

Someone Else's Battlefield

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This story is the sequel to my story Someone Else's War and a crossover with Buffy the Vampire Slayer early in that programme's fifth season.

"You don't think it's a little odd?" Giles asked in a mildly sarcastic tone. "That a film company should decide to set its latest production here on the Hellmouth?"

He was standing behind the counter of his shop, The Magic Box, counting the day's takings with Anya while the rest of the Scooby Gang lounged around.

"Duh, this is California," said Xander at the table. "They make movies here." He grinned at Willow. "I love it when I get to be smarter than him."

Giles glowered in his general direction.

Willow looked up from her book. "He kind of has a point. For one thing, it's a British company. Why would they come to Sunnydale?"

Buffy, leaning against the counter, held up her hands. "Way I see it is this - being a film extra would be fun and good Slayer business."

She grinned at Giles, who was now frowning at her instead of Xander, and explained before he could ask. "If they are for real, they're going to be the target for the local vamps - fresh blood and all that - so I need to be there to deal with them. If they're the bad guys and plotting the end of the world or whatever, I still need to be there. Either way, I get to be in pictures. Assuming the movie ever gets made."

Giles sighed. "I am, as ever, defeated by your logic. It's just..."

She bent towards him. "What?"

"I've never been very interested in the cinema but the company, Harlington-Straker, it seems familiar somehow."

It was her turn to frown. "You and familiar, not good. But I still think what I say holds."

He nodded reluctantly. "I doubt my books cover the entertainment industry. Willow?"

The redhead was already swapping her book for a laptop. "Netgirl is on-line."

"And I'm on patrol," said Buffy as she headed out the door.

* * *

Alec Freeman sighed. It was something he seemed to have been doing a lot of these last few years, sighing. The present cause was that he had no idea what the technicians were talking about.

He was in America, in some God forsaken, one-horse town with the mind numbingly awful name of Sunnydale because - for reasons which escaped him entirely - the US government had chosen to site a deeply classified black-ops project there. Said project had gone down the pan last summer, leaving its technology rich remains to be picked over by

SHADO. It was Colonel Lake's field, really, but she was overseeing the construction of the new baby-SID chain of satellites and Ed had thrown him this to get him out of the office.

He hauled himself painfully to his feet and announced: "I'm going for a walk."

Captain Ford, his second in command on this one, looked up momentarily. "Right, sir. It's very pleasant out."

Then he was back to work. Stevens, built like a mountain, dropped into place behind the Colonel. Alec groaned silently but the man was simply doing his job.

"Pass me my cane," he said. "And do you know anywhere worth walking to around here?"

Stevens passed him the ebony, silver topped cane that Ed had given him when he had left hospital. "I believe there's a park, sir. One night club, a couple of coffee shops, an ice-cream parlour."

"Great. What's the nightclub like?"

"Mostly full of high school students, it seemed."

"Better and better. We'll try the park."

He set off, ignoring the pain in his hips. It only went with all the other pains.

The fresh air lifted his mood a little. California was pleasant, especially in the evenings. His thoughts drifted to the film project that was cover story for this little fishing trip. It would probably come to nothing but he had spotted a few likely looking locations and the University under which they were currently working held bevy of unfeasibly good-looking students.

He sighed once more. Girls that young only made him feel old. Sixty-something was not that old - but the truth was he was nearer to seventy than sixty, worn out and out of date. Not something you could say about his boss, Ed Straker.

He shivered. They seemed to be passing close to a graveyard.

"Great," he said. "Memento mori."

"Sir?" Stevens asked.

"Remember you must die," whispered a voice from the darkness.

Alec stopped still. He had not seen or heard anyone approach but they were there, four of them. Each looked young but their faces were contorted into hard planes and angles. They were killers, he knew that by instinct, but not aliens and not - something told him - human.

Stevens was reaching for his gun. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Boys and girls come out to play," sang one girl.

"Will you let us pass?" Alec asked, his free hand on the butt of his own gun.

A young male stepped forward. "I don't think so. You're too old for food but you might be fun."

Alec understood. He had been that kind of fun before, still bore the scars, but he had survived it. Now, with just the two of them and him in no shape to fight, the odds were not looking too good. Even with them holding the guns.

The creatures could see the guns. They did not look afraid. A shiver went down his spine.

In the darkness, he thought he saw another figure but could not make her out.

The attack began as one leaped the space between to clutch at his throat. Freeman fired wide as he went down. He heard Stevens' gun go off and a cry of pain. The hands round Alec's throat were unnaturally strong. One hand, as the other probed his old injuries. It seemed the creature knew exactly where to press and jab, making him writhe in agony.

Someone else was twisting the gun out of his hand: "Pretty toy, pretty toy."

"I'm hungry," someone else was saying. "This one's young enough."

A slurping sound and a cry of pain from Stevens.

Freeman had lost the gun but he had one more trick up his sleeve if he could manage it.

A girl's voice, annoyed: "I'm warning you."

The grip on his throat, on his wrist, slackened just slightly. He slipped his hand away and, with a flick, discarded the outer part of the swordstick. He brought it across in a sweeping blow aiming for the head.

It worked in part. His attacker was unbalanced and Freeman was able to scramble painfully to his feet.

"Aim for the neck," the girl shouted. "Behead them."

She was a pretty, blonde slip of a thing who was fighting with athletic skill and what looked like a sharp stick. She plunged the stick into one youth and he exploded in a shower of dust.

Freeman blinked, startled. Someone shoved him in the back and he fell forward. He rolled over, thrusting upwards. The blade passed through a blond boy with no more effect than to annoy him.

The kid roared.

Freeman withdrew, slashed, took his head off. This one, too, exploded into dust leaving Alec coughing.

He looked quickly round. One girl was running off. There was no sign of the fourth attacker.

The girl was closing Stevens' eyes. She looked across to Freeman. "I'm sorry, I was too late. Are you OK?"

For a moment she had that world-on-the-shoulders look he had seen too often with Ed.

"I'm fine, thank you. What were those things?"

"The local vermin. We ought to be getting out of here." She gave him a sweet smile that made him feel old enough to be her grandfather.

"You mean I should."

She held out her hand to him but still a groan escaped his lips as he got his feet.

She was all concern. "Did they hurt you bad?"

"No, it's an old injury. I don't think I can walk back, though."

"That's OK, my friend's place is just along here."

She retrieved the outer shell of the cane - "Neat. I should get Giles one for his birthday, he'd love it." - and he leaned heavily on that and on her arm as they walked into a shopping street. A few hundred yards away was the place they were headed for, an occult shop called The Magic Box.

Curiouser and curiouser, he thought.

The sign said Closed but the door was not locked and she pushed it open as if she was expected.

"Giles? Can you get the first aid kit?"

A man emerged from the back of the long room: clad in a jumper but somehow giving an impression of tweed, bespectacled and worried. "Buffy? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, I just arrived kinda late."

Alec looked at Giles. Giles looked at Alec. Both looked slightly puzzled.

"Do you two know each other?" Buffy asked warily.

Freeman's thoughts flashed back twenty years to a routine operation with a far from routine ending. "You're the one that didn't get the injection."

"Oh dear," said Giles. "Straker. I knew I should have known that name."

Buffy was looking between the two of them. "Your name's Straker? From the film studio?"

"No and yes," Freeman said. "Ed Straker's my boss. What's going on here?"

Giles sighed. "Why don't you take a seat? I'll put the kettle on and we'll all hope this isn't going to turn into a complete disaster."

"Nice to see things back to normal." Buffy commented.

They both went into the back, presumably to talk amongst themselves. Freeman took the opportunity to call Ford and inform him of the basics of what has happened. They were back a moment later. Alec was grateful for the chair and the tea. Giles even produced a bottle of good Scotch from behind a stack of books. But what Alec most wanted was information.

It seemed that Giles was prepared to give it, if not quite sure where to begin. "It's awkward, Buffy. I made a promise to Mr Straker that in return for his deviating from normal procedure I'd withhold certain facts that had come into my possession - something which I have continued to do to this day."

She frowned and Alec wished that he was a much younger man. "Okaaay, so this is in our normal line of business?"

"No."

"No?"

"What is your normal line of business?" Alec put in. "And will somebody kindly tell me what those creatures were?"

Giles turn to him. "Mr. Straker seemed remarkably quick to believe what I had to say, most people aren't. And if your, er, line of business has come to Sunnydale it is almost certainly going to impact on our line of business. I really think it would make sense if I could speak to him myself and we could see what the situation truly is. The last thing we need at the moment is any misunderstanding. No offence."

Alec, used for most of his adult life to playing second fiddle to Ed, replied: "None taken." and called Ford.

"I'm bringing someone -"

Giles shook his head. "Both of us."

"Some people over to the communications post. I want a direct line to Ed and they aren't to see anything else. Understood?"

"Understood, sir."

Alec was surprised to find Giles owned a gleaming, red sports car.

"He got bored," Buffy whispered.

They used it for their journey, Freeman giving directions.

A few minutes later, Buffy said: "We're headed for the university."

"We're headed for the Initiative," said Giles.

She groaned. "You're right. I thought we demolished the place."

"What's that got to do with you?" Alec asked.

Buffy looked between the two men. "Don't see why I should be the first one to give."

A moment later they pulled up at the entrance, Ford waiting to meet them. "I've sent a team to - er, collect Stevens."

He looked warily at the two newcomers.

"It's all right," Freeman assured him. "They know about that. It's thanks to this young lady that there aren't two corpses out there."

"Then we're very grateful, Miss."

She smiled at him and he smiled back, seeming to grow an inch in height.

Freeman cleared his throat. "Communications?"

"Yes, sir, he's on the line."

The communications post was one of the first doors off the corridor. One screen already showed Ed Straker half turned away from them as he spoke to someone else.

"Turn the sound up, Ed, we're here."

Straker's white blond hair was now mostly white with age but his face was remarkably unlined, leaving him looking not that much different from how he had twenty years ago.

He turned the volume up. "Alec, what's going on? Ford tells me Stevens is dead?"

Then his eyes caught the two figures in the background and his frown deepened. "Giles, Rupert Giles. It's been a long time. You'll forgive me for saying I hoped it would be never."

Giles took a step forward. "The feeling is mutual, I assure you. There's only so much... Well, never mind. Your sphere of expertise and mine seem to have overlapped once again. I was wondering what we were going to do about it."

There was movement from behind Straker and an increase in the volume of voices. Freeman picked up the word *incoming* and swore. Straker turned away from the screen for a long moment before turning back.

"Alec, they're headed for you, two of them. Sky Two and Four are launched but keep cover."

"What's going on?" Buffy was asking. "Who's headed here? Giles?"

"Yes, yes." Giles stepped forward. "I know you're busy but we have friends out there. Do they need to be warned?"

Freeman looked at him. "They her age?"

"Yes."

"Prime targets. But don't worry, we'll deal with it."

"Deal with it?" Buffy was getting louder. "On the Hellmouth, I deal with it. Whatever it is."

Giles shook his head. "I think we should wait. If they land -"

"Sky Two has intercepted." Ford said from the other side of the room. "Kill confirmed. The other target is still on this vector. Sky Four is closing."

Freeman remained tense. They were not set up to deal for an incursion and he wanted to clear up this girl's mystery.

There was a long moment's silence.

"Second killed confirmed," Ford announced.

"Where?" Freeman asked.

"Ten miles away, over the desert."

"Too close," said Straker. "And too much of a coincidence. I'm coming out there."

"Ed! That's the best reason for you not being here."

"Sorry Alec but I think it's necessary." He smiled briefly. "Maybe you'll have it cleared up by the time I arrive."

Then he signed off.

"Not with nobody telling me anything," Freeman grumbled.

He turned to his two guests.

"Explanations..." said Giles tentatively, though he looked satisfied.

"Is there anything I need to know now?" Alec asked.

"That it's not safe after dark," said Buffy.

"I got that. Anything else? Then we'll wait till Ed gets here."

He showed them out, longing for his bed and a bucket of painkillers but knowing he had to check every source that SHADO had. He had some reason to trust these people, yes, but it was his job to clear the decks for Ed to get to work.

Buffy stopped for a moment, gazing deeper into the complex. "Beware of what you might find down there. It bites."

Freeman sighed. As they left, Ford came up behind him.

"You want me to get the research done, sir? I expect you'll want to be fresh for when the Commander arrives."

Alec nodded gratefully. He could leave things in Keith's hands and catch a few hours sleep before meeting Ed's helicopter five miles out into the desert as dawn broke.

Ed bounced out of the chopper as usual but his expression was a little too controlled for his friend's liking.

"I remembered what you said," Alec mused. "About that Giles bloke. *Ours isn't the only secret war*. Something tells me we've landed right in the middle of the battlefield."

Ed nodded. "I think so too. Tell me exactly what happened last night."

Freeman told him. "Is that what happened before?"

"Pretty much. You're OK?"

Alec let out a frustrated hiss. "Yes, I'm OK."

They drove in silence of the rest of the way until they reached The Magic Box. Inside, both men were surprised to find a gaggle of young people.

Giles came out from behind the counter to meet them. "Mr Straker."

"Mr Giles. May I ask who these people are? I wasn't expecting a public meeting."

"It's not. This is what Xander once christened the Scooby gang. What you saw before is nothing to what goes on here and these are the people who deal with it."

Freeman began to take in individuals besides Giles. Buffy, of course, petite and pretty but with a warrior's confidence. A redhead in clothes that could only be described as kooky, regarding them with intelligent eyes -

There were more but one girl was drawing attention to herself. Blonde again and with strong features, her body language was jumpy and she kept giving little yips. A well-built, dark haired youth looked on with concern: "Anya?"

But Anya was staring at Ed.

Eventually she managed to form a coherent sentence. "I know you."

Straker frowned. "I don't recall -"

"You were cheating on your wife."

Alec started. How did she know?

Straker was frowning deeply. "No, I wasn't. She thought I was but I was working. But that must have been before you were born -"

Anya was positively bouncing up and down with tension, her hands balled into fists. "You weren't? You mean I did all that stuff to you for nothing?"

Ed took a step towards her, a curious expression of his face. "What did you do?"

But it was too much for the girl. She raced through the shop and out of the door, a cry of anguish on her lips and the bell ringing behind her.

The others gave various cries of: "Ouch!", "Oh no!" and "Anya!"

The youth made to follow her and so did Freeman, totally confused but knowing

instinctively that she was telling the truth. She had hurt Ed.

"I'll kill her," he rumbled.

And found the boy blocking his way. "No you won't. I know she spent a thousand years giving guys ouchies and I'm really sorry if she got your friend by mistake but she's human now and she's my girlfriend and you don't touch her."

Freeman took a step back and nodded, appreciating the sentiment. "Make sure she doesn't do it again."

"She won't. She can't. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an ex-demon to convince - once again - that it's worth being human."

He turned and ran out of the door, calling her name.

Freeman turned back, noting that no one else was in the slightest fazed.

"Must be awkward," the redhead commented "having had a job like that. That's partly why I turned it down."

"Only partly?" asked Buffy.

Freeman walked over to the table and sat down heavily. "Now can we get on?"

Everyone took their seats and Straker turned to Giles. "Do I take it you're in charge here? Or do you answer to someone else?"

"I answer to Buffy." It was said without any hint of self-consciousness. "I'm not sure if I mentioned the term Slayer."

Buffy spoke up. "Mr Straker, I understand you have some kind of secret. So do we. Can we put our secrets on the table and agree not to tell anyone else about them? Because if your secret and our secret are making whoopee, I think we all need to know about it or it's end of the world time again and much as I might get used to that, I'd rather it didn't happen."

Freeman shivered inwardly. For all the flippant tone, he knew she was serious.

Straker was nodding slowly. "Makes sense. I don't know what Mr Giles has told you -"

"Nothing. Only that he made a promise and he intended to keep it."

Again Straker nodded and the two men's eyes met. "Twenty years ago we were both staying at the same house when it was attacked by vampires -"

"*Vampires?*" Alec exclaimed.

Ed turned to him, an ever so slightly mischievous smile on his face. "What did you think they were, Alec? No, don't answer that. You've dealt with aliens for thirty years, is this any more difficult?"

"*Aliens?*" exclaimed the youngsters and Freeman felt a whole lot better.

"Well, that's kinda got things out in the open." the redhead smiled. "Aliens. Cool. I think."

"It does make a change," said the diffident girl behind her.

They got down to business, making proper introductions and bringing each side up to speed on the other's problems. Freeman sighed, accepted it and move on. He was used to doing that. But they still did not know if there was any link between the aliens and the Hellmouth or if either attack had been anything more than random.

Willow looked at her watch and yelped. "We gotta get out of here."

Buffy and Tara also checked the time.

"Oh no! Not again." Buffy was already out of her chair.

"What's the matter?" Straker asked urgently.

"We're late for college." Buffy dashed across and picked up a bag of books from behind the counter. "If there's anything else, talk to Giles. This is more his kind of thing. He tells me what to hit and I hit it."

"Hardly true," the Englishman said to her back as she and the others raced out of the shop. "But I ought to be opening up. I hope Anya comes back, she's my sales assistant."

He walked towards the door where the bell was still ringing.

"Can I ask you about her?" Straker said, following him.

"Buffy?"

"Anya. What the boy - Xander? - said about her. Is it true?"

Giles sighed and nodded. "All true. She was born human but she spent a thousand years - give or take a century - as the vengeance demon with particular responsibility for unfaithful men. It's not like her to get it wrong - still, if you say so..."

He had turned the door sign over to indicate the shop was open. Now he turned back to them. "Whatever happened, she really is a different person now. A different species, even. And one of us."

There was a distinct tone of warning in that last sentence.

Straker made an open handed gesture. "There's one thing I need to know. If she can give me a straight answer to that, I'll let things rest."

"Then I'll try and get you your answer." Giles wandered back towards the table. "Now, would you like a cup of tea?"

* * *

Buffy might have been physically present in her history class but her mind was elsewhere. To the danger from the Hellmouth she could now add danger from the skies. And Straker -

She had immediately felt a bond with Straker, something in common beyond blond hair and blue eyes. She was glad he had friends, she knew she would not have got by without her own. And if he could survive that long -

Not that he was the Slayer exactly.

And he was kind of sexy in an *he's older than Giles* kind of way. If she had been her mom's age...

Then she remembered just how old Angel had been and went off on another, familiar tangent.

* * *

Ed and Alec walked out into the mid-morning, California sunshine. Discussions with Giles had ended in going round in circles and they had agreed that they could proceed no further without more information. They would check their sources but, to a large extent, they would simply have to wait.

Alec still did not know what to make of it. It did not seem likely that the aliens were intending to somehow tap the power of this Hellmouth. Then again, neither did time warps, telepathy or vampires and he had direct experience of those.

"You OK?" Ed asked, bringing him sharply back from his thoughts.

"Yeah, why?"

"You groaned. I thought -"

"I'm all right," Freeman snapped.

"You took a beating last night."

"I nearly got killed last night. If -" He sighed. "Sorry. You're right, my leg's acting up. And my back and everything else. And those kids are far too young."

Straker looked away. "Johnny would have been older than them by now."

That took Alec a moment. "You think the demon-girl... No, it couldn't be. I mean, it sounded like she did what Mary wanted and much as I can't stand your ex, she'd never harm

her own child. Besides, that was years after the event."

"I guess."

Alec did not mention that whatever Mary had wished might well have got others killed. Or maybe she had simply wished on Ed a life of loneliness and an unending sense of guilt. He had got both of those in spades.

He looked around at the colourful shopping street, full of improbably good looking youngsters, his mood lifting a little.

"I'm going back to the university," Ed said. "I might as well take a look at the recovered technology myself."

"You do that, it'll keep you busy and it means nothing to me." A thought crossed his mind. "You're not sending me back to London?"

Ed managed a slight smile. "You don't want to go? Get away from the ghoulies and ghosties and -"

"And I can think of a lot of double entendres I can get out of that." Alec, too, was smiling - slightly. "Are you?"

"No. Ginny knows something about this but we're the only two people in SHADO who know all of it. I'm not keen on spreading the information."

That got a laugh. "Well I'm not telling anybody."

Ed laughed, then frowned. "We need to tell them something, those that are here, or they'll be more at risk than ever."

* * *

Xander had been torn between looking for Anya and getting to work on time. Eventually he had decided that she could not get into too much trouble during daylight and had arrived at the construction site ten minutes late. He had worked conscientiously - he kind of liked his job and did not want to lose it - but his mind had been elsewhere. Anya had been really upset. He guessed she was rarely confronted by the results of her demon actions. Certainly not since she became human. He was going to have to ask her what she had done to this Straker guy -

Strike that, he had heard too many gruesome tales of his girlfriend's past life already. The guy would get sympathy but that was all. And not even that if he made a move against her. Why could people not understand these things were not her fault, she was just doing what demons do.

Man, I've been around the Hellmouth too long. I'll be making excuses for Spike next.

At lunch time he searched the area immediately around the site. No joy. Maybe she had gone back to work but when he phoned The Magic Box, a harassed sounding Giles told him she had not.

"The place is full of customers. What am I supposed to do with them?"

"Sell them things?"

"Why do you think I employ an ex-demon? Strikes me there's some kind of commerce demon out to get me and she's the only thing keeping it at bay."

"There's such a thing as a commerce demon?"

"How should I know?"

Xander winced. The Watcher was in a seriously bad mood. Maybe that was down to this Straker guy, too, not just to the Englishman's dislike of having to deal with the everyday world.

He wondered what Straker's big secret was. He had missed out on the explanation and only knew that he was a face from Giles' past - which usually meant trouble - and that Buffy had rescued the big guy, Freeman, which was perfectly normal. Not much to go on there.

He went home to change at the end of his shift and found Anya sitting disconsolately on his doorstep.

"How do you pay someone back for ruining their life?" she asked. "By accident? I mean, it's not like I meant it. OK, I meant it but I didn't mean it if he hadn't done it which I thought he had because she said he did. She even had pictures. Though they looked kinda stiff, you know? Not romantic or anything and I guess I should have known, I'd had enough experience of that kind of thing, but I was never big on checking my facts and do you think I made more mistakes? I mean, a thousand years is a long time and I could have..."

Xander sighed, hugged her and unlocked the door. "The neighbours really don't want to hear about this."

* * *

Ed Straker was worried, confused and upset so he did what he always did, worked. There was plenty of eccentric technology to be looked at under Sunnydale University. And this town looked so boring. It was always the way.

He had known about the vampires for twenty years, near enough, but he had dismissed them from his mind as not his problem. Now they had got involved in his business - had attacked Alec and killed one of his people - and he had little idea what to do about them.

On top of that there was the girl, Anya. She seemed totally convinced that she had done something dreadful to him. Her friends seemed to take that at face value so he had little choice but to believe it. She had known what Mary had accused him of. He had to know the truth.

And Alec. Alec who should have been retired years ago but Ed had not had the heart to do it. It was only the prospect of work that had kept him alive. He had survived the first vampire attack thanks to Buffy's help but if Ed was not careful his friend could become a danger to himself and to others.

Who, Ed thought, what he kidding? Looking at those kids made him feel positively geriatric. Even Giles was a good decade his junior.

He sighed. California was supposed to be where you went for a vacation.

It was the end of the afternoon, the sun heading towards the horizon. Maybe tonight would straighten things out. He collected Alec and they drove to The Magic Box. The youngsters were just filing in.

"A briefing?" Alec asked.

"Kinda," Buffy said. "We're only this organised because you're here. Mostly we research or we do, no major strategy."

Straker looked around: Giles, Willow, Tara, Buffy. "Will Anya be here?"

Willow grimaced. "*Not* predictable. At the best of times. Which this isn't. But Xander should show."

As if on cue, the shop's bell rang and the young man walked in. Everyone turned to look at him and he looked back.

"Anya?" Buffy asked.

"Hiding. At my place."

"Very hid," said Willow.

Xander shrugged. "She's..."

"Anya?" Buffy repeated.

"Yup."

Straker decided it was best to defer his questions if he was going to get an honest answer. Xander was looking at him with an expression that was half sympathy, half resentment. It

made him uncomfortable so he turned to a different problem.

"Buffy, I have a favour to ask."

In the background, Willow was updating Xander on their discussion that morning.

"*Aliens?* Okay, okay, I'm cool with that. *Aliens?*"

Buffy smiled first at Xander, then at Straker and shrugged. "What can I do for you?"

"I understand from Mr Giles that you... patrol?"

She grinned. "You want to go vampire hunting?"

"It seems the best way to learn the ropes, if that's all right with you."

Alec was frowning, as he had half expected. "Are you sure that's a good idea? Those things -" he shook his head.

Buffy nodded. "He has a point. The guys are used to the local conditions, you're not and you are..." she pursed her lips as if she was trying to think of a polite way of putting things.

Straker half smiled. "I'm too old?"

"You said it," muttered Xander.

The others glared at him but Ed did not mind. "It's true I'm not young any more and I could be a liability to you. It's your decision."

Buffy look into his eyes, blue into blue. "You'd do what I say?"

"Of course." Why would he not? She was the expert.

"Okay," she said "you're on. If there's nothing else, we should get going. We can talk while we patrol."

"That's what I was hoping."

He looked at Alec. Alec looked back, scowling. In the old days he would have had Alec out there looking for leads but not now. He was too vulnerable. And he knew it.

"Alec, why don't you -"

"Why don't I stay here?" There was just the strike slightest trace of bitterness in his voice.

"You can learn more here."

The youngsters were twitchy, embarrassed, picking up on the tension, trying not to look. He could have done without that. Alec was aware of it to. It was not helping his mood but he sighed and sat down.

"Whatever you say."

"I'll put the kettle on," Giles said.

"What do we do?" Tara asked.

"Doughnut run?" suggested Xander.

Alec grinned, body language loosening slightly. "Fine by me."

A look pass between him and Ed. "I can't stay in all night."

"Guess not." He turned to Buffy. "I'm ready when you are."

She nodded and headed for the back room, emerging a moment later with a large canvas bag. "You know how to use a crossbow?"

Ed's eyebrows shot up. "In theory. I've only ever used one for target practice."

"Good enough." She reached behind the door and produced one, handing it to him as she went past. "Let's take a walk."

The two of them went out onto the sidewalk and turned in the direction of the nearest cemetery. Buffy gave him a running commentary on the habits and habitat of the local supernatural wildlife. "They like sewers."

"So they can get about in daylight?"

She grinned. "Exactly. Not that vampires are all we have."

"I kind of noticed that back at the shop."

"You don't know the half of it."

He pulled a face. "I'm not sure I want to. You have a lot of... What do you have a lot of?"

"Around town? Pretty much everything. I can't remember how many types of demon..."

They walked on, both keeping their eyes moving across the landscape. Buffy was alert but not anxious so he matched his mood to hers.

The conversation became more wide-ranging. Buffy asked questions of her own, about the aliens. It embarrassed him how much less he knew about his subject that she did about hers.

"I guess you've got a Giles to do it for you."

"No, actually, I'm supposed to be the expert."

"How long have you been studying them?"

"Since the late Sixties."

She shrugged. "There you go. There's been Slayers forever and Watchers nearly as long."

She moved on, constantly checking the monuments of the graveyard. "So, what's with your friend? Old war wound?"

"Yes."

"But you don't like to talk about it?"

"He doesn't."

She paused. "You'd have thought it would have ended his career."

"You might."

"And you're his boss."

"That's right." He knew what she was asking and he knew she understood the answer.

She nodded. "You need people you can trust. People who know what's going on. Really know. It's quiet tonight."

"What would a normal night be?"

"*Not* in Sunnydale. This place doesn't do normal."

They moved on, looping around the back of the Bronze - the local nightclub - on their way to the next graveyard.

* * *

"Doughnuts are life," said Xander, his mouth half full, causing Alec to reflect that his own tastes were rather more adult at that age.

Yeah, but I knew a lot less about life. Demons, for crying out loud!

They had just come out of the doughnut shop and were sitting in Alec's car.

"Coffee's good." Freeman commented.

Xander nodded enthusiastically. "Is good. 'Scuse me, I ought to deliver some to Anya."

"I -"

"Sorry, no. Not till she says so."

Alec shrugged. "Go on, then. You want me to stay here or take the stuff back?"

"Can you stay? I won't be long. I hope." He slipped away.

Alec gave him a moment, then followed him. He was not sure why, it was more habit than anything else. But it was difficult with a heavy limp. Still, with decades of practice and plenty of hard won caution it was possible. Xander neither dawdled nor hurried. He rounded a corner and headed towards a smart block of flats only a few hundred yards away. He did not ring a bell. It must be where he lived. Freeman was impressed. It was better than he had had at that age.

In the lobby, Alec watched where the lift stopped, wondering whether he needed to know exactly where the boy went and if so, did he have to clamber up the stairs?

Someone was watching him, he could feel it between his shoulder blades. Someone hostile. It made his mind up. He needed to warn Xander. Probably, he needed Xander's help.

Lift or stairs? Stairs would be slow. Lift could be a trap.

Stairs.

He hurried up, his cane tapping. He could hear footsteps behind him but they matched pace with his own. Was it the boy they were after? Was he leading them to him?

He loosened the sword in its casing, ready for action.

Two flights up, between floors, the footsteps broke into a run. He turned to face them, sword in hand.

And knew he was lost.

He could see them clearly this time, see the distorted faces and clawed hands, see the hate in the feral, yellow eyes. Three of them, all male, two side by side and one behind. And behind them a woman. Alec was not sure whether she was human or vampire. He had no time to think about it.

He got in one good, sweeping blow. The vampire's head bounced down two steps before it and his body exploded to dust. The second one grabbed Alec, twisting his arm till he dropped the sword. The human cried out. He knew it was over but he kept fighting.

"Hey!"

Alec twisted his head round. Xander was standing at the top of the stairs, stake in one hand and the box of doughnuts in the other.

"You looking for a snack, fang boy? Have these."

He threw the doughnuts, catching the second vampire in the face, who fell back. The other had Alec on his back, half choking him.

Xander was running down the steps. He kicked the vampire in the face, using the advantage of his elevation. It had little effect except to make the monster look up, surprised. He relaxed his grip a little.

"Run," Alec wheezed.

"Nope," Xander struck out with the stake and missed.

The first vampire shoved Xander back. The second grabbed Alec round the ankle, dragging him down the stairs. Freeman screamed as he bounced downwards, his old injuries coming to life.

"Run," he bawled. "Get help. Not trying - argh - not kill me. Run."

For a moment he glanced back, saw the young man's torn expression. Then the boy narrowly avoided a swiping claw and turned on his heel. Alec passed out.

* * *

"Giles, they got Alec. No, not dead. Took him. Don't know. Should have stayed. Tell Buffy."

Xander kicked himself. *Failed again.*

* * *

Somehow Ed found himself talking to this little girl as if she was an old friend and talking about his old friend. "Alec decided long ago that his job was to take care of me. Long time, I was hardly more than a kid. He saw something in me he thought was worth nurturing."

"Even if you didn't want it nurtured?"

He chuckled. She was amazingly easy to talk to, except that her vocabulary sometimes

left him floundering. He wondered if it was the generation gap or if he had simply been in England too long.

"It's like me and Giles." she continued. "I mean, he was told to be here for me but when they told him to get lost, he was still here for me. Gave up his friends, everything."

"He got fired?" Straker asked.

"Uh-huh."

"What for?"

"Trying to save my life. From them."

Ed pulled a face. "Reminds me of my ex boss. I think he'd have been glad to see the back of me. Permanently."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yes." he sighed. "We were friends, once."

"Ex friends. Bad thing. Very bad thing. But then there's Giles and the guys and... You won't believe this but when Giles drives me home, he waits in the car till I've got through the door. I mean, I'm the *Slayer*."

They both chuckled for a moment, then the laughter dried up.

"Buffy! Hey Buffy!" Willow was running towards them, waving.

Buffy half smiled, half frowned. "Will, what's up?"

Willow, Tara behind her, was panting heavily. She turned to Straker. "Mr Freeman. They got him."

His heart chilled. "Dead?"

She shook her head. "Taken. Xander saw."

"Definitely vampires? Did he see where?"

Puffing hard, she looked like she was trying to nod and shake her head at the same time. He was not sure which was the answer to which question.

Buffy was moving back the way they had come. "Where were they?"

"Xander's." Tara said.

"Then we go there. Unless you've got anything else." She was serious, grim. She moved like a hunter.

Still he was frightened. Alec could not defend himself. And why had he been taken? It seemed ridiculous that the vampires could be in league with the aliens but more ridiculous things had happened to him in the past.

He pulled his mobile phone from his pocket, striding after Buffy as he dialled. She had slowed so he could catch her.

"Calling your people?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Just tell them to keep their eyes open. This no time to give them a crash course in fighting the undead and without it, they're toast."

Willow was shaking her head. "You're after the technology the Initiative left behind? They had like tasers for demons. You could use those. They only knocked them cold - well, vampires already are cold but..."

Straker was already relaying this information to Ford. "You'll know them by the way their faces change... Believe me, you'll know. Once they're down you need to drive a wooden stake through the heart or behead them."

Ford was taking it remarkably calmly. Spending most of your adult life in SHADO did tend to do that to you.

"No, I don't want you joining in the search. I'm working with the local experts. Just protect yourself, keep your eyes open and let me know anything that happens." Straker signed off.

Buffy and her friends were in discussion. "Mr Straker, you go with Will and Tara. Giles is joining Xander and Anya."

"You'll be on your own."

She smiled apologetically. "Quicker that way. Don't worry, we have a really good success rate and if the vamps wanted your friend dead -"

"He'd be dead already," Straker finished.

* * *

Buffy plunged into the night, action keeping worry at bay. The truth was, she liked Straker. She had not expected to, he was more British than Giles for all he was an American but maybe that was it. Or maybe it was the saving the world thing. Heck, maybe it was just being blonde.

And she understood the friendship thing. How many times had she desperately searched for Giles, Willow, Xander or any of the others?

She needed to concentrate. Her sources of information were not so good these days, with Angel having left town and Willie lying low. She was pretty much reduced to Spike and he had been behaving very strangely recently. She shrugged mentally. It was probably just the chip in his head causing one on his shoulder.

One thing bothered her, one thing she would have to ask Giles about. Vamps did not usually go for humans past their twenties or so and Freeman was way past his twenties. So why had he been attacked twice in twenty-four hours? Maybe it was just the air of trouble about him and Straker that attracted more trouble.

Then again, there was something else. Someone else. Back in the trees last night. A woman. Buffy had barely noticed at the time, mind on other things, being too late. Maybe it would be worth taking a scout around if Spike had nothing.

She slowed as she reached the door of his crypt. Was he in? He was, after all, seriously, smokingly nocturnal.

She shrugged. She could knock at the door but that might give him the wrong impression so she kicked it open. And was way disappointed when it swung freely back.

"If I don't lock it," came a familiar, mockney voice from inside, "there's less chance of you breaking it and it costs an arm and a leg to fix. Not my arm and leg, of course."

"Yeah, right. Chip?" She stepped from the outdoor gloom to the indoor gloom.

Spike was sprawled in front of the television drinking beer. "What can I do for you?"

She outlined the problem, leaving out the part about aliens - she did not want to get laughed at by a vampire - and secret paramilitary organisations - because she did not want Spike equating these guys with the Initiative and deciding to do damage. She did mention the woman.

Spiked pursed his lips. "Sounds personal to me. This bloke's never been here before?"

"No."

"Doesn't matter. Maybe she's English. I haven't heard anything but people don't drop round for a chat much, these days."

Buffy scowled at him. "No help."

He shrugged. "What am I, the Encyclopedia Britannica? Can't Giles help?"

"He's helped plenty but he's long term. Now I need short term. I need this guy back in one

piece."

He shrugged again, reaching for his jacket. "Let's take a look."

* * *

Chains, Freeman thought almost before he came round. *Or something like that. I'm in trouble.*

Again.

But it was no joke. He was chained to the wall and the strain that was putting on his old injuries was already causing him extreme pain.

He gave an involuntary groan, opened his eyes and gasped with shock.

* * *

Straker was surprised to find the two young women leading him back towards the shop.

"We've got an idea." Willow told him. "Do you have anything of your friend's?"

He had to think. "Not on me, no. He gave me this watch, will that do?"

He had a vague idea where they were going with this. Willow and Tara conferred for a moment.

"Maybe we'd better swing by his hotel." Willow said.

"Xander said he dropped the swordstick." Tara put in. "Maybe it's still there, if Xander didn't pick it up."

"That's closer." the redhead agreed. "If it's not there, we can still try the hotel."

They found both the blade and casing of the swordstick on the steps of the apartment block. There was no blood, which was a good sign, just a trampled box of doughnuts. No other signs of a fight at all. Still Straker shivered.

Is he gone for good this time?

They hurried back towards the shop.

"Can I do anything?" he asked as the bell on the door rang behind them.

"Draw a sacred circle?" asked Tara, handing him a piece of chalk as she gathered ingredients. Willow was checking through musty, leather bound books.

"That's just a circle on the floor, right?"

"Uh-huh. Can't be any gaps and big enough for the three of us. Unless you want to get out of here."

"No."

"Didn't think so," muttered Willow absently.

He rested his crossbow against the shop's counter - much use it had been so far - and proceeded to draw the circle. In a few minutes the women were ready, their tools spread out on the ground. The two of them knelt inside the circle and Straker followed suit.

"This is a spell?" he asked, a little uncertain to be so far off his usual territory.

"That's right," Willow said.

"What will it do? Bring Alec here?"

"I wish. We're good but we're not that good. Not yet."

Tara nodded. "Translocation is really hard. And dangerous. You don't do it on people."

Willow nodded. "This is a tracking spell. It'll turn one of us kinda into a human blood hound."

"But without the drool." Tara grinned sheepishly.

Both women giggled at the joke. Straker was in no mood but he understood. *Humour as a defence mechanism*. He was not angry but they took one look at him and stopped laughing. He had always had that effect on people.

"It'll probably settle on Willow." Tara said hurriedly. "She's way more powerful than me."
"Am not. And you're so much more experienced. Doesn't matter anyway. Whoever gets it, we all follow."

"Can we get on?" Straker asked.

"Sure."

Ed was not certain what he had expected. Something longer, perhaps, but once the preparation was complete it was over in a few minutes. Willow and Tara performed a brief call and answer chant in a language he did not recognise. At the same time they waved each of the ingredients in the air, blew on them and piled them over Alec's swordstick, positioned in the exact centre of the circle.

The chanting took on a more urgent note as Willow kindled fire from her fingers - Ed was unable to stifle a gasp at that - and set the pile alight. A thin wisp of smoke curled into the air, faintly green in colour.

Ed frowned. The smoke was forming a definite, unnatural spiral. He watched it rise. It stopped at the level of their heads, thickening a little. A tendril flowed towards Willow, withdrew. Next it approached Tara and again pulled back. Lastly it reached out for him.

He found himself engulfed by a cloud, breathing it in. It should have been death. Instead it was life. He felt younger, stronger, more aware. Instinctively, blindly, he reached forward and touched the swordstick.

A jolt of pain coursed through him. "Alec!"

He found himself lying on his back, Willow and Tara staring down at him.

"Are you OK?" Tara asked.

"Did it work?" asked Willow.

He nodded breathlessly, springing to his feet and grabbing the crossbow, the joy of existence marred by Alec's suffering.

"Come on." he shouted and ran for the door.

* * *

Willow and Tara looked at each other, then at Straker as he raced out. He had looked fit for an old guy but now he ran with supernatural strength.

"Guess we'd better go." said Willow.

"You think we can keep up?" asked Tara.

"Nope. You try and find the others and I'll get after him."

"Will, I -"

But Willow too was running for the door.

* * *

Ed ran on, navigating as if he had spent his whole life in Sunnydale. He knew exactly where Alec was and how to get to him. He knew he was in pain - though the first shock of it had worn off - but he did not know why.

Still he ran on, exhilarated by his new-found strength. He would find Alec. He would save him.

You shouldn't have to save him. Not again. You should have retired him long ago.

He was back amongst the large mausoleums of one of the older graveyards, his feet aimed unerringly at one fronted by a classical pediment and columns. Not in there, through there. He pushed the door open and hurried past the caskets, crossbow at the ready.

There was a door in the far wall leading to a metal ladder fixed to the brickwork. Below, he could see the way lighted by candles. Uneasy, he hesitated. It was almost like an invitation.

Perhaps he should go back, fetch Buffy and the others.

It was only then he realised he had left Willow and Tara far behind.

Below him, echoing through the tunnels, he heard a scream. It made his mind up, he had to go on.

* * *

Willow was fitter than most Americans her age, being around Buffy saw to that, but she was still panting as she ran up to the crypt that Straker had entered. He had only just been close enough for her to see him.

She stopped a little short, leaning against a tree. She was unsure whether to follow him herself or get help. She had no idea what he would find down there. Vampires, most likely.

Vampires, two of them, big, out here with her. They moved across in front of the little building. It looked as if they were going to go in after him but instead they turned and took up guard positions.

That made her mind up. There was no way she could get past them, she needed to go find Buffy.

Willow slipped away into the darkness.

* * *

Ed stepped over the threshold. This scene was self-consciously Gothic. Alec hung chained to the wall between two flaming torches, his head lolling. The flickering shadows half hid his wounds.

He raised his head as Ed entered. Their eyes met. He tried to speak but only a dry croak emerged.

Straker took a step towards him, glancing around for the keys. They were hanging on a hook, mere inches from Alec's fingertips. As he did so, he heard a noise in the shadows, the sound of someone striking a match. He span around to see someone, a woman, lighting a cigarette.

She took a step forward.

"Mary!" He felt his muscles go weak.

"Hello Ed."

She looked no older than the last time he had seen her, twenty years before, but she did look different. Her blonde hair was cut short and close, her red dress was tight across her figure and her make-up was dramatic against her pale skin.

For a moment he was confused. "What are you doing here?"

She chuckled. "You mean besides torturing Alec? Don't you know this is the Hellmouth? This is where vampires belong." She took a drag on her cigarette. "You don't look as surprised as you should."

He had stepped between his ex-wife and his friend, his crossbow still raised. "I know about the Hellmouth. I've known about vampires for years."

"You never said."

"We weren't exactly speaking."

"After Johnny?"

"Around that time."

"About when I found out." She shook her head and smiled. "You always were full of mysteries. I was asking Alec about some of them but he wouldn't play. Never mind, he served his purpose."

Ed's heart sank, though he had known what she was going to say. "To get me here?"

Mary nodded hungrily.

Straker spread his arms wide, pointing the crossbow to the ground. "Then take your revenge and let him go. He's never hurt you."

She laughed. "Idiot, I'm a vampire. I don't need a reason. Besides, I want revenge on him for taking you away from me. It was never those girls, was it? They were just an excuse for both of us. It was Alec and whatever shady business you were both mixed up in. And you, I want you back. Forever."

She bared her teeth as her face shifted into the angled planes of a vampire.

* * *

"He went down there." Willow said, indicating the crypt. Buffy looked. It was still being guarded by the two burly vamps.

Will had managed to round up everyone except Spike. She had, however, sent Tara back to the shop to do more research.

"The spell worked too well," she explained to Buffy.

"Yours do. As long as it's not granting his every wish or actually turning him into a dog, I'm happy."

Willow shrugged. "Not sure I am."

Buffy stepped forwards, flanked by Giles and Xander.

"I'll take the one on the right," she said loudly. "You guys shouldn't have a problem with Lefty."

The theory was they looked up, saw the Slayer and ran - thus saving time - but these guys were either too dumb or too mean for that. They stayed in place, roaring and baring their fangs.

So Buffy did what she had said. She flipped hand over hand towards the vamp, at the last moment somersaulted over him. Her feet hit the mausoleum wall, bouncing her back in his direction and a swift stake through the shoulders finished him.

She looked over to see Giles, Xander, Anya and Willow all on the ground, each holding a limb of the struggling vampire. Buffy leaned over and staked him too.

"Party pooper," complained Xander.

"We're in a hurry," said Giles.

Scrambling to his feet as Buffy helped Willow and Xander gave Anya a hand, he led the way into the little house of the dead.

* * *

For a moment Straker stood spellbound. The torches crackled, Alec groaned but he simply stood there looking into Mary's eyes.

She stepped forward, wresting the crossbow from his fingers.

He shook himself, coming back to his senses but it was too late. She slammed him back into the wall, her hand around his neck.

"Let Alec go," he gasped. "Take me but -"

She squeezed tighter. "Don't be silly, torturing him is far too much fun and you'll be hungry when you wake-up."

He could smell her foul breath now as her mouth closed in on his neck.

* * *

Buffy pushed Giles gently aside as she entered the crypt. "My job. Watcher, watch."

He smiled slightly, letting her through. He was carrying the bag of weapons. She had Mister Pointy in her hand and two more stakes tucked into her belt. She walked past the

coffins, absently checking them for signs of undead life but otherwise hardly noticing them. These things were just part of the scenery. Likewise she found the ladder without looking for it.

"Looks like a trap." she said.

"For you?" Giles asked, concerned.

"For him."

"Then we'd better get a move on."

The others were lining up behind them.

She slid down the ladder, swinging immediately round to check the corridor. It was clear. She waved up to Giles to follow. Not waiting, she ran silently forward to an arch in the wall.

The first thing she saw was Freeman, chained up and struggling to stand. His eyes were fixed on something off to one side.

Vampire, all her Slayer senses told her.

Vampire feeding.

On Straker.

Buffy leapt, raising her stake. But the vamp was not interested in a fight. She slipped away into the shadows, leaving little more than an impression of blonde hair.

Buffy tried to follow, heard an iron door clang shut and ran slap into it. She squealed with frustration, slamming her hand against the door so that it rang. It was solid. Maybe she could shift it but by that time it would be too late.

She turned back into the chamber. Xander was supporting Freeman while Anya reached for the keys. Giles and Willow were kneeling over Straker so that she could not see his face. Giles' body language, however, was telling her it was not good news.

She asked the inevitable question: "Is he dead?"

There was no answer and she asked again, more tightly: "Is he dead? Will he rise?"

Giles looked back at her, his face pale. "I don't think it's that simple."

If there was one thing in her life that was usually simple it was vampires. Die, rise, stake: that was all there was to it. Unless it was Angel, of course. Or a friend.

Freeman, freed from his shackles, stumbled over to Straker. "Ed? You can't let her..."

"What do you mean?" Buffy asked, wondering if he meant her, but Giles was already explaining and her attention was split.

"He's not dead, not quite, but there's blood on his lips." He turned to Freeman. "Did he drink? Her blood, did he drink it?"

* * *

Mary, her lips red and wet, slashing herself across the chest with her nails, forcing Ed's mouth to the gash as the blood oozed out. Ed half conscious, still struggling, knowing it was wrong.

* * *

Freeman shook his head, his voice hoarse and desperate. "I dunno. Maybe. We need to get him to hospital."

"No." Buffy knew that tone in her Watcher's voice. "They can get to him in a hospital. We need to get him somewhere safe."

"My place is closest," Xander said.

"Good, we'll take him there."

"But is he or isn't he?" Buffy asked. "I mean, if we're trying to save him..."

Giles' eyes met hers and she could see how worried he was. "I don't know. He's showing

signs... I think he's on the cusp. It's an intermediate state, very rare. Depends on certain circumstances. He could go either way."

"So what do we need to bring him back our way?" Freeman asked.

"First we need to keep him alive. What blood group is he? He needs a transfusion."

"O positive," Freeman said. "It's the only normal thing about him. Surely a transfusion means he needs to be in hospital."

Buffy reached up to put a hand on his shoulder. "Listen to Giles, he knows what he's doing."

Giles gave her a wry smile. "You may be reassuring him but you're worrying me. Can you get the blood from Spike? O positive or negative will do."

She nodded. "I'm gone."

She ran out, senses already alert for the punk vampire with such mixed motives.

Then she turned and headed back. Xander was supporting Freeman while Giles and the girls were bracing to carry Straker. They all looked up at her, so that she almost blushed.

"What if he wants cash? I've only got ten dollars on me."

Freeman reached into his pocket, pulled out a money clip and tossed it to her. It bulged with notes and her eyes bulged with it.

"You really are in the movies."

Then she was gone.

* * *

Freeman shrugged off Xander's concerned looks as the boy practically carried him back to Giles' surprisingly flash convertible. All his attention was focused on Ed. At the moment his friend was neither moving nor making any noise. Willow was keeping pressure on the twin puncture wounds in his neck, trying to prevent any more bleeding. Occasionally she would check his vital signs and give an update to Giles.

For all that they looked like a bunch of amateurs, these people were good at their job. Perhaps he passed out on the way but it seemed to Freeman that they reached Xander's building with remarkable speed. He shivered slightly as they entered the lobby. A few moments later they were inside the flat, large and luxurious if rather untidy. Boy must also hold down a good job.

They went through into the bedroom, laying Ed out on the bed. Alec dropped into a nearby armchair.

"Got your first aid kit?" Giles asked Xander.

"In the bathroom."

"Good. Can you three manage here? I need to go back to the shop for -"

"Books."

"Among other things." Giles sniffed. "If Buffy arrives -"

"I can transfuse," said Willow. "At least, I saw it on a web site."

"Don't worry," Giles said. "I've only ever done it on a dummy."

A moment later he was gone. Alec wanted to protest that he knew lots of first aid but he was too weary to speak.

Ed had been utterly immobile but now Alec could see his lips twitching, as if he was talking to someone. His head began to roll back and forth.

Alec was about to say something but Willow was onto it. She laid the back of her hand across Ed's forehead and frowned.

"Feverish?" Alec asked.

"No, he's getting colder."

* * *

"Ed. Ed."

He was only aware of two things, Mary calling to him and the hunger that raged like a beast inside him. He could not ever remember such hunger. Nor could he remember where he was or why.

Straker opened his eyes. Mary was crouched over him. She smiled when she saw he was awake. Beyond her he could see a brick ceiling.

He shook his head, pushed her away and pulled himself into a sitting position. Which was when he realised they were not alone. Alec was there, chained to the wall between two flaming torches. Straker was puzzled. The scene looked oddly familiar.

Alec was staring at him in horror. "What has she done to you?"

"Done?" Ed asked. "I don't know, what has she done?"

He could smell Alec's fear over the concern. Again, odd. His senses had never been that acute before. But just looking at Alec made his stomach rumble and at the moment he needed food more than answers. He stood up, a little unsteady. Mary was there to support him. It was good to think they were together again.

He took a step towards Alec and bared his fangs.

No, this is wrong. Alec's my friend. This is wrong.

"Mary?" he asked, frowning. "What did you do?"

* * *

"You have to keep talking to him," Giles told Freeman.

The Watcher had just returned, leaving Willow and Tara at the Magic Box, and was setting up for the transfusion. "Keep him in this world. Remind him of all the things he has to live for."

He looked across at the older man. "What?"

Freeman grimaced. "That doesn't add up to much. His wife dumped him - and is now a vampire. His son is dead. He has the worst job in the world -"

"No, Buffy has that."

Alec shrugged. "I won't argue with you. Let's just say there isn't much to keep him here. Only his duty."

Giles looked him full in the face. "That's it? Nothing else? This isn't just about loss of blood, you know. Willow has a spell to perform but above all it's down to him. He has to decide whether or not he stays."

The other man's expression was hard to read. "Perhaps he wouldn't be so sorry if he died."

Giles stepped towards him. "He won't die, not in the way you mean. He'll become one of the undead. A vampire. A demon possessed corpse. Would he want that?"

"No. No, he wouldn't. I'll do my best."

Sighing, Giles went back to his work. "I'm sure you will. But you have to understand, if we lose him we will have to stake him."

That got a reaction. "I'd never let that happen to Ed."

"I'm sorry but we can't make exceptions simply because we knew someone in life."

There was a deep growl in Freeman's voice. "Now you don't understand. If that happened, I'd stake him myself."

Giles nodded sharply and looked away. "He has a good chance. We have an excellent

success record. The most important thing now is for Buffy to return with the blood. And for you to keep his attention."

"Don't worry, I'll think of something."

As Giles went out, he heard Freeman begin: "Do you remember..."

* * *

Do you remember, Ed? Do you remember when you found me? I thought I was dying. No, I wanted to die. Couldn't take it any more. I knew they were gone but still, I couldn't take it. Couldn't take the pain or the despair. You know what being tortured does. And I couldn't even manage dying. The whole building had fallen in around me and there I was, lying on my back and looking up at the ceiling. A foot above my head.

The sunlight was coming down that one clear air shaft until a shadow blocked it. You.

"Alec? Alec, are you down there? Oh god."

I never did ask how you got there so far ahead of everyone else. You do that sort of thing.

"I'm here." I'm surprised you heard me.

You moaned. I thought That's my job.

I could hear you talking to someone. Then I realised I could only hear your side of the conversation. Talking into your radio, must be.

See, I was still thinking. Still capable of rational thought. Which you weren't. Because then you did the bravest thing I've ever known you do. Which is saying something.

"Alec, it's going to be a while before anyone else gets here. The shaft is wide enough to take me - so I'm coming down."

You, the well-known claustrophobe, climbed down a two foot wide shaft into a black hole.

Into my hell.

* * *

Mary sighed. "I turned you into a vampire, darling. I know it's a bit of a shock but believe me, once you get used to it you'll find it's the best thing that's ever happened to you. I've got such great plans for us. But in the meantime, why don't you just snack on Alec? Or maybe you'd like to play with him for a while?"

She lifted her prisoner's head, tutting with annoyance. "Don't pass out on me, Alec. You always did have the worst timing."

"How would you know?" came the mumbled reply.

Ed was hungry, blazingly hungry. Though the feeling was actually somewhere between hunger and thirst. And there was no one else he would rather quench his thirst on than Alec.

No, I won't do it. No.

He shook his head. He really did seem to be in two minds.

He had been tortured in the past. Suddenly he could see why his tormentors had enjoyed it so much. And Alec would make such a good subject.

Smiling, he moved in.

"No, Ed, no." Alec was panicked, as much by what Ed had become as by what was going to happen to him, Straker suspected. "We're friends, remember? You don't want to do this."

The only line Straker could think of was Oh, but I do and that was such a cliché he did not bother to say it.

No I don't, no I don't. Somebody stop me.

Intervention came just as he put his hand on Alec's shoulder. Someone behind him

cleared their throat.

"I think there may be a few things you want know before you do that."

Buffy.

* * *

"There you are," said Buffy, swinging past the cemetery gates.

"What?" said Spike. "You said search and I've been searching. Doing the sewers."

"I can tell." She made a play of holding her nose. "Search is off, we found him. Now we need blood for a transfusion. O positive or negative. You got any?"

"Sure," said the blonde vampire, setting off for his home crypt. "You'll need to heat it before you put it in him. Cold blood, yuk." He shivered.

He looked at her as she loped along beside him. "Why haven't you taken him to hospital?"

"Giles thinks there could be another attack."

"So it's personal?"

"Maybe."

"There's something you aren't telling me."

She smiled sweetly at him. "There's lots of things I'm not telling you because, duh, you're a vampire."

He pulled an altogether human face. "Shan't help you if you're going to be like that."

"I have cash."

"That's different."

* * *

Mary sat in the sewers and sulked. Again, she had lost him again. She was not even sure if she had converted him properly, whether he would rise. And this to cap forty-eight hours when it seemed that all those she had ever made vampires had been staked by the Slayer.

Or beheaded by Alec Freeman. She really wanted to drink Alec's blood, it would be almost as satisfactory as when she had killed her mother. Overbearing, neurotic, controlling old

-

But what she most wanted was Ed. Her mother and Alec had kept them apart but now they would be together forever. Forever, as King and Queen of the underworld.

If she had killed him right.

* * *

"Xander! We need the kitchen to start on the spell." Willow and Tara had arrived minutes earlier and were currently unpacking what looked like half of Giles' shop.

"You need the microwave? Because that's a first." He passed her a mini pizza. "And we need - probably all the food I have in the place. That's the pizzas gone, who wants hot dogs? Or popcorn? Anya?"

Anya was obsessing on the couch. "I should have checked my facts. How many others did I get wrong? But it didn't matter then. I wasn't a justice demon, I was a vengeance demon. As in the hell hath no fury type. Let me tell you, hell hath plenty of fury and the facts don't matter..."

"There are justice demons?" Tara asked.

Xander sighed, delivered a pizza to his girlfriend and ruffled her hair. "I think I'm beginning to understand Angel. Which is not something I wanted. Ever. Don't tell Buffy I said that."

The doorbell rang and Giles, who had been sorting ingredients into the different stages of the spell and clucking over the cost, got up to answer it.

"Popcorn please," he said before he reached it. "In answer to your earlier question."

The microwave pinged and Xander went back to the kitchen. "Popcorn coming up."

He pulled out the hot dogs, sidestepped Willow and placed the next package of food into the machine, reaching for the sodas with his other hand. "I'm guessing one of our guests needs to eat."

He came out of the kitchen to see Buffy and Spike at the door. "Nobody asks him in. No way does anyone ask him in. Not in my place."

"And you're not welcome in mine either," Spike shot back. "Not that it stops anyone. And you don't look awfully threatening delivering snacks."

Freeman shuffled out of the bedroom, attracted by the raised voices Xander guessed. "What's going on?"

"It's okay," Buffy said, pulling packages of blood out of a shopping bag and showing them to him.

Spike frowned. "I thought you said he needed a transfusion."

"Not him," said Giles. "Now thank you very much and -"

But Spike was peering as far round the door as he could.

He grinned. "Somebody's on the cusp. Wow, never seen that in real life. Come on, you gotta let me stay. That's educational."

"Your education didn't tell you the spell needs to be performed at sunrise?" Giles asked drily.

"Bummer." Spike shrugged.

He pulled a vampface at Xander, stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered off.

Giles shut the door. "How much did he charge you?"

"Only a hundred and fifty," Buffy said. "For five packets. I didn't ask when he got it from."

Xander turned back to Freeman and held up the plate. "Food American-style. You're gonna need it."

The microwave pinged once more. "Popcorn's done. Giles, get your own."

"Thanks, not."

"Hey, you're learning to speak American." But his attention was on Freeman. "You sure you're OK?"

They had given Freeman basic first-aid and some painkillers when they had arrived but he had refused anything more.

"I'm fine, can we get on?"

"Transfusion in a couple of minutes," said Giles, heading for the kitchen with the blood.

Xander followed Freeman back into the bedroom. Straker was laid out on the bed, very pale and still muttering to himself.

Xander shook his head. "You're close?" He did not wait for an answer. "I had a friend once, Jesse. I guess Will's always been my best bud but Jesse was a close second. We did guy stuff. Then Buffy came and we found out the truth about this town."

"Jesse got killed?" Freeman asked quietly.

"Nope. Not exactly. Jesse got vamped. Then he got staked. By me. First one I ever did."

"I'm sorry."

Xander looked at him. "So'm I. Giles told us what you said. I hope your friend makes it. But if he doesn't and you don't want to do it yourself..."

He shrugged. "We're all on your side."

Freeman smiled sadly, his face looking more crumpled than ever. "Thanks. But I'll do it."

* * *

"What are you doing here?" asked Mary. "I created this -"

She stopped abruptly.

"Created?" Straker asked. "Created what?"

Created the new me?

Buffy sighed theatrically but she was grinning. "You haven't explained anything, have you? You've let him think he's a vampire."

Now this was getting weird. He look from one woman to the other, not sure who to trust or even listen to. Mary was hissing. Buffy was looking smug but he could see the tension in her.

"Somebody explain," he growled.

Buffy leaned against the wall and gestured around. "None of this is real. We aren't real."

"We are," insisted Mary.

Buffy shrugged. "Kinda. But we're not who we seem."

"So?" he asked. "Who are you?"

The girl nodded towards Mary. "The real one, your ex, she bit you. But she bungled it, left you hanging. Now she represents the demon trying to take you over. Maybe your own dark side, too. The part that's capable of killing in cold blood. The part that wants to be a vampire."

She grimaced. "Everybody does, at least a little bit."

Mary nodded enthusiastically. "You'll enjoy it. Wait till you hear my plans. We could rule."

"Can we do that later?" Buffy asked. "I'm trying to give him the background. Now me -"

"You represent the good," Straker said.

She nodded. "You're getting it."

"There is no good," Mary whined.

"Gimme a break," pleaded Buffy. "I gotta get through this. I mean it's not like I'm Answers Girl. This is Giles' job."

"Why don't you stake her?" Straker asked thoughtfully.

"Told you, this isn't real. Or it's real like a film set. It's here for a purpose. And I'm here to represent, yeah, the good. The protective. The loving. All that stuff. Kinda embarrassing."

Alec groaned. Ed had almost forgotten he was there. He caught a tender look in the girl's eyes.

"He's your decision," Buffy said. "Also your past, your future. It's not just a one-shot deal. But he's the important one. What are you going to do with him?"

Straker turned to look at his friend. It would feel so good to destroy him.

God help me. Alec help me. Somebody help me. Please.

* * *

"You're wearing a groove in my rug," Xander complained absently.

Buffy knew he was right, frustrated Slayer was not good for the furniture. He would probably be protesting louder if he was not so busy trying to keep Anya stable. Willow and Tara were immersed in the complex preparations for the spell. Giles was continuing to research similar cases from a host of Watcher journals. Freeman was having what sounded like a very private, one-sided, conversation with his friend. But the Slayer had nothing to do. Nothing she

could usefully contribute.

"I hate that," she said, only realising that she had spoken out loud when everyone turned to look at her.

"Yes, you do, don't you?" remarked Giles.

She glared at him and to cover her embarrassment she walked over and picked up a bundle of stakes. "I'm going out. I'm going to try and find the vamp that bit Straker. It won't mess up the spell if I dust her?"

Willow shook her head. "It gives us a better chance of success. But I need to know if you do, it means changing some of the details."

"Okay, I'll call in."

Giles looked up once more. "Freeman told me the lady is Straker's ex-wife. I'm not sure how that's relevant -"

"But it has to be some way. I hate these family affairs, it makes it all so..."

"Icky?" tried Xander.

"I was going to say complicated," Buffy returned. "But icky is probably closer."

She made for the door but stopped when Anya pushed past her. "I'm going too."

Buffy pursed her lips. "Speaking of complicated - why?"

"I'd like to ask her a lot of questions. But mostly I just want to stake her."

Buffy nodded. "Okay by me."

Xander came over to them, picking up the crossbow they had retrieved with Straker. "Guess I'm with you, too. And we can pick up some fresh junk food on the way home."

"Sounds like a plan," she said. "Giles, you're looking at me again."

"I was just thinking this Mary might have plans of her own. Straker's a very powerful man."

Buffy nodded. "I hear you. Powerful man plus powerful demon makes powerful vampire."

"Exactly. And Sunnydale has had something of a power vacuum of late."

She sighed. "So we get a bigger plan."

* * *

Do you remember, Ed? Do you remember?

I couldn't see your face as you wormed your way down the shaft - just about at a decent angle for you not to fall and break your neck. I'm half glad I couldn't and I bet you are too. White as a sheet would be my guess but you did it.

There was just room for you to lie beside me. You gave me painkillers and wet my lips and you held me and talked to me. I was passing in and out of consciousness. I'd wake up thinking it had all been a dream and you weren't there. You couldn't be there. Then you'd have to calm me down again.

You remember what really bothered me? It wasn't the pain and it wasn't that the roof might fall in on us. It was so stupid.

"It's not stupid." you said. "Not if it matters to you. What is it?"

"It's stupid."

"Tell me what to do, Alec."

And I sobbed. I was half crazy. "They spat in my face. Nobody's ever done that before. Ever. Told you it was stupid."

"It's not stupid." you said.

And you took out a clean, white handkerchief - trust you to have one in a collapsed

torture chamber - and gently wiped my face.

"Is that better?"

And it was.

* * *

"I'm not patrolling with him," said Spike.

"That's my line," protested Xander.

"After you threw me out of your place?"

"Not threw you out, did not allow you in. Crucial difference."

"Whatever."

Buffy put her hands to her head. Swinging by Spike's crypt on the way out had obviously been a big mistake. He was enthusiastic enough but this bickering was going to drive her crazy and the vampires away. She looked across at Anya but the ex demon was just slumped in misery, her momentary animation having deserted her as soon as they hit the fresh air.

Buffy put her foot down, literally and loudly. That got their attention.

"Xander, you're with me. Anya, with Spike."

"No way." Xander was in her face. "No way do I trust him with her, especially when she's feeling so down."

"Down I don't need," replied the blonde vampire. "Why don't you and me patrol, Slayer, and leave doughnut boy and Miss Congeniality to get eaten."

She glared at him.

"Or go home or something," he quickly backtracked.

"I'm not going home," said Anya.

It was the first thing she had said in ten minutes and she added nothing more. There were times when Buffy could understand why previous Slayers had worked alone.

She came to a decision. "We all go together. You all keep quiet. You do what I say. Or you all go home and I do this on my own like I'm supposed to. And why am I suddenly sound like a teacher? I've left school."

But it had done the trick. They did not exactly look shamefaced but they came along quietly. She knew the best place to start was the crypt where they had found Straker and Freeman. Vampires were surprisingly territorial.

It did not take long to find Mary's lair.

Mary's lair, she thought, *sounds too stupid.*

But the place gave her a shiver. Bad place, bad things done there.

"Over here," called Spike.

His superior night vision had found the back door.

* * *

Mary Straker also had superior night vision. For quite a while she had not used it, sitting on a concrete block with her head in her hands, a prim display of despair. She had not even manage to kill stupid old Alec, for goodness sake.

Someone was out where, further up the sewer. Too heavy to be rats and just wrong to be another vampire. Listening, she thought there might be two of them.

Curious, she stood up and moved quickly to the nearest junction. There she turned right. The footsteps were coming towards her. She was not sure if she should confront them or not. If it was a human...

Her stomach rumbled. *Should have fed on Alec. A snack wouldn't have made any difference.*

Making her mind up, she walked boldly forwards. Even if it was the Slayer and her friends she would tackle them.

Or at least take a good look.

She came to another junction, turned left and found herself looking at two figures in red spacesuits. For the first time since she became a vampire, Mary Straker was utterly stunned.

* * *

The other Mary, the one in Straker's head, had insisted on the chance to put her side of the situation. Now she was nuzzling his ear.

"There's no Master in Sunnydale, no king, not since Spike got neutered and Angel turned good. But together, Ed, together we can take over the town. And not just this town. Combine the power of the Hellmouth with the power of SHADO and we can take over the world. You shall be King and I shall be Queen."

Buffy tapped her foot. "You know she's using you? Just bright enough for that but not bright enough to see what you'd do to her."

Alec raised his head. "Don't do it, Ed. It's not you. It's not what you want."

Ed turned on him coldly. "How do you know what I want?"

"I'm your friend."

"Friend? I have no friends."

Straker spat in his face. Alec gasped. He made feeble motions to wipe it away but even that was too much for him. He collapsed, only the chains holding him up.

I'm sorry, Alec. I don't think I can win this fight. Goodbye, my friend.

* * *

"Do you have to do that in the kitchen?" Giles asked as he watched Willow paint a pentagram on the lino. "Wouldn't there be more room in here?"

"We'd never get it out of the carpet," she replied, still looking at her work. "And Xander wouldn't get his deposit back."

With a mumbled word of blessing, she added the last line and looked up. "That's it, everything's set. We just need to get Mr Straker laid out -"

"Not until the last moment."

"No, of course. Then all we need to know is if Buffy's staked the sire." The redhead wandered to the window. "Not long till dawn."

* * *

Ed Straker stirred in his sleep, moaning.

Alec Freeman put a hand on his cheek. "It'll be alright. Stay with me, Ed."

* * *

Do you remember, Ed? Help came in the end but they needed to lift away - it seemed like half the rubble. Tons of the stuff. And you wouldn't leave me until they convinced you there wasn't room for you and a medic. You were at the top of the shaft when they brought me out and you were in my hospital room when I woke up. You were the one who convinced me that I still had something to live for, though my body was smashed to pieces. You were the one who convinced me - and Henderson - I was still needed.

You're needed, Ed. You're needed by SHADO. You're needed by me. And I won't let you become a monster. Haven't I always kept you from that? You have to come back, Ed. You have to live.

* * *

Food, was Mary's first thought. She could not smell the blood of these creatures but they

looked human enough. So she attacked.

She flung herself on the back of the nearest one, wrenching his helmet off to get at his neck. Green fluid flooded out, drenching her dress.

"Yuk!" she let go, trying to wipe the stuff off her.

That first alien was on his knees now, gasping for breath. The second was reaching for a gun.

She charged at him, twisted his hand away and put a fist through the faceplate of his helmet. More goo. She pulled a face. Perhaps this had not been such a good idea.

He too was gasping for breath. She removed his helmet and casually broke his neck. Then she went back to the other and drank. His blood tasted odd but no odder than the first time she had tasted curry after growing up on English food. In fact she rather enjoyed it, regretting she had not saved the other for later.

But she had more important things to think about. She had to see about rescuing Ed.

* * *

Spike was in the lead as they tracked Mary, his senses being as acute if not more so than the Slayer's.

"I smell something odd," he said, quickening his pace.

"That's what I hate about vampires," muttered Buffy. "It has to be -"

"Blood!" exclaimed Spike.

"Exactly."

And blood there was, blood and green liquid pooling beside two space suited corpses.

Xander whistled. "Are they Straker's aliens?"

"They look human," said Anya. "Apart from the green. And the eyes."

Spike was bending over one. He flicked out its eye shield and held it up. "Eyes are perfectly normal."

"But tasty," he said, licking blood off his fingers.

The others glared at him but he shrugged. "They're not human. What do you care?"

"It's your table manners we don't like," Buffy told him. "We should get on. This must have held her up, she can't be far."

She took the lead now, listening ahead. Xander brought up the rear with his crossbow. Spike was still surreptitiously licking his fingers. They all ignored him. Anya was muttering to herself in what Buffy suspected was no human language. She rather wished she had brought Giles with them. His people management skills might not be of the best but at least he was reliable. When he was not been Ripper.

She caught a sound and held up her hand for them to stop it. "Don't underestimate her. Those corpses were pretty beat up."

Spike looked at her. "Slayer, Big Bad, two spare. What are you worried about?"

"I'm not worried."

"Cos I can lead the charge."

"I'm not worried and I'm not letting you give the orders."

"Oh, you're giving orders now?"

"Er, guys?" Xander was pointing up ahead.

She stood at the next junction, watching them. A pale, petite woman in her thirties - or that was what she looked like. Her red dress was smeared with green.

"Okay," said Buffy "I'll go right. Spike, you go left and we'll -"

Anya shoved both of them aside, hurtling forward stake in hand.

"Anya!" Xander exclaimed.

She ignored him, eyes only for her target. Startled, Mary stood still. Anya plunged the stake into her.

"You - made - me - mess - up - my - job."

With every word the stake went deep but haphazardly into the vampire. On the full stop, Mary Straker turned to dust and ashes.

Anya dusted off her hands. "That's better."

She walked back towards them.

Xander hugged her. "Great job."

Spiked patted her on the back. Buffy shrugged and smiled. Then she looked at her watch.

"We only have a few minutes till dawn. We have to get back and tell Will. Come on."

She set off at a run.

"Er, phone box?" Spike called after her. "There's one just up there."

As she stopped and turned, he pointed straight through the roof.

* * *

"It's time," said Willow, turning from the window. "I guess they didn't find her."

Giles nodded. "I'll get Straker."

He went into the bedroom. He had half expected the two men to be asleep but Straker was tossing and turning worse than before and Freeman was making a vain attempt to calm him.

The older man looked up. "What now?"

"It's time for the ceremony," Giles told him. "We need to get him into the kitchen."

"The kitchen? Is that significant?"

"It's easier to clean."

"Oh," Freeman said "Hadn't thought about that. "

Both men went to the head of the bed. Giles leaned over to lift Straker to his feet. As he touched his shoulder, the American began to writhe and howl.

Giles fell back a step. "Didn't expect that. The demon must know we're coming."

They both stepped forward and gripped Straker firmly. He went limp, allowing them to manhandle him with some difficulty out of the room. Giles took most of his weight, Freeman's contribution was little more than symbolic.

When they got him to the kitchen they laid him out in the pentagram, his head towards the topmost point and his limbs echoing the others.

Willow nodded. "Mr Freeman, if you can kneel by his head."

"I'll try." His face creased with pain as Tara helped him into position but he managed a smile for her.

"It ought to be the next of kin," she said. "But I'm sure you'll do fine."

"His next of kin got him into this mess. Have they found her?"

"No, I -" Willow was interrupted by the phone ringing.

"I'll get it." Giles was already moving away from the door.

"We ought to get on," Willow said. "The sun will be up in a moment."

She began to lay out bunches of herbs across Straker's body.

Giles took the call in the living room.

"It's me, Buffy. We got her."

He turned and shouted to Willow. "Other ceremony. They staked the sire."

Freeman looked up at her. "Mary's dead?"

"Deader than ever, by the sound of it."

Alec sighed. "Not sure how Ed will take that."

"Kinda depends if the spell works. That's great, Tara. Now the holy water. Giles, I need you here."

"I'm coming." Giles picked his way through the crowd to stand behind Freeman. "Feels odd without a book in my hand."

"It'll feel odder if you start seeing visions."

"You see visions?" Freeman asked.

"Not normally. I'm supposed to represent -"

Willow shushed him. "We have to begin."

Everyone else shut up. She began to chant in Latin, sprinkling holy water across the prone Straker. He began to writhe and shout.

"Ed?" Freeman asked. "Ed? Are you alright?"

"The demon -" Giles gasped with pain. "Doesn't want to let go of his prize."

"Are *you* alright?" Freeman asked.

Giles nodded but his face was tight.

"See anything?" Willow asked him.

"Usual fire and brimstone. Few aliens. Mary." Both he and Straker were sweating heavily.

Tara had taken up the chanting and was wafting purifying smoke over them. Willow leaned over and drew a complex sigil on Straker's forehead with red ochre. The moment it was completed, he started to scream.

Freeman's eyes darted between his friend and the young witch. "What's going on?"

"We're winning. We're driving the demon out."

"But it's not going without a fight." Giles said through gritted teeth.

He glanced towards the windows in the living room. "How long?"

"A few seconds." said Tara. "If it's on time."

"Can't even guarantee sunrise round here." the Watcher muttered.

But she was right.

As the first rays entered, Straker sprang to his feet, throwing himself at Willow. She squealed and dived out of his way.

"Ed!" Alec yelled.

But Straker seemed oblivious.

"We've lost," wailed Tara.

"No, the sun -" Giles broke off, screaming as Straker hurled himself into the light.

Both men reacted as if they were on fire, Straker rolling on the ground but through his gritted teeth they could hear him repeat: "Won't do it. Won't. Won't do it."

Willow grabbed the holy water and doused him thoroughly with it. He gasped and lay almost still, shivering slightly. Giles dropped to his knees. For a moment there was silence.

The front door opened.

"I hate sewers," Xander said. "Now can I get in my room to change?"

* * *

Buffy, Willow and Tara made it to lectures on time, Xander was only a little late for work and Anya opened up The Magic Box. Giles was officially keeping an eye on Freeman and Straker but in truth was sleeping off the after-effects of the spell on Xander's couch.

When they gathered at Xander's apartment that evening, Willow explained. "Basically it's a really tough form of exorcism. It can kill so it helps if you have someone to link in to the

subject and share the load."

Straker, sunbathing on the balcony, looked up at that. "Do you mean it could have killed Giles as well?"

"Maybe."

Giles shrugged. "It's a ridiculous way to earn a living but it's what we do. Interesting, at least."

"I'll say," said Buffy, glaring at him. "And did you deliberately not tell me that?"

Willow blushed. "That was me. Didn't tell Giles till you'd gone. You'd only worry."

A look passed between Freeman and Straker.

Buffy sighed theatrically and smiled. "Oh well, guess we saved the world again. By proxy."

She looked at Straker, who smiled back. "We'll get out of your way tomorrow."

"You don't have to." She said it quicker than she intended. There was something about Straker she could understand, some kind of bond between them as if he was a Slayer in his own right. And between Giles and Alec by the look of things.

"No, we have to go." Straker said. "We have to get back to work."

She nodded. "No rest for the wicked. Which reminds me, I've got to go hassle Spike."

There was still the matter of Anya. She was not exactly hiding in the kitchen but she was preparing snacks with unaccustomed enthusiasm while the others relaxed outside.

"I'll talk to her." Alec said.

"No." said Ed. "I will."

He was walking slowly but he was walking. Anya had her back to him, tending the oven, when he came in. He cleared his throat.

She whirled round, dropping a tray of cookies.

"It's all right," he said. "I don't understand all of it but I do know it wasn't your fault. No more than it would have been mine if I'd become a vampire."

She looked small, closed in. "I kind of enjoyed it."

He nodded. "As I would have. As I did."

She echoed his gesture. "Forgiveness is a new idea for me."

"But it works. If you can handle it. It's not easy on either end." He took a deep breath. "I don't want to know what you did, just one thing. Did it have anything to do with my son?"

"I didn't even know you had one."

He shivered with relief. "He died. I thought... What I said before was right, there's nothing to add. Now I guess we can't eat these cookies. Do you have any others?"

She indicated some on the side and he half turned to see Xander in the doorway. The young man nodded, smiled slightly and took the plate.

* * *

The next evening Straker and Freeman collected up Ford and the others, who had far too much sense and experience to ask what had been going on. They left with a few pieces of Initiative technology, a couple of protective charms as gifts from the Scooby gang, a bag of leftover snacks from Anya and a lot of memories.

Giles patted Buffy's shoulder as the helicopter lifted off. She looked up at him.

"If they can live that long, maybe we can too."

Giles nodded. "The average Slayer may not live very... Well, what I mean is -"

"I've never been average?"

"Exactly."

They wandered off into the sunset to fight the forces of the night.
"Never did get to be in a movie."

* * *

Straker was catching up on paperwork on board the jet they had transferred to. He looked across at his old friend.

Freeman raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Johnny would have been ten years older than them and I'd still have been worried about him. They're kids. They shouldn't have to be saving the world."

Freeman sighed and shrugged. "They're good at it. Like we are. And if they live as long as we have, I expect they'll be happy." He stretched his painful limbs. "I am."