.

Finally, the last program revealed unexpected results. She gasped as the type in the document slowly transformed into legible text. She leaned forward to read the words, forcing the part of her brain which understood science to interpret the meaning of the formula and what it meant for her friend.

"How did you con this out of Adam?" She asked Spike.

The bleached white blond vampire shrugged. "Got him to believe I'd split the lot of you from her. The Yoko Factor."

Except for Giles, Wesley, Doyle, Oz, Jenny and Joyce, the members of the Scooby gang raised puzzled faces towards the unusually modest vampire, causing him to frown.

"You guys have heard of the Beatles, right?" He asked. At their nods, some slowly approaching understanding, he continued. "What a surprise. The point is, they were once a real powerful group. It's not a stretch to say they ruled the world. And when they broke up everyone blamed Yoko, but the fact is the group split itself apart, she just happened to be there. And you know how it is with kids. They go off to college, they grow apart. Way of the world. At least, that's what I was pretending I would do to Adam. Then it was just a question of asking and palming the disk when he wasn't looking."

"Do you think the other disks have any information worth decrypting?" Oz asked, as he lifted one from the pile to put in his laptop, while Willow turned back to studying the document once more.

"I'm sure he didn't expect me to treat them as such," Spike replied. "Or if he did, he's not as smart as Walsh made him to be. Did you find a cure though?"

"You're unusually anxious, Spike," Xander commented. "I thought you found Buffy and Angel annoying."

"I do, but life is full of little irritations," Spike replied. "They let me live at the Mansion rent free, and I don't want to move. Property prices in this town are a bugger."
"They are generous souls," Giles remarked, impatience displaying in his tone. "But you didn't answer Spike's question, Willow. Have you found the cure?"

Willow stopped reading the file on her screen long enough to turn and face the rest of them with a hopeful smile. "I think we have."

Their hopes had been satisfied, there was indeed a cure to the disease which racked the slayer's body. The Initiative had not been so cruel as to create the parasite in the first place without creating an antibody to destroy it as well. The list of ingredients and instructions to make the latter was long, detailed and complicated, but Willow was confident she was up to the task. She had to be, for there was nothing but despair if they failed. Buffy would only become weaker and die, extinguishing the one light left in this dark world.

She plugged her laptop into Jenny's inkjet and printed off the list of ingredients and instructions. Giles sent the slayerettes off into town to find the supplies, while he and Willow returned to the campus to give her the plausible authority to borrow the lab she needed in order to brew up the antidote. The slayerettes joined her as fast as they could with the supplies, while Joyce returned to the Mansion to inform her daughter and Angel of the news. In the lab Willow worked long and hard at creating the cure, double checking her methods, following the instructions to the letter. By dusk she had the antidote ready, travelling with Giles to the Mansion on Crawford street in order to give it to her friend.

Buffy took the cure, and her friends and family settled into an anxious waiting period, watching her every move and checking over her constantly. As morning began to settle over the hellmouth, they finally noticed a change in her breath, as her exhausted body slept. Hopeful, they called the doctor, who came round as soon as his appointments allowed him.

"I am astonished," he informed them after he had checked the patient over. "Once again, you have made a remarkable recovery, Miss Summers."

"The disease is cured?" Angel asked.

"More than that, I can find little evidence of it in her system," the doctor replied. "The unidentifiable molecules have gone, and Miss Summers seems to be in excellent health. I only wish all my patients made so smooth a recovery."

Buffy sent a glance to her beloved, who received the unspoken motion to politely see the doctor out before his pleasure at learning of her cure gave way to curiosity as to how she had achieved such a state. He obliged, leaving her with Joyce and Giles.

"I'm so relieved you're well," Joyce uttered as she leaned over the bed to hug her daughter. "When Angel called me to say you were unconscious I was so frightened."

"You won't get rid of me so easily," Buffy replied. She turned to her watcher, who eyes looked suspiciously moist under his prescription lenses. "So did you find out who and what gave it to me?"

"We did," Giles replied. "It was the Initiative as you thought. Walsh put the virus into the candy bars, figuring that you would at least try one. She created the disease in such as a way as to make only your immune system vulnerable to it. From the files Spike stole for us and Willow decrypted, I gather she took a sample of your blood during our meeting with her to study and obtain the vulnerabilities in your body. Then she contacted Ethan Rayne to procure the candy."
"Spike stole the files for me?" Buffy sought to confirm.

"According to him it was so he would still have a rent free home," Giles answered. "But I think to save your life was his real motive. He still has a long way to go, but it's a start."

"It is," Angel agreed from his return, causing them to direct their gaze to the threshold of the doorway upon which he stood.

Giles caught the look the half vampire sent towards the slayer and with a discreet nudge to Joyce, the two of them made their farewells, declaring their intention to go and inform the rest of the gang that Buffy was alive and well.

When they had gone, Angel took her mother's place on the bed before his beloved, and cradled her hand in his own. "What do you want to do now?"

Buffy leaned forward and kissed him softly. "Hunt," she replied with a smile, making him return the gesture, along with a husky laugh. Her gaze hinted however that after her return from patrol, she would be ready to resume the more erotic parts of their relationship.

Night fell, and the full moon rose high over the town of Sunnydale, bathing the countless graveyards with its ghostly pale light. Shadows stalked the memorial places, their long lines of darkness drifting out from each monument over the grass which grew upon the recovered earth once dug out then in order to put a body into the ground.

From one of those grass patches, a hand rose, crawling its way through the coffin and the soil to reach the cool night air above. Their movement was deadly graceful, quiet and controlled, performed with all the caution of a hunter who had been waiting for this moment, this time in which to act.

Slowly the hand was joined by another, whom together with its partner placed themselves upon the grass, flattening the green blades in order to use the surface as a purchase to aid the rest of his body in the journey from their resting place below. Though the body was in essence not theirs to possess, the soul having long since departed for another plane of existence, the mind was under the control of a new being, who saw fit to use the corpse for its own nefarious purposes.

Once they were completely free from the grave to which their new body had been condemned, the hands brushed the soil off the clothes and skin, while the eyes surveyed their new surroundings, adjusting to the light of the moon.

They were surprised to encounter another form within the graveyard, standing opposite them. A part of their mind silently thanked the powers that be for providing them with their much needed first substance so soon, until the eyes noticed the piece of wood which the form was carrying in one hand, the end sliming down to a point.

"I thought you were dead," they growled out to her.

"Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Buffy remarked with a grin. She raised the weapon, rushed forward, and the hunt was on.

_The End._

_To Be Continued In Primeval._
Primeval

Author's Note: Due to the changes I have made, the plot line of this is the same in essentials, with dialogue from the original episode, but with more of build-up, similar to what Joss did with the end of Season 2. Or at least, what I was aiming for. Enjoy.

Primeval.

The first evil in the world is never easily defined. Some believe it was the devil in the form of a serpent who gave Eve the apple, thus exiling the human from the garden of Eden. Others believe that man was the first evil to ever live upon the earth, each human being born with sin inside them from the act of their conception. And then there are those who believe that evil came to the earth in the form of demons, known as the Ancient Ones, who were forced into another reality when humans came to exist; all save one who lived off the blood of this new race, until he created his very own sub-demon species, who wait patiently and silently for the Old Ones to return.

Man however, is not without intelligence, and whether one uses such talent for good or ill is depended upon the nature of oneself. History has proven time and time again that humans are capable of the darkest evil ever known or conceived. Morals, education, motive, money, these count for nothing when a cause needs preserving or a desire for vengeance to be exacted. Rarely do those who perform these deeds realise the damage they do not only to others, but to themselves as well. Memories of the act prey upon their minds, haunting the rest of their days, colouring every future sin. Redemption, if they believe in such, never comes without a price, and often a heavy one, no matter how goodly sought.

And yet, because this world depends on balance, history has also proven that humans are capable of the greatest compassion and goodness ever known or conceived. Heroes and heroines alike are born of these two opposing breeds, their end often tragic no matter their preference for good or evil, either born out of insurmountable odds, or a mistake they tried to prevent, were forced to watch take place, or as a result of too much trust in another, blinding them to their failures or future fate. Despite this seemingly gloomy fate, there is often hope waiting in the wings, giving them the certainty that their deaths were not in vein, or that all is never truly lost. Evil may triumph over good, or vice versa, but neither side will ever achieve absolute victory, for there is always a light in the darkness and darkness to every light.

This is why, when those two foes battle one another, the end result is never certain.

"What's wrong?" Angel asked his beloved, as he wrapped his arms around her slim waist as she stood before the window of their master suite on the first floor of the Mansion on Crawford Street, looking out at the view it gave of the star lit sky.

"I was just thinking about those visions I had while I was ill," Buffy answered, her tone thoughtful, slightly distant, though some part of her spared a moment of awareness to let her hands rest on his, where they had clasped together around her waist. "If the ones of the future might true, and what I would do if they did."

"And what would you do?" Angel asked her softly.

"I don't know," Buffy replied, a sigh escaping her as she leaned against him, savouring the comfort his embrace provided. "I told you once that I never thought about the future. And it's still true, in a way. When you face the prospect of death every day in your life, all you can think about is the
now, otherwise you take life for granted, never realising that it's the only one you have. I know there's a good chance I'll never live beyond the years of an average slayer. I also know that I could just die walking across the road one day. And though I think about the future, especially when faced with dreams like this, I never plan or dream about it, because I know nothing is ever certain and something always gets in the way."

"Yet?" Angel prompted, feeling that she had more to say.

Buffy's hands came to rest on his, idly stroking the slender fingers as she continued. "And yet I cannot see myself leading an army of slayers into battle, even though I know most of my slayer prophecy related dreams come true."

"My love," Angel began, after a brief kiss to her blond tresses upon which his chin rested, "you are the most capable woman I have ever known. When you told me about that dream, I had no doubt that you were up to the challenge of leading an army into battle. Look at your life so far. You once feared you would be alone because of your calling, and yet you're not alone, nor will you ever be, I promise. Beloved, you are more capable than you give yourself credit for."

Buffy smiled before turning her head to face him, the light from the stars illuminating her face, displaying the moistness of her eyes. "You are another I never take for granted, Angel. It seems so strange that two years ago I thought I had lost you forever. When you hold me like this, I almost believe that it has always been this way."

He lifted and turned his head, allowing her to look at him more freely. "I promise you beloved, that I will always be by your side, no matter what the future may bring."

There was nothing she could reply to that oath with but a kiss. She stretched upwards, his embrace losing to allow their lips to touch, a hand rising in a sensuous journey from her waist to caress the smooth line of her jaw, supporting her as their lips continued to savour each other's warmth, security, desire and above all, never ending love. Around them the stars faded away from their vision as their eyelids closed their gaze, sending them into the joyful darkness that was their two souls united, transforming it into light.

"Okay, one last shot," Willow murmured before tapping at some keys. There was a moment of silence and then two quiet gasps were wrung from the resident computer geniuses of the slayerettes. "Wow. I didn't think that would work."

"What wouldn't work?" Buffy queried from her place by Angel in the living room of Giles and Jenny's apartment on Oakpark Street. She had been cured for a week now, and was back up to her usual slayer speed, coupled with almost antsy desire to get rid of Adam and the remnants of the Initiative once and for all, causing Willow and Oz to make an attempt to hack their way into the rest of the disks which Spike had managed to con out of Adam's lair in the caves while she was ill.

"The disks are decrypted," Willow replied.

"Actually," Oz corrected, studying the computer readout on the screen of his laptop, "they decrypted themselves, but we almost had them."

"What do they say?" Giles asked.
"A bunch of stuff we already know about 314," Willow remarked, as she skimmed the documents on the view screen of her laptop. "And there's also some final phase where Adam manufactures a bunch of creepy cyber-demonoids like him. There's a special lab in The Initiative complex, but it doesn't say where."

"Well give the demon his due," Buffy remarked. "He thought this one out."

"What do you mean?" Tara asked.

"You know how overcrowded the containment cells have been at the Initiative?" The slayer paused for nods from her friends then continued. "Those demons were just too easy to catch. It's like they wanted to be in that place."

"The Trojan horse," Giles realised.

"Adam's gonna make sure the demons attack the Initiative from the inside," Buffy added for clarity.


"And Adam has a neat pile of body parts to start assembling his army," Angel continued. "Diabolical."

"Does anybody else miss the Mayor, I just wanna be a big snake?" Xander asked.

"I've got to shut him down, Giles," Buffy declared. "His final phase is about to start."

"We need to warn the Initiative," Giles pointed out.

"They're not gonna listen to me," Buffy reminded him.

"Or me," Xander added.

"Okay, I'm confused," Doyle began. "Adam has this evil plan. Why is he so anxious for you to know about it?"

Buffy shrugged, unconcerned about that desire and the possible motive which lay behind it. "He wants me there. Probably figures I'll even the kill ratio."

"He's not worried you might kill, oh say, him?" Xander queried.

Buffy shook her head. "No, he's really not."

"Does Adam have any weaknesses?" Wesley asked. "Like his power source for example?"

"His power source is uranium core embedded somewhere inside his chest," Oz replied, reading the information on the disks. "Probably near the spine."

"Great, so we just ask him to lie down quietly while we do some exploratory surgery," Anya muttered aside to her boyfriend.

"What about magic?" Willow asked Jenny. "Some kind of, I don't know... uranium extracting spell?"

Everyone glanced at her in disbelief, rationale and logic, despite all, still managing to have some reign over their intellect during this strategy session.
Willow sighed. "I know. I'm reaching."

"Perhaps a paralysing spell," Jenny suggested.

Her husband rose from his seat and fetched a book off the shelves. "Good idea. Only I can't perform the incantation for this. And you shouldn't risk it in your condition."

"Right. Don't you have to speak it in Sumerian or something?" Tara sought to confirm.

"I do speak Sumerian," Giles informed them. "Anyway, it's not that. Only an experienced witch can enchant it, and you'd have to be within striking distance of this object. I may have dealt with magic before, but I was never highly trained enough to handle this spell alone without someone else who is to help."

"See what you get for takin' French instead of Sumerian?" Cordelia commented.

"What was I thinking?" Buffy remarked, defeately collapsing back into her soulmate's arms with a sigh of despair.

"So no problem, all we need is combo Buffy, her with Slayer strength, Giles' multi-lingual know how, and Willow's witchy power," Xander suggested.

Giles looked at him.

"Yeah, don't tell me," Xander added, misinterpreting the expression. "I'm just full of helpful suggestions."

"As a matter of fact, you are," Giles said slowly.

"Nervous?" Willow asked in such a tone.

It was two hours later. The Slayerettes, plan in hand, had gathered themselves at the battlefield, otherwise known as Initiative Headquarters.

Xander replied to his redhead friend. "No way. I'm full of that good old kamikaze spirit."

"Xander," Giles rebuked. "Just because this is never gonna work, there's no need to be negative."

"The adjoining spell, is it powerful enough to defeat Adam?" Cordelia asked.

"It's very powerful," Giles affirmed. "It's also extraordinarily dangerous."

"Buffy, are you sure you're up to this?" Angel asked her.

She smiled at him. "Yes, for the fortieth time, I am recovered from my illness. Now, game faces, guys," Buffy ordered. "We're going in." She kicked the window.

One by one they climbed inside.

Then, slayer in the lead, they walked to the entrance for the lift shaft that descended down to the underground complex. Angel, Spike and Wesley secured climbing ropes and slowly everyone started to climb.
"How you doing?" Buffy asked her best friend as she levelled with her, having waited until everyone else was secure before descending herself.

"Super," Willow replied. "What was I thinking, using stairs all this time?" She smiled. "Actually, it's not as scary as I thought."

They reached the bottom of the shaft, then made their way to the entrance. Discovering that it was locked, Giles took a crowbar to it.

"Okay, we stick together, then everything should be fine," Buffy remarked. "Everybody ready? Let's..."

She trailed off as the door opened to reveal five members of the Initiative with laser rifles.

"Do this," Buffy finished slowly, before making her first move. She kicked at the front most one, dislodging the gun out of his hand.

Angel did the same to another, and Spike to a third.

Buffy struck out and knocked the fourth to the floor, then grabbed the fifth, locking his arm behind his back. "This is gonna sound lame, but take me to your leader," she said.

"You've got some nerve, lady," the Colonel remarked as soon as the slayer and her friends had entered his offices. "You think you and your friends can just keep waltzing into a government installation brandishing weapons like....." he trailed off, looking puzzled at the device in Willow's hands.

"It's a gourd." She informed him.

"Magic gourd," Giles corrected.

"What kind of freaks are you people?" The Colonel asked.

"Adam is here, Colonel. In the Initiative," Buffy informed him.

The Colonel was sceptical. "Nice try."

"Those overcrowded containment cells of yours: courtesy of Adam," the slayer added. "He's pulling a Trojan Horse on you, he's just waiting....."

The Colonel shook his head. "Everything in this installation is under 24-hour surveillance."

"Including the secret lab?" Angel asked.

"Including everything!" The Colonel affirmed. Then he heard what Angel had asked him. "What secret lab?"

"The one Adam's been using," Buffy replied. "The one built for the final stage of the 314 project."

The Colonel looked at them blankly.

"And you have no idea what I'm talking about," Buffy added.

"I know everything that goes on around here," the Colonel scoffed. "A tick on a mouse couldn't get in without my knowing it. And if Adam wants to try we're ready for him."
"Jolly good," Giles remarked sarcastically. "How exactly do you plan to get close enough to Adam to remove his power source?"

"Hit him simultaneously with multiple taser blasts," the Colonel answered. "Incapacitate him with as much voltage as we can muster."

"Great plan," Xander remarked. "That's right up there with 'duck and cover.'"

"I've seen Adam hit with taser blasts," Buffy informed him. "He feeds on it. And now you're gonna provide him with an all-you-can-eat buffet?"

"You telling me my business?" The Colonel countered.

"This... is not your business. It's mine. You, the Initiative, the boys at the Pentagon, you're all in way over your heads. Messing with primeval forces you have absolutely no comprehension of."

"And you do?" The Colonel queried arrogantly.

Buffy glared at him. "I'm the Slayer. You're playing on my turf."

"Up there, maybe," the Colonel allowed. "But down here, I'm the one who's in control."

At that moment, the room was abruptly bathed in darkness, undermining his statement in one second.


Deep in the bowels of the Initiative, Adam pressed the off button for the main power grid, followed by the one that controlled the security around the holding area. His gaze was fixed upon a video screen, where a scientist and a soldier were walking.

"This will be interesting," he murmured.

The corridor which the scientist and soldier happened to be walking down, was the one which contained the access to the cages in the holding area, the bullet proof glass doors of which now opened via Adam's command.

"What's going on?" Queried the scientist.

"I don't know!" The soldier answered.

The demons stepped out of their cages, realised their freedom had just been handed to them on a plate and rushed at the soldier and scientist, who would never stand a chance against this kind of frenzied assault.

"Containment area's been breached," the soldier, having managed to get away, informed his superiors. "Hostiles are lose."

"How many?" The Colonel asked.

"All of 'em, sir."
"It's Adam," Buffy remarked, making the Colonel turn to her. "Look, I'm the only one who can stop him now. Just let me handle this. Get your people out of here."

The Colonel, as usual, ignored her. "All right, you men follow me. We gotta take the Armoury now."

"Sir."

"Colonel." Buffy implored.

"These people are under arrest, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel left, leaving behind a guard of two soldiers for Buffy and her friends. The slayer gave the nearest one a kick to the chest, then banged the head of the other one into the desk, before hitting him in the face and knocking him out cold.

"We've gotta find Adam," she said.

"On it," Willow replied, sitting herself before one of the computers, which were fortunately controlled by separate systems.

"The enjoining spell is extremely touchy," Giles informed them. "It's, volatile. We can't risk it being interrupted. We need a place that's close to you and quiet."

"Uh... quiet?" Xander queried, gesturing at the view screens.

Every available piece of closed circuit television was covering the fight in the holding areas. All the remaining members of the Initiative were fighting several demons at a time. And being rapidly overwhelmed.

"They need some help," Angel remarked.

Buffy met his gaze. "Be careful," she warned him.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Spike assured her before they both left to join the fray.

The slayer turned back to her friends. "How we doing, Will?"

"Done," she answered. "Hold on. According to this, there's air ducts and electrical conduits all running into there." She pointed to an area on the screen.

"So?" Buffy queried, looking over her shoulder.

"So, there's no there there."

Buffy stared at the view screen for a moment, then straightened up. "It's Adam."

"You sure?" Giles sought to confirm.

"Right behind 314," Buffy said nodding. She turned back to Willow. "Can you unlock the door?"

"I don't have to. All the locks in the Initiative have been disengaged...... except for the exits."

"Demon open house," Xander mused.
"Great," Buffy acknowledged. "So we know we're going to 314. Now all we have to do is get there."

She advanced to the door and kicked it open. Two demons were lying in wait. As then ran at her, she punched one in the face, and kicked the other's leg.

Xander grabbed a spare laser rifle and blasted another.

Then they all ran.

"Okay, it should be over here," Buffy remarked as the reached the door. "Once I'm in, barricade the door behind me. Is this place okay to be Magic Central?"

"It, should do," Giles assured her.

"As long as we don't get blown up or nothin'," Willow added.

"What are the odds of that?" Xander asked rhetorically.

"How long before the ritual kicks in?" Buffy asked her watcher.

"Five minutes, give or take," Giles replied. "I still don't like you going in alone."

"I won't be," Buffy replied, before walking inside.

Inside Buffy ran into the dead walking bodies of Professor Walsh, Dr Angleman and Forrest. She saw Riley with them, along with Adam.

"What's happened to them?" she asked.

"They're part of the final phase," Adam informed her as he emerged from the shadows. "As you were supposed to be."

"Sorry," Buffy said, her tone anything but contrite. "I don't jump through hoops on command. I've never really been one to tow the line."


"I thought you'd never ask," Riley replied.

Buffy kicked the Walsh in the face, sending her flying. She grabbed Forrest and threw him into the wall, breaking glass.

Inside Room 314, Giles lit a final candle.

"The power of the Slayer and all who yield it," Willow began. "Last to ancient first, we invoke thee. Grant us thy domain and primal strength. Accept us in the power we possess. Make us mind and heart and spirit joy. Let the hand encompass us. Do thy will."

Forrest punched Buffy, sending her to the floor. She landed with a roll and punched him back.

Riley advanced, punching her. She grabbed his wrist before his hand could connect, and wrenched
it, breaking the bone.

“So glad you join in,” Buffy remarked. “I’ve been wanting to punch you for a long time.”

“I can’t believe I fancied you,” Riley remarked before kicking her.

“So glad you’re using past tense,” Buffy countered before kicking him in the stomach.

Back in Room 314, Willow continued to chant.

“Spiritus... Spirit,” she said, handing a card to Xander.


Giles took the next one. “Sophus... Mind.”

“And Manus... the hand,” Willow continued. “We enjoin that we may inhabit the vessel, the hand... daughter of Sineya... first of the ones...”

Back with the Slayer, the attackers had gained a slight advantage, and were using it to the full, grabbing Buffy and trying to restrain her.

“Is that it?” Riley mocked. “Is that all you got?”

“No,” a voice growled behind. “She’s got me.”

Angel struck out, knocking both scientists unconscious. Buffy kicked Forrest to the floor, then jumped up. “Thanks. I need to get to Adam.”

“Go,” Angel said. He turned to Riley.

Who gulped.

Buffy found the villain of the piece, watching the ever retreating Colonel and his men. “Fun, isn’t it?” she commented.

“I do appreciate violence,” Adam agreed.

“Good.”

Buffy punched him, but he was faster. He punched her, sending her into the wall. He raised his arm that was made of demon fork and prepared to strike her with it.

Surprising him, Buffy grabbed it and snapped it. “Broke your arm.”

“Got another,” Adam replied as his hand turned into a mini-gun. “I’ve been upgrading.”

Buffy dived over the computer console.

“We implore thee, admit us, bring us to the vessel, take us now,” Willow continued in Room 314.

Buffy rose from her hiding place, an orange glow surrounding her.

“You can’t last much longer,” Adam said.

“We can,” Buffy replied, with the voices of the spell. “We are forever.” She dipped into Sumerian.
"Interesting," Adam commented, before firing at her.

But the shots never reached their target. They were repelled by an invisible force-field before the slayer.

"Very interesting," Adam added. He continued to fire.

"Kur," Buffy remarked, raising her hand before the beam's trajectory.

The laser shot turned into doves. She punched him, and grabbed his head.

"How... can you," Adam began.

"You could never hope to grasp the source of our power," Buffy intoned, reaching into his chest with her other hand. "But yours is right here," she added as she drew out the uranium.

Adam collapsed.

"Buffy," Angel said as he entered. He watched as the uranium levitated above her hand. More Sumerian was uttered, then the power source disappeared into nothing.

Buffy fainted, and swiftly her soulmate caught her.

Inside Room 314, the Scoobies collapsed.

"Wow. That was....." Willow trailed off.

A demon burst into the room. He growled at them menacingly. Suddenly a hand grabbed his neck. A loud snap was heard before he fell to the floor.

"Nasty sort of fellow," Spike commented. "Lucky for you blighters I was here, eh?"

"Yes, thank you," Giles acknowledged.

The door opened, to reveal Buffy and Angel.

"Buffy," Giles remarked in relief.

"Wasn't it amazing?" Willow asked her as she hugged her friend.

"You were great," Xander added.

"We were great," Buffy corrected. "You guys get to the exits, get 'em open. Xander, organise the soldiers, pull 'em back. I'll take point."

"Are you up to this?" Angel asked her.

Buffy knocked out a demon. "I am," she remarked.

"It was an experiment," a man said, in an office far away, days after news had reached them that the Initiative complex had been besieged and then wiped out all within twenty-four hours.

"The Initiative represented the Government's interests in not only controlling the otherworldly menace, but harnessing its power for our own military purposes. The considered opinion of this counsel is that this experiment has failed. Once the prototype took control of the complex, our
soldiers suffered a 40 percent casualty rate. Only through the actions of the deserter and a group of civilian insurrectionists that our losses were not total.

"I trust the irony of that is not lost on any of us. Maggie Walsh's vision was brilliant, but ultimately insupportable. The demons cannot be harnessed. The end result cannot be controlled. It is therefore our recommendation that this project be terminated and all records concerning it expunged.

"Our soldiers will be debriefed. Standard confidentiality clause. We will monitor the civilians and usual measures prepared should they try to go public. I don't think they will. The Initiative complex itself will be filled in with concrete. Burn it down, gentlemen. Burn it down, and salt the Earth."

The End.
To Be Continued In Restless.
**Restless**

**Author's Note:** For those who are wondering, I purposefully left the Angel vs Riley moment vague because I wanted readers to let their imagination run wild. So picture the most frightening, mortal fight in existence, and you have some idea of what happened to Riley!

When I was first writing this, I had planned not to refer to the original at all. Instead I would make the Scoobies dream of the canon of Btvs so far, and then end with a cliffhanger that would form the arc of *Season 5*. I planned to eliminate *Dawn*, by making *Buffy* and *Angel* have a child plunging Seasons 5 and 6 into a very dark place. Then I saw Wood in *Season 7*, and the idea of slayers not able to have children went boom.

I wasn't too sure about the whole arc to begin with, mainly because I knew the B/A baby thing had been done and wasn't original. Then, a few weeks ago, I started watching the whole of Btvs again. And when I got to *Season 5*, I realised there was another way to deal with the *Dawn* character. So I scrapped my previous plan and rewrote the rest of the series.

And how does this apply to this episode? Well, with the help of the excellent *thesis to Restless in the Watcher's Guide Vol. 3*, I wrote a plot that closely resembles the canon, with necessary rewrite of the symbolism for my future plans for the series. *Enjoy.*

**Restless.**

The Mansion on Crawford Street was a quiet contrast to the chaos of the underground laboratories of Lowell House only hours before. After the victory over Adam, the gang had been forced to exit the place rapidly as the frat house went down in flames. Angel and Buffy's place was a large enough sanctuary for all concerned, as well as being the nearest safe-house from the campus.

"Dinner is served," Xander announced as he and Angel entered the double-height living room from the kitchen. "And my very own recipe."

"Ooh, you pushed the button on the microwave that says popcorn?" Cordelia asked as she took a handful.

"Actually, I pushed defrost, but, um, Angel was there in the clinch." He snagged a place on the stone floor in front of the sofa. "Let the vid-fest begin."

Jenny rose up at that moment, causing a free space on the soft furnishing, which he quickly grabbed.

"Control problems?" Joyce sought to confirm sympathetically as she rose too.

Jenny nodded. "And tiredness." She looked towards their host, who nodded. "Feel free, there's empty rooms on the second floor."

Buffy turned to her mother. "You're welcome to crash here too, you know."

"No, you guys have your fun," Joyce replied. "I'm awake enough to get home. I can't believe you're not exhausted. Have you even slept since..."

"Still feel a little bit too wired," Giles answered.
Willow nodded in agreement. "Mm. Yeah, that spell, that was, that was powerful."

"Don't think I could sleep," Buffy remarked from her place in Angel's arms.

"Well, we got plenty of vids," Xander affirmed, as he reached into the bag to retrieve his first choice. "And I'm putting in a preemptive bid for Apocalypse Now, huh?"

Willow scowled. "Did you get anything less heart-of-darkness-y?" She asked as Joyce made her exit.

Xander rushed to his film's defence. "Apocalypse Now is a gay romp! It's the feel-good movie of whatever year it was."

"What else?" Buffy asked determinedly.

Knowing from her tone that he would lose the battle, Xander accepted defeat and began emptying the bag. "Don't worry. Got plenty of chick-and-British-guy flicks too. These puppies should last us all night."

Yet, as the FBI warning came upon the screen before the opening credits of the first film, the tiredness which all the Scoobies claimed was non-existent, came into being, leaving them with eyes closed and minds far, far away.

"I think it's strange. I mean, I think I should worry that we haven't found her name."

Willow looked up from her work to meet her boyfriend's face. "Who, Miss Kitty?" Before the big battle with Adam, they had spoken of getting a cat, who was now playing with a ball of red yarn. However, Willow couldn't remember actually buying the feline.

"You'd think she'd let us know her name by now," Oz continued.

"She will," Willow found herself answering confidently. "She's old enough to choose one of her own. She'll let us know when the time is right."

"You're not worried?" Oz asked her.

"I never worry here. I'm safe here."

"They will find out, you know," Oz remarked. "About you."

"Don't have time to think about that," Willow replied as she refilled her ink brush. "You know I have all this homework to finish," she added, gesturing at the writing upon his back.

"Are you gonna finish in time for class?" Oz asked her.

Willow continued to write. "I can be late."

"But you've never taken drama before." He reminded her. "Might miss something important."

"I don't wanna leave here," Willow confessed after a moment.

"Why not?"
Willow rose from the bed and went to open the red curtains which were covering the window. "It's so bright. And there's something out there," she added.

Concerned, Oz joined her at the window, where, in the desert, they could see a shape, too far away to define what it might be, moving primitively through the mounds of sand.

Somehow, Willow found herself walking down the locker covered hall of Sunnydale High. Before she had time to ponder over who had rebuilt the place, she descried Xander and Anya walking towards her.

"Hey." The former called out.

"Hey, guys," Willow felt herself reply as she continued to walk.

The couple fell into step behind her. "Heard you're taking drama," Anya remarked.

"Uh-huh." Willow confirmed.

"It's a tough course," the former vengeance demon warned.

"You took it?" Willow asked her.

"Oh, I've been here forever," Anya answered mysteriously grand.

"So whatcha been doing?" Xander asked.

A bell rang, making Willow stop trying to open one of the lockers. "I'm gonna be late."

Somehow she found her way to the drama area, and entered the back stage dressing rooms, confused by the rows of costumes and people changing into them.

A Swedish milkmaid once known as Harmony ran up to her. "Isn't this exciting? Our first production! I can't wait till our scene! I love you! Oh!" She hugged the redhead wiccan briefly.

"Don't step on my cues."

"Production?" Willow found herself echoing.

Buffy ran in just then, clothed in a costume more suited to the musical Chicago and a strange contrast to Harmony's. "Ohmigod. The place is packed. Everybody's here! Your whole family's in the front row, and they look really angry," she said, cheerfully.

Too cheerfully.

"There's a production?" Willow tried again.

"Oh, somebody's got stage fright," Harmony cried gleefully.

"Isn't this the first class?" Willow sought to confirm.

"Well, you showed up late, or you'd have a better part." Harmony informed her.

"Your costume is perfect," Buffy assured her. Suddenly she dropped her voice to a whisper. "Nobody's gonna know the truth. You know, about you."
"Costume?" Willow queried, still confused.

"You're already in character! Oh, I shouldn't done that!" Disappointed, her best friend turned away.

"But how come there's - I mean, I was given to understand that a drama class would have, you know ... drama class. I mean, we haven't even rehearsed!"

"Well, maybe some people haven't," Harmony countered.

"I just think it's really early to be putting on a play. I, I don't even know what...," Willow trailed off as a horrible thought occurred to her. "This isn't Madame Butterfly, is it, because I have a whole problem with opera."

"All right, everyone!" Giles suddenly cried, clapping his hands. "Pay attention! In just a few moments that curtain is going to open on our very first production. Now, everyone that Willow's ever met ... is out in that audience, including all of us. That means we have to be perfect. Stay in character, remember your lines, and energy, energy, energy, especially in the musical numbers!"

Willow's focus was not on his speech, but on the mysterious shape, the same one which had been roaming the desert before, and which had now suddenly appeared to be roaming the stage. She could see more of it now, enough to determine that it was a woman, covered in clay, with black, neglected hair and clawlike nails. "Did anyone see that?" She asked softly.

Giles, like everyone else, did not hear her question. "Acting is not about behaving, it's about hiding. The audience wants to find you, strip you naked, and eat you alive, so hide." He paused here, but only to address Harmony, who was in game face behind him, her fangs near his neck. "Stop that. Now, costumes, sets, and props. It's all about subterfuge. Now go on out there, lie like dogs, and have a wonderful time. Now, if we can stay in focus, keep our heads, and if Willow can stop stepping on everyone's cues, I know this'll be the best production of Death of a Salesman we've ever done. Good luck everyone! Break a leg!" And with that, he pushed through the crowd to leave.

Willow frowned and walked away from the excited crowd of her friends and enemies. She encountered a man by a table, filled with cheese. "I've made a little space for the cheese slices," he whispered to her. Still confused, Willow walked past him into the dark space between the curtains before the stage. Suddenly she encountered Tara in a beam of light.

"Things aren't going very well," Tara seemed to guess.

Grateful to find someone who appeared to understand, Willow spoke. "No! This drama class is just ... I think they're really not doing things in the proper way, and now I'm in a play and my whole family's out there, and ... why is there a milkmaid in Death of a Salesman anyway?"

Tara frowned. "You don't understand yet, do you?" She softly sought to confirm.

"Is there something following me?" Willow asked her.

"Yes."

"Well, what, uh, what should I do? The, the play's gonna start soon, and I don't even know my lines."

"The play's already started." Tara corrected. "That's not the point. Everyone's starting to wonder
about you. The real you. If they find out, they'll punish you, I ... I can't help you with that."

"Well, what should I ... what's after me? Is it something I-I was supposed to do? W-was I supposed to-

"Shh," Tara interrupted her nervous babbling, concerned suddenly.

A buzzing noise reached Willow's ears. "What was that?" She turned in what she thought was the source of the sound, only to find darkness. She turned back, and found Tara gone. "Tara? Tara, okay, this really isn't fu-

Her words were cut off by a blade suddenly slashing through the curtains, just past her face. Willow screamed, and tried to back away, but the blade struck again, gashing her palm and making her stumble to the floor.

"Will!" A familiar voice cried, and two different hands reached through the curtains to pull her to safety.

"Buffy! Oh god," Willow cried in relief.

"Come on," the slayer, now out of her costume and back into normal clothes, guided her through the curtains into a classroom. "Stay low. What did it look like?"

"I don't know. I-I don't know what's after me." Willow tried to assure her friend.

"Well, you must have done something," Buffy mused.

Willow shook her head. "No. I never do anything. I'm very seldom naughty. I, I just came to class, and, and the play was starting."

"Play is long over." Buffy looked at her strangely. "Why are you still in costume?"

"Okay, still having to explain wherein this is just my outfit."

"Willow, everybody already knows. Take it off."

Anxious not to add naked in a classroom scenes to this already frightening nightmare, Willow protested. "No. No. I need it."

Her best friend just rolled her eyes. "Oh, for god's sake, just take it off," she remarked, before spinning her round and proceeding to do just that. "That's better. It's much more realistic."

Willow glanced down to find herself in the outfit she had worn the day she met Buffy; grey pinafore frock and a white lined shirt. Even her hair was the original length she had possessed back then.

"See?" Harmony remarked, causing Willow to notice that the previously empty classroom was now full of students. "Isn't everybody very clear on this now?"

"My god, it's like a tragedy," Anya uttered next to her. "It's exactly like a Greek tragedy. There should only be Greeks."

Suddenly it was there again, her attacker. The dark, dirty hands pounced on Willow as she leaped into the classroom from the ceiling. Her arrival and her attack was unnoticed by the rest of the class. Willow tried to call out, but the hands surrounded her neck and began to suck the breath from her.
On the sofa at the Mansion on Crawford Street, Willow's sleeping body was choking too, as she continued dying in her sleep.

While his best friend was still gasping for air, Xander became awake, and sat up from his place on the sofa. "I'm awake. I'm good," he uttered, even though no one had inquired. "Did I miss anything?"

"Not very much at all really," Giles answered, munching popcorn.

"Bunch of massacring," Buffy added, also munching.

Xander turned to the screen, where a soldier was marching through a jungle.

"We gotta keep going, men," he said. "We gotta take that hill. Damn this war! Men? Oh my god, what's happened to my men!"

"I have to say, I really feel that Apocalypse Now is overrated," Angel remarked through bites of popcorn.

"No, no. It gets better," Xander protested. "I remember that it gets better."

Buffy held out the dish to him. "Want some corn?"

"Butter flavour?" Xander asked.

"New car smell."

"Cool." He leaned across to take a handful, brushing a sleeping and struggling for breath Willow. "What's her deal?" He added.

Buffy shrugged. "Big faker."

"Oh, I'm beginning to understand this now," Angel remarked. "It's all about the journey, isn't it?"

Xander rolled his eyes. "Well, thanks for making me have to pee." He rose up from the sofa.

"You don't need any help with that, right?" Buffy asked.

"Got a system," Xander added.

"Don't use ours," Angel called out.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Xander called back down. "Don't want to give myself anymore nightmares."

He headed to the spiral staircase that led up to the second floor. Opening one of the doors to the one of the guest ensuites, he found himself instead in the off campus house that he, Anya, Cordelia, Willow and Oz shared.

The house was dark, and silent, save for the pounding on the front door.

"I didn't order any vampires," Xander called out loudly, only for the pounding to increase in noise level. He backed away. "That's not the way out," he added, before turning and heading for the back
Outside, he saw that there was no need to worry about the vampires, for it was daylight in Sunnydale. Confused, he walked up to the playground ahead of him, to find Giles and Spike swinging on the swings, and Buffy building castles in the sandbox.

"Hey, there you are," he remarked.

"Are you sure it's us you were looking for?" Buffy asked him.

"Giles here is gonna teach me to be a Watcher." Spike suddenly said. "Says I got the stuff."

"Spike's like a son to me," Giles remarked.

"That's good," Xander found himself answering. "I was into that for a while, but I got other stuff going on." He glanced away from them to the sight of the Bronze behind. "You gotta have something. Gotta be with moving forward." He paused, suddenly concerned. "Buffy, are you sure you wanna play there? It's a pretty big sandbox."

The sandbox in question had suddenly changed into a desert.

"I'm okay," Buffy assured him. "It's not coming for me yet."

"I just mean you can't protect yourself from some stuff."

"I'm way ahead of you, big brother," Buffy remarked.

"Brother?" Xander echoed, confused.

"Go on, put your back into it!" Giles directed Spike at the swings. "A Watcher scoffs at gravity."

A door began rattling, making Xander turn to the entrance of his nightclub. "There's something coming for me." He backed away, only to bump into someone.

The man held up his cheese slices. "These will not protect you," he said.

"Giles," Xander pushed past the cheeseman to find himself in the hall of Sunnydale High. The watcher was leaning against wall, holding an apple.

"Xander, what are you doing here?" He asked.

"What's after me?" Xander countered.

"It's because of what we did, I know that," Giles answered, before a taking a bite of his apple.

"What we did?" Xander repeated.

"The others have gone on ahead. Now, listen very carefully. Your life may depend on what I'm about to tell you. You need to find the house where we're all sleeping. All your friends are there having a wonderful time and getting on with their lives. The creature can't hurt you there."

Xander however, had understood not a word from 'you need,' for Giles had slipped into French. "What? Go where? I don't understand."

"Oh, for God's sake this is no time for your idiotic games," Giles yelled, still in French.
"Xander," Anya said, suddenly appearing. She spoke some more, but her words were also French. "You have to come with us now. They're waiting for you."

"That's what I've been trying to tell him," Giles affirmed in the same language.

"Honey, I don't... I can't hear you," Xander appealed to his girlfriend.

Anya took his hand. "It's not important," she assured him in French. "I'll take you there."

Giles took his other hand. "Let's go."

"W-wait! Where we going?" Xander queried as other hands grabbed him. "Where? Hey! Let go! Hey!"

The hands dragged him, helplessly into the darkness of a forest, then into the darkness of a room, lit only a by fire.

"Where are you from, Harris?" A voice spoke in the darkness, sounding an awful lot like Principal Snyder.

"Well, my off campus house, mostly," Xander replied.

"Were you born there?" Snyder asked.

"No."

"I walked by your guidance counsellor's office one time. A bunch of you were sitting there ... waiting to be shepherded. I remember it smelled like dead flowers. Like decay. Then it hit me. The hope of our nation's future is a bunch of mulch."

"You know, I never got the chance to tell you how glad I was you were eaten by a snake," Xander uttered, before wishing he hadn't.

"Where are you heading?" Snyder asked. "Your time is running out."

"No, I'm just trying to get away. There's ... something I can't fight."

"You're a whipping boy. Raised by mongrels and set on a sacrificial stone."

"I'm getting a cramp," Xander uttered, standing. To find himself somewhere else. A growling sound echoed from a darkened trellis. Backing away, he found himself in the courtyard of Giles and Jenny's apartment.

Xander turned and dashed inside. "Giles, it's here!"

"It's more serious than we thought," Giles uttered as if he had never spoken.

"Giles!" Xander tried again.

"I can fight anything. Right?" Buffy queried.

"Maybe we should slap her," Anya remarked.

The door rattled again. Xander backed away, only to find himself bumping into something.

The clay clad woman growled at him and pushed her hand into his chest. Xander found his voice
screaming as she pulled out his heart.

In the Mansion on Crawford Street the sleeping form of Xander convulsed in shock. Now like his redhead friend he began to choke and die in his sleep.

The old gold pocket watch swung back and forth, suspended in his hands.

"You have to stop thinking," he intoned. "Let it wash over you."

"Don't you think it's a little old-fashioned?" His slayer asked.

"This is the way women and men have behaved since the beginning, before time. Now look into the light."

Buffy stared at the swinging watch, then burst into gleeful laughter. Giles closed his eyes in frustration, only to hear other sounds suddenly. He opened his eyes and found them in the streets of the town, heading towards a graveyard.

"Come on! Come on!" Buffy cried, dragging him along by the hand towards the rows of crypts and graves. Strangely they were decorated almost as if they were circus attractions. "We're gonna miss all the good stuff."

"Does she always want to train this badly?" A voice asked him, making Giles turn to find Jenny at his side. Curiously she was still full-term but pushing an empty pram. "Well, it appears she's never heard the fable about patience," he found himself replying.

"Which one is that?" Jenny asked.

"The, the one about the fox, and the, uh, less patient fox," Giles said quickly.

Buffy stopped in front of one of the graves, which held more than a passing resemblance to a shooting booth. "Here, I want to, I want to!"

"Yes, go ahead," Giles found himself agreeing.

"I am a vampire!" A recorded tinny voice sounded behind the fake vampire targets. Buffy aimed a ball but missed by a mile.

"Buffy, you have a sacred birthright to protect mankind," Giles found himself saying. "Don't stick out your elbow."

"I am a vampire!" The voice repeated. Buffy picked up another ball and this time, victory was hers. "Ahh, you staked me!"

As the slayer turned round, beaming, Giles moaned. "I haven't got any treats."

"For god's sake, Rupert, go easy on the girl," Jenny admonished. She doled out a few coins, and directed the slayer to the cotton candy.

"This is my business," Giles found himself protesting. "Blood of the lamb and all that." He turned in the direction of the slayer and groaned. "Oh, now you're gonna get that all over your face."

But the slayer turned, and though her face was covered, it was not in candy, but in mud. Her
expression was different, no longer childish, but even younger, almost primitive.

"I know you," Giles echoed.

"Hey!" Another British voice cried out. Giles turned to see Spike standing at the entrance to a crypt. "Come on! You're gonna miss everything!" He turned and entered the grave house.

"Don't push me around," Giles answered as he entered the crypt. "You know I have a great deal to do." He found himself suddenly bereft of his companions. Spike meanwhile was surrounded by tourists.

"I've hired myself out as an attraction," he informed Giles.

"Sideshow freak?" Giles asked.

"Well, at least it's showbiz."

"What am I supposed to do with all of this?" Giles asked, confused.

"You gotta make up your mind, Rupes. What are you wasting your time for? Haven't you figured it all out yet, with your enormous squishy frontal lobes?"

"I still think Buffy should have killed you," Giles found himself commenting. Spike was nonplussed, still posing for the crowd. Giles turned away and walked through the suddenly large crypt.

"I wear the cheese," a man said as they passed each other. "It does not wear me."

"Honestly, you meet the most appalling sorts of people," Giles found himself saying before coming to a door. He opened it and walked through into the Bronze. Seeing the Scoobies grouped around their booth, he walked over to them. "I'm so sorry I'm late. There's a great deal going on. And all at once!"

"Don't we know it," Willow agreed. "Only at death's door over here, and look at Xander!" She pulled up his shirt to reveal the wound left from his attacker.

"Got the sucking chest wound swinging," Xander commented, unaffected. "I promised Anya I'd be there for her big night. Now I'll probably be pushing up daisies, in the sense of being in the ground underneath them and fertilising the soil with decomposition."

Giles glanced in the direction of his pointing, and saw Anya on stage, trying to tell a joke. The jeers from the crowd indicated how well it was going. Willow and Xander turned back to the books before them. "She's doing quite well," Giles uttered as if saying it would make it so.

"Do you know this is your fault?" Willow asked him.

"We have to think of the facts, Willow," Giles heard himself answer. "I'm very busy. I have a gig myself, you know."

"Something's after us. It's, uh, like some primal ... some animal force," Willow added.

"That used to be us," Giles commented.

"Don't get linear on me now, man," Xander complained.

"Rupert," Willow said, surprising Giles. "You've gotta focus. You must have some kind of
explanation. If we don't know what we're fighting, I don't think we stand a chance."

Giles felt himself open his mouth and begin to explain what he had come to realise, but the words came out in song. "It's strange, it's not like anything we've faced before." He paused as he rose and walked to the stage, where a band had suddenly appeared to support his vocals. "It seems familiar somehow. Of course! The spell we cast with Buffy, must have released some primal evil that's come back seeking, I'm not sure what. Willow, look through the chronicles for some reference to a warrior beast. I've got to warn Buffy. There's every chance she might be next. Xander, help Willow. And try not to bleed on my couch I've just had it steam-cleaned. No, wait..."

The mike went dead. Confused, Giles glanced down at the wires, and followed them back to the source, where he found the thing he had first been holding; his pocket watch. "Well, that was ... obvious."

A growl sounded from above, and he looked up to the see the creature, holding her weapon, far above him.

"I know who you are," Giles heard himself say. "And I can defeat you ... with my intellect. I ... can cripple you with my thoughts. Of course, you underestimate me. You couldn't know. You never had a Watcher."

At the Mansion on Crawford Street Giles' sleeping form took several gasping breaths.

A voice was calling to her.

"Buffy! Wake up!"

She opened her eyes, to find herself in her and Angel's bedroom. She turned in the direction of the voice, to find it belonged to Anya.

"Buffy, you have to wake up right away!" The former vengeance demon implored.

"I'm not really in charge of these things," Buffy heard herself say as she closed her eyes once again.

"Please wake up. Oh please." Anya pleaded.

"I need my beauty sleep. So stop it, okay?" She rolled over on to her back.

Only to find the creature staying down at her.

Abruptly she sat up, and the scene around her shifted. She was in another of the Mansion's bedrooms, but one of the guest suites on the second floor. Suddenly she was standing upon it's threshold, looking at the unmade bed.

"Faith and I just made that bed," she heard herself say.

"For who?" A voice asked.

Buffy turned and saw Tara had joined her. "I thought you were here to tell me." She paused before asking, "the guys aren't here, are they? We were gonna hang out and, watch movies t-"

"You lost them," Tara interrupted.
Buffy shook her head. "No. No. I think they need me to find them." She glanced at the alarm clock beside the bed, showing the time to be seven-thirty am. "It's so late."

"Oh ... that clock's completely wrong," Tara remarked, handing her something. "Here."

Buffy looked at the Tarot card of Manus that she had just been handed. "I'm never gonna use those."

"You think you know what's to come," Tara intoned softly. "What you are. You haven't even begun."

Buffy glanced from her towards the freshly made bed. "I think I need to go find the others."

"This is why we chose you," Tara was heard to utter as she walked away. Buffy wondered what she meant as she climbed down the spiral staircase that led to the first floor. Instead of arriving at the doors to her and Angel's rooms however, she found herself in the conference room of the Initiative.

"Hey there, killer," Riley said from his place at the conference table. A human who she realised bore a more than remarkable resemblance to Adam, sat to the right of him.

"Riley? You're back," Buffy felt herself say.

"I never left," Riley answered her. He gestured at Adam. "We're drawing up a plan for world domination. The key element? Coffeemakers that think."

"World domination?" Buffy echoed, concerned. "I-is that a good?"

"Baby, we're the government. It's what we do."

"She's uncomfortable with certain concepts," Adam commented. "It's understandable. Aggression is a natural human tendency. Though you and me come by it another way."

"We're not demons," Buffy answered, but in defence of her and her ancestors.

"Is that a fact?" Adam countered.

"Buffy, we've got important work here," Riley said dismissively. "A lot of filing, giving things names."

"What was yours?" Buffy asked Adam.

"Before Adam? Not a man among us can remember."

A blue alarm light suddenly began to flash.

"The demons have escaped. Please run for your lives," the computer instructed.

"This could be trouble," Adam commented, standing.

Riley followed suit. "We better make a fort."

Adam nodded. "I'll get some pillows."

Buffy glanced to the floor, to find her bag before her. "Wait! I have weapons!" She sat on the floor and opened the bag.
Only to find mud. The slayer covered her face with it solemnly.

"Thought you were looking for your friends," Riley remarked. "Okay, killer...... if that's the way you want it. I guess you're on your own."

He walked away, leaving a beam of light before her. Buffy felt her body walk forward towards it.

And into the desert.

"I'm never gonna find them here," she heard herself say, before catching sight of Tara walking towards her.

"Of course not," Tara said. "That's the reason you came."

"You're not in my dream," Buffy said in plain contradiction of the evidence.

"I was borrowed," Tara uttered. "Someone has to speak for her."

"Let her speak for herself," Buffy argued. "That's what's done in polite circles."

The creature emerged from the sands, abruptly coming from behind the slayer. She circled her, sniffing out of her enemy.

"Why do you follow me?" Buffy asked her.

"I don't," Tara answered for the primitive.

"Where are my friends?" Buffy tried.

"You're asking the wrong questions," Tara answered.

"Make her speak," Buffy commanded.

"I have no speech," Tara answered for her. "No name. I live in the action of death, the blood cry, the penetrating wound. I am destruction. Absolute ... alone."

"The Slayer," Buffy realised.

"The first," Tara confirmed.

"I am not alone," Buffy countered.

The primitive shook her head, while Tara replied with words. "The Slayer does not walk in this world."

"I walk," Buffy countered. "I talk. I shop, I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out. And I don't sleep on a bed of bones. Now give me back my friends."

The words had made the primitive angry enough to speak for herself. "No ... friends! Just the kill! We ... are ... alone!"

A bald man with cheese suddenly intervened between them, holding up the slices with an inane smile.

"That's it," Buffy decided. "I'm waking up."
The primitive attacked her, trying to push her face into the sand. Buffy met the ancient fighting stance with an equally ancient one of her own, only much more sophisticated and powerful. The martial artist was always the superior.

"It's over," Buffy commented. "We don't do this any more. Enough!"

She pushed the primitive away, brushing what little sand grains remained away from her eyes. Fully opening them, she blinked.

To find herself back in the living room of the Mansion on Crawford Street. A growl sound, and she was pushed to the floor. The primitive stabbed repeatedly at the stone floor with her weapon.

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Are you quite finished? It's over, okay? I'm going to ignore you, and you're going to go away."

The primitive rolled away and rose from the floor.

"You're really gonna have to get over the whole ... primal power thing," Buffy continued as she rose and walked towards the sofa. "You're not the source of me. Also, in terms of hair care, you really wanna say, what kind of impression am I making in the workplace? 'Cause-"

In mid-sentence she woke up, opening her eyes and finding herself in Angel's arms, on the sofa, in the living room of the Mansion on Crawford Street, gasping for breath.

At the same time Willow, Xander and Giles also opened their eyes, gasping as well.


They were all awake now, the gasps having alerted the rest of the naturally sleepy slayerettes that something had occurred. In an effort to stay awake they had assembled in the large dining room of the Mansion.

"Not big with the socialisation," Xander commented.

"Or the floss," Willow added.

"Somehow our joining with Buffy and invoking the essence of the Slayer's power was an affront to the source of that power," Giles murmured in understanding.

"You know, you could have brought that up to us before we did it," Buffy remarked.

"I did," Giles reminded her. "I said there could be dire consequences."

"Yes, but you say that about chewing too fast," Buffy pointed out.

"You all right?" Angel asked her.

"Yeah. I think I might jump in the shower."

"You seem a bit, uh..." His girlfriend nodded. "A little. The First Slayer. I never really thought about it. It was intense. I guess you guys got a taste of that, huh."

"Yeah, from now on, you keep your Slayer friends out of my dreams," Xander admonished. "Is that
'clear?"

"It's not good for the sleeping," Willow agreed.

"Well, at least you all didn't dream about that guy with the cheese," Buffy remarked as she rose up from her chair. "I don't know where the hell that came from."

Willow, Xander and Giles glanced at each other in astonishment, while she walked towards the dining room door. She raised her hand to clasp the handle, only for it to open before she could.

Jenny was standing upon the threshold. "Guys, I hate to interrupt the vid-fest, but I think it's time."

Giles and the rest rushed to rise from their chairs and Buffy went past her to grab the keys for Angel's car.

Not finding them in the kitchen, she dashed upstairs and began a search of the bedrooms.

Curiously, she found them on the second floor, in the room where she had stood before the made bed in her dreams, first with Faith, then with Tara.

"You think you know," the voice of the latter intoned once more, "what's to come. What you are. You haven't even begun."

Buffy shook herself and grabbed the keys off the bed before turning and running to join the others.

The End. Of Season Four.
Continued In:
Season Five.
Buffy Vs Dracula.

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