

Rivalries

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Chapter 1

Rivalries

A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Short Story

Sunnydale Museum was something of an embarrassment to the authorities. It wasn't that it was too small and under funded to make it convincing, a surprising number of high profile exhibitions had passed through Sunnydale over the years, due to its convenient location and somewhat colourful history. No, it was the number of deaths that had occurred in the museum that were the major cause of embarrassment. Every time an exhibit of macabre nature came through the museum and left without incident, the authorities heaved a collective, though silent, sigh of relief.

It was with some trepidation that the curator found himself preparing for the latest exhibit. Carl Hunsicker had been curator of Sunnydale museum for forty years. He attributed his long tenure in the job to the fact that, as policy, he never entered the place after dark. However this was an unusual case. He had been phoned at home, late in the evening, by the manager of the 'Historic China' exhibit. This exhibit had been due to arrive that day, but had failed to turn up. Now, close to midnight, it was here and the manager wanted the museum opened and her exhibit safely placed therein. Carl had had no intention of going to the museum at that time of night, but the manager of Historic China proved to be more stubborn than he was. It was with considerable reluctance and not a little fear that Carl found himself alone in the museum except for a truck driver and the elderly but domineering presence of Clarice Shelbourne, manager of Historic China and expert on Sino-Japanese trade in the nineteenth century.

Carl and the lorry driver struggled with the heavy boxes whilst Ms. Shelbourne directed their activity.

"Be careful, young man" she admonished him, "that contains a full size wax

model of the 3rd emperor of the Manchu dynasty. It's priceless."

Carl was unimpressed, but he handled the box a little more carefully. The last thing he wanted was the old bat to demand they open everything to check for damage. However, to his alarm, once they were all inside, she showed every sign of doing just that.

"I'm not paid to work this time of night," complained Carl grimly. "You can unpack them in the morning."

"Young man, I don't think you appreciate the value of these exhibits."

"I appreciate that there are safety regulations," Carl played a last card, "if you persist in staying here I shall have to have you removed." He pondered whether any of the local policemen would actually be prepared to turn up at the museum at this time of night to remove one dotty old woman. Privately he doubted it. He wondered what would happen if he just walked away and left her there. He couldn't lock her in, but he could just leave the place open. Problem was, there'd been trouble when he'd accidentally left it open a few weeks ago and an exhibit had been damaged. He wasn't sure he could afford to do it again.

Fortunately some, but not all, of these thought processes must have shown in his face. Miss Shelbourne suddenly compromised.

"Let me just check everything off on the manifest and then you can lock up. It'll only take a few minutes."

Carl agreed. He waited by the door, next to the model of the old Chinese emperor, while she disappeared into the interior of the storage space. The lid of the Emperor's box had come loose, he noticed. Superstitiously he looked around for something to fix it back in place. His office was nearby and he could fetch a hammer from there and bang the nails back in. He set off. Behind him a long thin hand with sharpened nails forced its way out through the gap between the lid and the box and began to work it open.

When Carl returned with his hammer, he saw with alarm that several of the nails were now on the floor. Hurriedly he gathered them up and began to hammer them back into place. He failed to notice the shadow fall over him until claw-like hands grabbed him and teeth sank into his neck.

He gasped, once. Miss Shelbourne, engrossed in her work, didn't even hear him. When she returned and found him missing she simply assumed that he had finally given up and left her to it. She made a mental note to write a complaint to the municipal authorities about his slackness. Then she left. No one ever found Carl's body.

Act 1

Buffy was on her way to the Bronze. Autumn was closing in. Although, during the day, the sun had blazed, the nights were cool and she found herself shivering in the thin shirt she'd thrown over her dress. She always felt some trepidation and excitement when approaching the Bronze. It was the only happening place in Sunnydale but, as a result, well, things tended to happen there. One way or another Buffy had rarely spent an uneventful evening at the Bronze.

She sensed rather than saw someone step out of a side street as she passed. Turning, she was relieved, but not altogether surprised, to see it was Angel. He was a soft tailored jacket, made of velvet and a white shirt. Large, dark eyes stared out at her under a short spiky haircut. In short, he looked drop dead gorgeous as usual. She lowered her aggressive stance, but did not relax. Angel had some problem with their relationship which Buffy couldn't quite fathom. OK, she could fathom it - he thought he was too old for her, plus the rest - she didn't really see why this was such a big problem. After all, if they didn't give it a chance how would they ever know. It was just that, as a result, she was never quite sure how he would behave. Would he be up tight and standoffish, as he normally was, or gentle and shy as she'd found him the once or twice she'd managed to persuade him to get off his high horse and talk to her as an equal, a friend and possibly a lover?

"Hello," he said carefully.

"Hello, what are you doing here?" already she was throwing up the defenses and the question sounded like an accusation.

"Something's happening," he began. Buffy's heart sank.

"Business then," she said, "not pleasure."

She could see he didn't know how to react to that. His uncertainty made her mellow. "OK, so what's the problem".

"I'm not sure, but the local vampires, they're behaving strangely."

"In what way?"

"Well they're not gathering where they normally do. But there are meetings of some sort happening, I'm not sure where, and there's more of them in town than usual - you must have noticed that and... and I think they're scared of something."

"Yeah, I'd noticed there were a lot around at the moment," Buffy agreed reluctantly. "So, what do you suggest?"

That threw him. Forward planning wasn't really Angel's strong point.

"Oh great," she muttered, "you think there's something weird happening and you want me to find it and slay it. Cool, well I had no other plans this evening."

A night out at the Bronze, see some friends, you know socialize. Nothing that can't be dropped just like that to trudge round Sunnydale looking for meetings of vampires." She was getting angry, not his fault, but he would just stand there looking a bit helpless, incredibly handsome, but helpless.

There were days, in fact there were lots of days, when Buffy felt that being the chosen one, the Slayer, the one in a generation gifted with the strength and speed to take on the legions of vampires, was a real pain. People expected her to take the lead, to drop everything and go hunting. Angel wasn't here to see her, he was here to enlist the help of the Slayer. Unconsciously, her face set itself into a pout.

Angel attempted a small smile and took a step towards her. "I'll come with you, if you like."

'Result!' thought Buffy triumphantly to herself, surprised and pleased, but aloud all she said, in an off-hand manner, was, "If you like."

Half an hour later they were in an alleyway behind some warehouses. Several of them were disused and Buffy had marked them down previously as potential meeting places for vampires. She was checking them out by the rather unobvious means of ripping off the padlocks and looking in. Angel stood at her shoulder and she found it comforting to know that she wasn't on her own.

"Uh Oh!" murmured Angel quietly.

Buffy looked up. At the end of the alley were three figures. Two of them carried what looked like clubs and one had a torch which he pointed at them, catching Buffy and Angel in its glare.

"Well what have we here?" asked one of the figures. The three of them sauntered down the alleyway. Behind the torch light it was impossible to make out their features. Instinctively, Buffy backed up and glanced over her shoulder at the far end. She looked at Angel, unsure what he would do. She saw her uncertainty reflected back in his eyes. Buffy had a creeping sensation at the back of her neck which probably meant they were vampires. She adopted a fighting stance.

"Who are you?" she called.

One of the figures laughed. "Your worst nightmare," it growled melodramatically and then began to run towards her. She dodged it easily and staked it as it went past. She turned back to the others, but they had not attacked at the same time and now hung back. One of them backed out the alleyway, looked around and then shouted something.

“Time to get out of here,” said Angel. He grabbed her hand and pulled her in the opposite direction. Even with the peril they were in, Buffy felt a little thrill of pleasure that they were holding hands. They were only about half way there when three more figures appeared ahead of them. Another torch was shone in their eyes. They halted and looked behind, five people now stood at the other end boxing them in. Buffy took four stakes out of her bag. She handed two to Angel.

“This is bad,” he said.

“I know.”

This was very bad. They had nowhere to retreat to and they were heavily outnumbered. What was worse, the vampires were showing more signs of organisation than she was used to. They were being cautious and careful. There were very few vampires who she would have described as cautious and careful.

“Let’s try and take out the three at the far end,” she suggested.

Silently Angel nodded. The two of them ran down the alleyway. She heard the sound of feet behind her.

The first vampire she met parried her blow with a baseball bat. Meanwhile a second tried to out flank her, shining a torch in her eyes as she did so. Buffy had to divide her attention between the two of them. The combination of torch and baseball bat made it difficult to do anything except concentrate on dodging. Keeping them at a distance, but not getting close enough to either to stake. She didn’t have the time to worry about Angel - she hoped he’d deal with his one assailant quickly. Not long now until the others caught up.

Suddenly the torch dropped. Buffy saw a thin neatly carved piece of wood protruding through the woman’s chest. For a second the woman remained held, a look of surprise on her features then she disintegrated into dust. Buffy seized the opportunity to close in on the other vampire and stake him. She was dimly aware of a long coat and a sword. Someone tall with long curling hair tied in a pony tail stood at her back meeting the on rush of the other five.

A woman’s voice, with an English accent, said, “Hello Angel, long time no see,” and then the enemy were upon them. Three abreast they spanned the alley, Angel having despatched his assailant. Buffy was a natural fighter. That was part of what it meant to be the Slayer. She could pick up any weapon and already be part way competent in its use. It also meant she could analyse and understand another’s fighting technique almost instinctively. Although she was concentrating on the woman and the club before her, Buffy could tell, although she would have had trouble explaining why, that Angel and the mystery woman with the sword were fighting together. While she had to worry, in a fight, whether Angel would pick up on the cues she gave him, this woman didn’t. She and Angel fought

together with the understanding born only of long practice. Angel concentrated on keeping blows off himself and the woman while she concentrated on dispatching her opponent. In a second only three vampires remained. Seizing an opportunity Buffy rammed her second stake into the heart of the vampire before her. Nothing happened. She kicked it in further, to make sure. The vampire laughed, pulled the wood from her chest and tossed it over her shoulder.

Next to her, Buffy heard the woman swear. "Cover me, concentrate on keeping them back," she said and then dropped behind.

Angel closed up, the fabric of his jacket brushing Buffy's shoulder through her shirt. It was a long few minutes. Then Buffy felt the woman just behind her.

"Stick this to her forehead," she said. Buffy glanced down to see a hand holding a yellow post-it note with Chinese characters scrawled on it.

"You what?" she asked.

"Stick it to her forehead," repeated the woman.

Mentally shrugging, Buffy took the post-it. She was aware of Angel taking another. 'Hearts, heads, what's the difference,' she thought. She ducked in again under the swinging bat and pressed the sticky strip to the woman's head. The vampire keeled over backwards and dropped like a stone. Seconds later they were alone in the alleyway. The strange woman began tying up the bodies in red string.

"Excuse me," asked Buffy, "what exactly are you doing?"

"Disposing of the bodies."

"Oh right, silly me, obvious really," Buffy rolled her eyes.

Once the vampires were tied up, the woman removed the post-it notes and the three bodies disintegrated as if they had been staked. She started gathering up the string. She looked up, and Buffy saw her face properly for the first time. She had strong features, a graceful, sharply defined nose, elegant cheekbones, and delicate arched eyebrows. Classically beautiful, the type of beauty that aged well without sagging or blurring. Wisps of curling hair floated round her face, looking a bit like a halo in the security light. She was old - not old old, but as old as Giles or Buffy's mother. There were lines at the corners of her eyes and her temple that would soon mature into wrinkles. She smiled at Buffy.

"Hello," she said, "I don't believe we've met."

"Buffy," gingerly Buffy shook her hand, "Buffy Summers, who are you?"

"Catherine," said Angel suddenly.

"Catherine, right," Buffy nodded seriously.

Catherine turned to Angel. They were the same height, Buffy noticed, staring at each other eye to eye. Angel reached out and pulled out one of the wisps of hair examining it in the light.

“Grey hairs,” he said.

“I got old. It happens.”

Buffy was beginning to feel left out of this. “Hello, would anyone care to tell me what all that stuff with string and sticky notes was?”

The woman, Catherine apparently, sheathed her sword. “They weren’t vampires,” she said, “at least, not the western kind. They have a lot in common with western vampires, but differences too.”

“Like no stakes?” asked Buffy.

“Like no stakes.”

“Where are they from then?”

“The east. China these ones.”

“They didn’t look Chinese,” Buffy frowned, feeling sure she’d have noticed if they’d been oriental. She was fairly sure the woman she’d post-ited had had blonde, or at least light coloured, hair.

“No they didn’t, did they,” said Catherine thoughtfully.

“But you knew all about them, right?” asked Buffy, “you’re here because of them.”

Catherine suddenly looked doubtful and glanced at Angel.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “you can trust her. She’s the slayer.”

“It’s a long story,” she said. “We should get out of here, there may be more of them around. Besides,” she looked apologetic, “I’ve only just arrived in town, I need to find a hotel and unpack.”

“OK,” said Buffy, “let’s meet again tomorrow evening. The library, Sunnydale High School.”

Catherine smiled, “I’ll be there.” They had walked out of the alleyway now and there was a new looking car standing on the curve. “Can I give you a lift?”

“No thanks, I’ll be OK.”

“Suit yourself,” Catherine opened the door and climbed in, “Angel?”

Angel glanced worriedly at Buffy and hesitated a moment, “yes, please,” he said suddenly. “See you tomorrow,” he smiled faintly at Buffy and then opened the near door.

“Sure, just carry on as if I wasn’t here,” said Buffy forlornly to herself as the car drove away.

The dim security light showed the long empty straight road. Buffy shivered in the slight wind. Strands of hair blew across her face. Disconsolately, she considered how rumpled and disheveled she probably looked as she began the long walk back home.

“... and he just left you, all on your own?” asked Willow, incredulously.

“Yep.”

“Didn’t offer to walk you home.”

“Nope.”

“The beast,” said Xander, “with all those Chinese vampires around just waiting to rip you limb from limb.”

Buffy and Willow ignored him.

“I’d have accepted the lift, if I hadn’t wanted to ask Angel about this Catherine person.”

“Maybe Angel wanted to talk to Catherine,” suggested Willow.

“Maybe,” suggested Xander, “they are secret lovers, with a stormy passionate past.” He put an arm round Buffy’s shoulders, “I’m sorry Buffy but there is another woman.” He paused a moment, “after all - they were heading off to find a hotel.”

“But she’s, like, my Mom’s age,” said Buffy.

“But then Angel’s a lot older,” put in Willow, “Oops,” she shook her head fiercely, “forget I said that. Yes, real old. Not attractive at all.”

“You know,” said Xander, as they walked into the library, “I’m beginning to like this woman already.”

Catherine surveyed Sunnydale high school as she walked up to its gates. Typical American High School, as far as she could tell, not that she really counted herself as knowledgeable about such things. She found her way to the library without much difficulty, but there was no one there, or so she thought. Then she heard movement among the shelves. Rounding a corner, she found herself face to face with a middle-aged man in tweed and glasses, carrying a heavy, leather bound volume.

“Rupert Giles, I presume?”

“Well, yes,” he looked mildly surprised, “I’m afraid you have the advantage of me.”

“Catherine Quigley,” She held out her hand, “I hunt vampires, not full time anymore, but its sort of a family thing, you know. I bumped into Buffy last night.”

Giles shook her hand gingerly and awkwardly while clutching the tome, “Pleased

to meet you, I haven't seen Buffy yet today, so you'll have to forgive my ignorance."

"It's sort of complicated."

"Mr. Giles," a determined voice floated up from the main area.

"That's the principal," said Giles. Nervously he rounded the end of the bookcase. Catherine behind him.

"Mr. Giles," said a small bald man, who looked startlingly like a goblin, "may I remind you that there is a staff meeting."

"Oh yes, umm."

Catherine took the book from him, "I'll see you later."

"And may I remind you that it is not appropriate to meet with lady friends on school premises," the goblin was saying as it shepherded the protesting Giles from the room.

Catherine smiled to herself and flicked through the book. She didn't have long to wait.

"Well I don't," Buffy was saying as she walked through the doors. There were two people with her. One was a small girl who would have been prettier with some more self-confidence, long straight brown hair hung unflatteringly down either side of a round childish face. The second was a boy with dark short curls who still had that unfinished look about his face, with full lips and the traces of puppy fat around his chin and eyes, which made you wonder whether he would mature to good looks or a florid overweight. Buffy, herself, was easily the most striking of the three, demanding that you look at her. She was dressed in a short mini-skirt and tight top. Her blonde hair was sculpted into what Catherine could best describe as a bob although she suspected that such a plain term would have insulted the hairdresser responsible. Buffy had a fresh-faced, youthful beauty and confidence that Catherine had long ago lost, if she had ever had it in her gawky, lanky teenage years.

"Hello," said Catherine.

"Hi," said Buffy. "Catherine, this is Xander and Willow."

"Interesting names."

"... and Giles should be around here somewhere."

"I already met him, briefly. He had to go to a staff meeting."

"Oh," Buffy was put out. "I was hoping he'd know all about the Chinese stuff."

"Well, I imagine he'll be back soon."

"I don't know," said Willow, "these staff meetings can go on for ages and they're discussing next year's budget today?"

"How do you know that?" asked Buffy.

“Oh, you know, I pick these things up.”

There was an awkward silence.

“You fight vampires then?” asked Xander.

“That’s right,” said Catherine. “I don’t know how much Buffy has told you. I’m here on the trail of a Chinese one.”

“She did mention it,” said Xander.

“It’s really lucky for me that you people are here. It saves me spending days trying to locate the various haunts and find out what the local vampires are like.”

“So,” said Willow, “you want the tour of Sunnydale?”

“The supernatural tour anyway.”

“Well, the Bronze has to be the starting point doesn’t it?” said Xander, “for almost any tour. Besides which,” he added, “it’ll be a much nicer place to wait for Giles than this library. Too many books. Makes me think of homework. Why, don’t we all go to the Bronze, for a friendly chat?”

“The Bronze?” asked Catherine.

“It’s a bar. They play music and stuff,” said Willow.

“A young people’s place,” said Catherine doubtfully.

“But it’s a major vampire hunting ground, so you’ll need to check it out. Sounds like a plan,” said Buffy firmly, obscurely enjoying Catherine’s apparent discomfort. “I’ll leave a note for Giles and Angel.” She began fishing about in her bag.

“I’m not sure about this,” said Catherine.

“Believe me, you’ll love the place,” said Xander, “I’ll bet it’s just like an English pub.” He slipped his arm through hers and began leading her towards the door.

“... and even if it’s not,” said Willow grabbing her other arm, “it’ll be a cultural experience.”

“Right,” grinned Buffy placing a note on Giles desk, “all set.”

The main route from Sunnydale high to the Bronze lay through the more industrial part of town; semi-deserted streets at this time of day when the shadows were lengthening. Buffy and Willow lagged behind Xander who was giving an extravagant potted history of Sunnydale to Catherine.

“He seems to like her,” said Willow.

Buffy shrugged, “you know Xander. You don’t think anything serious will come of it though. I mean she really is twice his age.”

“I suppose not,” said Willow.

Suddenly there was a loud wolf whistle from somewhere. Buffy groaned in disgust, but Catherine had stopped in her tracks and was scanning the area.

“Just ignore them,” advised Buffy.

“Up there,” Catherine pointed.

Looking up Buffy saw someone on top of a roof just ducking away. Seconds later Buffy heard the screech of tyres cornering. Willow was facing her and she saw her eyes widen at something. The others all started running. Buffy turned round to look. She was staring into the headlights of a car. She couldn’t see its form or shape behind the glare, but it was only meters away and bearing down on her at top speed.

Act 2

Someone thudded into Buffy, knocking her aside. The car slipped past, long, sleek and black, narrowly missing them.

“What?” began Buffy.

“Someone was looking out for us, probably for you,” said Catherine helping her to her feet. “You walk this way often I guess.”

“Well yes,” admitted Buffy.

The car screeched round and headed back towards them. Buffy waited for as long as she dared, as the car approached and then jumped aside, giving it as little time as possible to adjust its course and run her over. She wondered how long they could keep this up.

“In here,” shouted Xander, he was standing in the entrance to a small alley, too narrow for the car to get down. They ducked in.

“I don’t like this,” said Catherine. “It feels like a trap.”

“Too right,” said a voice. A large figure moved out from behind some packing cases before them. Looking back Buffy noticed that the car had parked across the alley’s entrance and two more people stepped out. There was a rattling sound up above. More people, a man and a woman, had stepped out onto the one fire escape that lead out of a warehouse flanking the passage.

“Stake,” said Buffy.

“I doubt it’ll work,” said Catherine, “I’m guessing these are Chen’s lot, otherwise I’d expect more of them to set a trap and be sure of taking you out.” She was

already scribbling. Buffy took out a stake anyway.

“The one at the end.”

“That’s the best way out,” agreed Catherine, she held a loop of red string in one hand and a small post-it in the other. “Keep right behind us,” she said to Xander and Willow.

“Believe me, we’re not going anywhere,” said Xander.

Catherine and Buffy charged. Buffy got to the man seconds before Catherine. He didn’t even look nervous and was laughing, with his arms spread wide as she rammed the stake into his chest. She was not altogether surprised when nothing happened. As she staked him, however, he grabbed her and picked her up.

“Oi,” she shouted.

“You,” he said, “are coming with me.”

Catherine was upon them. One hand whisked over Buffy’s head. The man’s eyes, which had been gloating into her’s slammed shut. Buffy had to brace herself as he began to topple, his arms still clasped round her. A loop of red slipped over his head, Catherine ripped off the sticky and he was gone. It had taken less than a minute. Buffy risked a look over her shoulder as they raced out of the alley. No one was following them. The vampires were obviously too shocked to do anything, having discovered they weren’t as invulnerable as they had thought.

“Cultural experience right?” asked Catherine, staring rather dubiously at the weak beer in front of her. She sipped it and made a face. “I’m surprised they even bother to sell this stuff. I must be the only person over twenty in the place.”

Willow thought she looked rather uncomfortable. Conversation was not really flowing. It was mostly dominated by Xander who continued to regale Catherine with a mixture of local gossip, tales of their exploits and compliments on the way she’d dealt with the ambush earlier.

“Be careful,” Buffy whispered to him, not as quietly as she might have done, “you’re starting to dribble on the table.”

“Tell us about these other vampires?” Willow asked, hoping to lighten the atmosphere a bit by concentrating on facts.

“It’s all a bit complicated. No one really knows where vampires came from in the first place.”

“Giles said it all started with some demon,” put in Buffy.

Catherine nodded, "Yes, that is the most likely theory. Anyway, there has, for a long time, as far as anyone can tell, been a separate strain of vampirism in the East. The basic stuff is the same, drinking blood and immortality, but lots of the peripherals are different. Staking is no use, for instance, as you've seen. Oh there's all sorts of stuff, you can prevent the infection taking control of a corpse by burying it properly and there are lots of really weird cures. The main way of getting rid of the things is inscribing certain taoist prayers on the vampire's forehead - there are heaps of theories about why it works, none of which are terribly convincing - and obviously attaching paper with the prayer written on it also works. Once the prayer is removed then the vampire returns to animation unless bound in blessed rope,"

"The red string," said Buffy.

"Yes, in which case, once the prayer is removed the vampire is destroyed."

"Well, may I say, that it all sounds truly bizarre," said Xander.

"It may seem bizarre to us - but then staking and crosses seem bizarre to the Chinese."

"Can you let me have some of these prayers?" asked Buffy.

"It's not as simple as that, the prayer needs to contain a description of the vampire in question, of some sort, and a reference to the time it is applied. Basically you have to write them on the spot."

"Why is nothing ever simple?" complained Buffy.

"Where does Angel fit into all this?" asked Willow. This was what she really wanted to know and she guessed Buffy did too. Vampiric and other supernatural threats were tenapenny in their lives - but old and mysterious friends of Angel's were a novelty.

"He doesn't, so far as I know. In fact, I had no idea he was here. Last time I saw him was in Boston about 20, maybe 25 years ago."

"But you know each other," prompted Xander, "well," he added.

Catherine laughed, a short nervous bark, "We did. I must have been about sixteen at the time." She pursed her lips and then shook her head, "I was *so* in love with him. I used to sneak out the back window of the house we'd rented and snog him desperately in the garden. Heaven knows what Daddy thought was going on. Probably had no idea. He had fairly strong views about vampires. I imagine he'd have thought it was all right for Angel and I to fight together, but he'd have had a blue fit at the thought of us sleeping together."

"Sleeping together!" said Buffy, Willow and Xander, almost in unison.

Catherine laughed again, more naturally this time, "don't look so shocked. It was the seventies. But no, we never slept together. Angel wasn't having any of it.

I tried desperately hard to get into his knickers but no luck.”

“Why not?” asked Willow in horrified fascination.

“Don’t know - we never discussed it. At the time I thought I was being pretty subtle. You know, I’d turn up in some skimpy dress in the middle of the Boston winter and drape myself, I thought seductively, over the scenery while Angel would appear oblivious of the hint. I never actually brought the subject up - I thought subtle was the way to go. Mind you, looking back the word ‘blatant’ seems more appropriate. I guess he came over all responsible”

“That figures,” grumbled Buffy. Willow guessed she now knew more than she’d ever wanted to about Catherine and Angel.

“You know,” remarked Xander, “no one has ever dressed in a skimpy dress and draped themselves seductively in front of me.”

Catherine smiled, “Well, wait ’til you’re two hundred odd. It’ll probably happen all the time. Teenage girls tend to have a real weakness for good looking older men.”

Seeing the look on Buffy’s face, Willow tried to interrupt. “I don’t know Xander. Remember that dance Buffy did with you. That was pretty seductive.”

“Thanks Willow,” said Buffy, “I really needed that brought up right now.”

Embarrassed, Willow lapsed into silence. The way things were going almost anything was going to be the wrong thing to say to Buffy. Xander, she could see, was determined to keep the conversation focussed on the subject of Catherine and Angel’s relationship.

“So, is this going to be the big reunion?” he was asking. “Will you ride off happily into the sunset together. Avoiding the fact that the groom will be burnt to a crisp if you do.”

Catherine laughed again, she sounded slightly embarrassed Willow thought, although it was hard to tell. “I don’t think so...” she began but was interrupted by the arrival of Giles, looking deeply uncomfortable in the surroundings of the Bronze.

“Er, hello again,” he said.

“Hello,” replied Catherine, “I was just telling these three about Chinese vampires.”

“Chinese ones, you mean the ones the taoists fight?”

“That’s right.”

Spike was in a bad mood. He paced around the interior of his deserted warehouse. Normally, there would have been a respectable crowd of vampires here, but not tonight. Only a few, if any at all, were likely to turn up tonight, or any night in the near future. He kicked an empty crate to pieces in sheer frustration.

“Spike’s not happy,” observed Drusilla.

“Too right I’m not happy,” growled Spike, “The bloody wog is bloody indestructible.”

“He is powerful,” said Drusilla, staring up through the ceiling as if she saw something beyond, her pale face seemed almost luminous in the half light. “He is one of us. It’s more important to get rid of the Slayer - she is still the main threat. Get rid of her for me Spike,” she pleaded.

Spike grunted noncommittally.

Drusilla rose, hugging herself with her arms. She still gazed into the distance a smile of almost rapture on her face. “He has so much power,” she whispered, “can’t you feel it.” She looked at Spike, hunger and desire in her face. This didn’t improve Spike’s mood. He kicked at another box petulantly.

“Join him, love,” said Drusilla, “join him for your Drusilla. She needs his power.”

“It’s alright love, I’ll join him, at least until you’re better.” Spike twined his arms round her, “He’ll want to get rid of the Slayer too. Maybe he’s the solution to one of our problems.”

“That’s right,” cooed Drusilla, stroking his hair, “he’s a solution. He is strong and cunning. He’s a bad enemy, Spike.”

A door banged open at the far end of the hall. Spike looked up. Harry, a former associate, hurried in.

“I though you were off with the wog,” said Spike hostilely.

“Come off it Spike. What choice did I have? he made his terms pretty clear.”

“Join me or die. Yes I was there too. ”

“He’ll be coming after you soon, you know.”

“I know, is this supposed to be a friendly warning?”

“No,” Harry glanced around nervously, as if expecting to find Chen lurking in the shadows. He dropped his voice to a whisper, “Something’s changed, he can be destroyed.”

Drusilla hissed quietly, curling her arms around Spike as if to hold him back.

“How?” asked Spike.

“I don’t know. There was a plan to take out the Slayer and it went wrong.”

“Nice to know it doesn’t just happen to me,” interrupted Spike, “what did she do?”

“I... I don’t know, but one of Chen’s lot didn’t come back. According to the others it was like he was staked.”

Spike smiled and kissed Drusilla, “You know you said he was a solution, love? Well, I think I might have the start of a plan.”

“What’s your interest in all this?” asked Giles. They had moved back to the library. Buffy had suggested a vote on staying at the Bronze. But Giles and Catherine had simply got up and left, leaving Buffy, Willow and Xander to follow or not as they chose. Angel was waiting for them when they arrived. Catherine had smiled at him and he’d smiled nervously back. Buffy wondered if that was significant or not.

“My family has been fighting vampires since way back when, much like yours.”

“Your family?” interrupted Giles.

“I’m a Harker.”

“Goodness, Charles Harker’s daughter?”

“That’s right.”

“We all thought you were the next slayer for a bit.”

“Yes, wishful thinking on Daddy’s part. If he’d stopped to think about it he’d have realized it was utter nonsense, but I must have been 5 or 6 before he finally gave up on the idea.”

“I met your father once. It was a while back. He’d come to consult our library, something to do with ghosts of vampires, I think.”

“Oh yes, we had some trouble up in Scotland. Daddy went haring off down south as soon as we realized what we were up against. We had no clue how to deal with something stakes just passed straight through.”

“Fascinating, I must look it up,” Giles started towards the stacks.

Buffy coughed meaningfully, “don’t you think the current problem is just a bit more pressing?”

“Oh, yes,” Giles stopped looking a bit non-plussed and slightly disappointed.

“You’ve still not explained how you know about these Chinese vampires,” Buffy prompted Catherine.

“Right, well, at some point Daddy made some contact with the Chinese side of things, just after the war, I think. The situation is a lot different out there. There

is a sort of unofficial, uneasy truce between the government and the vampires. An understanding that if the vampires keep their activity low key then they won't be sought out and destroyed."

Buffy boggled, "You mean vampires are part of the system?"

"Maybe it's a communist thing," hazarded Willow.

"I think it goes a lot further back than Chairman Mao. It's a very hierarchical society. In Europe there was once a time when a significant subset of the nobility were vampires. In the same way, there was a time when a significant subset of the Chinese nobility were vampires. Unlike in Europe however, where the vampires by and large kept themselves to themselves and didn't get involved much in politics, in China, the vampires did get involved. Perhaps they retained some sense of family, who knows? You got vampiric factions lining up against each other in similar ways to the mortal factions, dealing with mortal leaders on the quiet and becoming part of mortal strategic thinking. Mao found them uniquely useful. Occasionally he would give them the nod and havoc would reign somewhere. He saw it as part of the process of revolution or something."

"... and now they've come to Sunnydale," said Buffy.

"One has certainly gone walkabout. The details aren't clear. I'm guessing there is some political struggle behind it. The vampires tipped off the Chinese government. The Chinese don't want the US government working with vampires, who they regard as some sort of secret weapon, so they tipped us off. They all want this chap got rid of with the minimum of fuss."

"You're here on behalf of the Chinese government?" asked Xander.

"No, they simply alerted me to the situation. This vampire has been hiding out in the Historic China exhibition."

"The one at the museum?" asked Willow.

Catherine nodded, "He's not there anymore though, I checked this morning."

"But still," protested Buffy picking up on Xander's thoughts, "if we get rid of this bloke then we'll basically be doing what China wants."

"Hey, she agrees with me!", said Xander surprised.

"Don't let it go to your head," murmured Willow.

"Is that a problem?" asked Catherine.

"Well, you say they want us to stop this vampire helping our government against China. Now, I don't know about anyone else, but that sounds like helping China against America," Buffy continued to push the point, although she wasn't really sure why. Catherine seemed too self-assured and confident about the whole thing for her liking.

"She has a point," said Willow, loyally.

“But the Chinese are wrong,” said Catherine. “Vampires aren’t some secret weapon that act on behalf of the government. Historically they’ve failed to deliver as often as they have actually delivered. It’s just tradition and wilful blindness which makes the Chinese think they have some sort of deal. If anything the vampires who tipped the government off about this one are using them.”

“In which case we’re helping the vampires!” said Buffy. “We’re back to ‘you’re the Slayer and you slay vampires regardless of anything else.’ He’s not even my sort of vampire.”

“If America goes the way of China then you won’t be able to just go out and slay vampires. They will effectively have legal protection, certainly the more powerful ones will,” persisted Catherine.

“I can’t really see Buffy up in court for Vampire slaying,” said Willow.

“Oh she wouldn’t be prosecuted for that, but she’d be prosecuted for murder, assault or kidnapping, or something similar.”

“How very X-files,” said Buffy sarcastically. “One massive government conspiracy.”

“Listen, if your security services don’t already know about the existence of vampires, in fact, if they’re not aware that Sunnydale has some attraction for them then they are *really* bad at their jobs. Do you believe that you are the only four people in America who know about Vampires and the Slayer?”

“There were the men who took away Marcie,” said Willow.

“I’m still not buying it,” said Buffy. “I can see it would be very convenient for China but I don’t see why I should help them out against America.”

Giles looked puzzled, “This is unusually patriotic for you. I have to agree with Catherine. We can not afford to let vampires become an accepted part of the system.”

Angel nodded seriously, “He has to be stopped.”

“Somehow I just knew you two would take her side,” said Buffy.

“Excuse me, have I missed something?” asked Catherine, “when did we start being on different sides?”

A very promising argument was about to start when the door to the library was suddenly thrown back with a bang. Spike stood framed in the entrance and laughed.

Act 3

Buffy began to run towards Spike shouting “Stake someone”. He was too fast for them. Willow had been standing nearest the door and he lunged for her. By the time Buffy had crossed half the distance he had Willow in a head lock.

“Let’s not be hasty now,” said Spike. “I just want a friendly chat, although I think I might hold onto this little thing as insurance.” He gave Willow a shake and she made a stifled noise halfway between a scream and a gasp of pain. Buffy heard Catherine draw her sword.

“Impressive,” remarked Spike, although there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “I suggest you’re careful where you point that thing. Take one step closer, any of you, and I’ll break her neck.” He shook Willow again for emphasis.

“What do you want?” asked Angel.

“I have a little problem.”

“My heart weeps,” said Buffy.

“You know, I was hoping you’d say that. Here am I, no one to turn to in the whole world, and I thought, I thought ‘I know a girl: pretty, intelligent, brave. I’m sure,’ I thought, ‘if I appeal to her. Call out in my hour of need, as it were. I’m sure,’ I thought, ‘she’d be only too willing to help out,’ and I was right. My faith in humanity is restored.”

“Ha, ha,” said Buffy, “so what do you want.”

“I have a small, what you might call, political problem. Nothing I can’t handle, but any help would be appreciated.”

“A political problem,” said Buffy.

“Xin Chen,” said Catherine.

“If you mean the wog, then yes. Give the woman a banana, I’m glad to see you already appreciate the full complexity of the situation.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Giles. “You want us to help you get rid of this Chinese person, umm...”

“Xin Chen,” put in Catherine.

“Errr, yes, Xin Chen.”

“That’s right. He’s poaching on my territory. He’s organizing the vampires and I’m sure you don’t want that.”

“So what’s the deal,” asked Xander, “what do you want us to do?”

“I’m going to arrange a little meeting. The wog and me, to sort things out. We agree numbers. Now, I’m asking, friendly like, whether you would consider being part of my team?”

“Why?” asked Buffy.

Spike sighed, "Because the wog's lot are immune to stakes. But, from what I hear, you took one out. Without me you can't get close enough to take him and without you, I can't do anything even if I am close enough."

"Why should we help you?" persisted Buffy.

"You mean apart from the fact that this little lady comes with me if you refuse?" Spike gave Willow another shake. "No skin off my nose. If you won't help, I'll strike a genuine deal with him - then you'll have both of us to worry about. Your choice."

"You're bluffing," said Angel, "you don't have any followers left."

"All the more reason for me to make a deal with him. So no deal then," Spike pushed Willow's head to one side and snarled.

"Umm, Buffy?" said Willow.

"No wait!" said Buffy.

"Deal?" asked Spike.

"He's right you know," said Giles, "despicable as he is. I'd rather be fighting Spike than him and this Xin, ummm, chap."

"How do we know you're on the level?" asked Catherine.

"You don't," said Spike.

"Tell you what," suggested Catherine, "let us have the girl back, as a sign of good faith, and 24 hours to think about it. Then you can have your answer."

"And where do we meet for me to get this answer? I'm not so stupid I'm going to walk into some trap you've set up."

"Phone me," carefully Catherine put down the sword. Then opening her handbag, she scribbled something on a scrap of paper and cautiously approached Spike with her arms held wide. "This is my mobile number," she held it out.

Spike watched her closely for a second or two.

"All right then," he said. In one movement he pushed Willow at her and snatched the paper. By the time Willow and Catherine had picked themselves off the floor, he'd already gone.

"Well," said Catherine, brushing herself down, "local colour, I suppose."

"You could say that," said Angel with a slight smile.

"Yeah, local colour," said Buffy, "just a provincial vampire, nothing special."

"Are you OK?" Catherine asked Willow.

"I guess," said Willow. "That was pretty intense. Are you going to take the deal?"

Buffy noticed that Willow was asking Catherine, not her.

"No," said Buffy firmly, "we are not going to take the deal."

"Buffy, are you sure about this?" asked Giles.

“As far as I’m concerned, anything that makes Spike happy is out of the question. I’ve already made it clear I have some reservations about this whole situation. I say it’s clearly Spike’s problem, and Catherine’s too, if she chooses to make it so.”

“We can’t just, like, not do anything,” said Willow.

“Watch me. Look, Spike wouldn’t have come to us, unless he was really against this Xin person so, I say, let him deal with it. Catch him helping us in a similar situation.”

There was a short pause.

“But...” began Catherine.

“Look, I’m sure you’re a really nice person and you have good reasons for being here, but I have the world’s worst history assignment which has to be in by tomorrow. So if you’ll excuse me,” and Buffy walked out of the room.

“Wait,” said Catherine running after her.

“What?” asked Buffy.

“At least take this,” Catherine hurriedly scribbled a post it.

“What for?” asked Buffy, “you said they have to be written the spot.”

“I said they had to be tailored to the time and the vampire. That’ll work on Chen for, umm, probably the next 24 hours or so. ‘Soon’ is a fairly vague concept. You know you’re a target, at least take some defense.”

Reluctantly Buffy took the scrap of paper, then turned on her heel and left.

“You know,” said Catherine, “I don’t think Buffy likes me all that much.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” said Giles, “she gets rather worked up about History. She’s just worrying about her assignment. I’ll talk to her tomorrow evening. Hopefully she’ll have calmed down by then.”

“If you say so,” said Catherine dubiously.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Willow the next day. They were in a school corridor between classes. It was the first chance Willow had had to talk to Buffy alone. She sympathized with Buffy’s dislike of Catherine. She wasn’t all that keen on her herself, not because of Xander’s rather exaggerated pretense at admiration (he’d spent most of the morning extolling her virtues and harping on about how he could appreciate what Angel saw in her). Willow could have lived without seeing him make such a fool of himself in an attempt to drive a wedge between Buffy

and Angel, but it was hardly the first time. However she, too, felt that Catherine seemed to be representing a lot of dubious interests.

“Absolutely sure. If that Catherine person’s so convinced, then she can handle it. Giles and Angel can help her if they feel like it.”

“And you wouldn’t mind?”

“What’s to mind?”

“Well, she did go out with Angel. It was a long time ago but,” Willow shrugged, “you know.”

“I know what?” asked Buffy aggressively, stopping still and turning to face Willow, blocking her path, while the rest of the school flowed around them.

“Well, you know, you don’t know how he still might feel, or what might be going on.”

“Nothing happened between them right? You heard what she said. Angel wasn’t interested.”

“She said she kissed him.”

“Well, so have I, no big deal. If I was going to get worked up about someone who Angel kissed twenty years ago...”

“Oh,” said Willow, “so you’re not even a little bit jealous?”

Buffy lightened up, “OK, so maybe I’m a little bit jealous. But it’s not as if Angel and I are even dating properly.”

“I’d like to know what’s going on. I’d like to know what Angel thinks is going on.”

“Have you ever tried finding out what Angel thinks?”

Willow shook her head, “but then, I’m not the person who’s not dating Angel.”

Buffy made a face.

“Why don’t you go round to Angel’s place, after school,” suggested Willow, “and ask him?”

“Ask him what?”

“Well, about Catherine, you don’t have to say you want to know what they’re up to, just can you trust her. Ask his advice about this Chen business, you know,” Willow shrugged.

“OK, maybe I’ll drop round.”

“Can’t hurt,” said Willow as they went into class. She hoped Buffy hadn’t noticed that, behind her back, her fingers were crossed.

Catherine had never been all that good at subtlety. The complexities of human behaviour tended to pass her by. On the whole she figured that if she needed to know, someone would tell her. However, Buffy clearly had a problem, and Giles was obviously even less tuned in to the sixteen year-old brain than she was. She needed Buffy's help. She very much doubted she could take Chen alone, certainly not now he'd started to build a power base. Racking her brains to work out what the problem might be, one nasty thought had sprung to mind, based on her own past. The more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed, particularly when she thought about some of the questions the teenagers had asked her. She rather rapidly convinced herself that her suspicions were correct and shortly afterwards had decided who was to blame. Worked up into what she considered a righteous fury, she went to confront the culprit.

"You're involved with Buffy, aren't you?" she challenged when Angel opened the door.

An expression crossed his face which she remembered from years back. At the time it had made her heart melt at the tragedy of the whole thing. Twenty years later it merely irritated her. She pushed past him into a gloomy, sparsely furnished room. Heavy blinds covered small windows. She could picture him here, enjoying his depression.

"Idiot," she almost shouted, "you short-sighted, stupid, selfish, idiot," she spluttered searching for more effective insults.

"Are we arguing again?" he asked.

"Yes, we are arguing again. We are arguing because your emotional incompetence is complicating that young girl's life unnecessarily and making my job more difficult to boot."

"Who are you calling an emotional incompetent? I wasn't the one who ran away, as I recall."

"I was sixteen, Angel. Daddy was going home, were you seriously expecting me to stay in Boston with you? You could have come with us, you know."

"To England?" there was an edge of anger in his voice.

"Yes, to England. What's the problem, you're prepared to kiss an English girl but not return to her country?"

Angel turned away. There was a sudden silence. Catherine waited for his reply, determined to make him answer her. A clock was ticking somewhere and she counted it five times before he answered.

"This is different," he said.

“This is not different! That is the weakest excuse in the book. You’re just a serial cradle-snatcher, you realize that? I was lucky, my life went on, but you could seriously ruin Buffy’s life, get her killed even.”

“You think I don’t know that.”

“You didn’t show much sign of knowing it 20 years ago.”

“Can we just, for a moment, get off the subject of your apparently broken heart and talk about Buffy!” demanded Angel angrily.

The sudden change of tack threw her, “My broken heart!”

“Yes, this is all about you, isn’t it? That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? You knew Sunnydale was a Hellmouth and so I’d probably be here. You didn’t need to come. You could have contacted Giles. You would’ve known how.”

Catherine was stunned, he was turning the conversation against her, trying to put her into the wrong, “I don’t believe the arrogance of you. You assume that I’m still pining after you after all this time!”

“Look me in the eye and tell me that this conversation isn’t all about the fact that I’ve got over you, just as easily as you claim you got over me!”

“This conversation is about the fact that you’ve apparently learnt nothing since then.”

“You think that do you. You don’t think I don’t worry about it all the time. You think I don’t know where this will probably all lead?”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“I’m trying not to. But I can’t just up and leave. Leave her to cope alone with everything my kind may throw at her. I have to try and protect her. I’ve been trying to do most of it through Giles, but it’s not as easy to keep out of her way as I thought.”

“Especially, when she’d prepared to show a bit of leg and collapse into your arms with a sigh at the first opportunity.”

“Don’t assume she’s like you. She’s old for her years.”

Catherine ignored the insult, “Not judging by the way she was behaving last night.”

“Oh, and you wouldn’t have started a huge slanging match in her position? I thought she was pretty cool about it!”

“Cool! what kind of a word is cool.”

“Do try and keep to the point and not follow Daddy’s slavish interest in the English language.”

Catherine felt that the argument had somehow got out of her control. It was supposed to be about his behaviour not hers and suddenly she was feeling on the defensive, obscurely she felt as though she was being compared to Buffy and

found wanting, “What exactly is the point?” she said, more irritably than angrily, thrown off her stride, playing for time to rebuild her anger and focus back on its cause.

“Buffy’s handling it all pretty well. Better than you, as far as I can see.”

“She may be, that doesn’t put you in the right.”

“I’m not sure I’m in the right. But I’m not going to run away from this one. I’ll do things differently this time.”

Catherine stopped, she had lost the momentum of her anger, “I wish I believed that. I wish I could believe you’ve thought hard about what happened between us. I wish I could believe that this time you knew what you were doing. Especially when she’s the Slayer of all people.”

“I wish I could too, but it can’t be helped.”

“You just muddle through, eh?”

“I just muddle through.”

There was a silence. Catherine’s rage had burnt itself out, but she still wasn’t happy. Worse, she was no closer to enlisting Buffy’s help. “What are you going to do about it?” she asked at last.

“Do?”

“You’ve got to talk to her about you and me. I may not be a psychologist, but even I can tell that she’s upset. Pretending everything is business as usual isn’t going to help.”

“I suppose not. I’m just not very good at...”

“Personal stuff? yes, I know. Neither of us are. I guess that was half the problem. If I’m upset I just shout at people, and if you’re upset you go hide in a corner and pretend nothing is happening.”

“That’s not true.”

Catherine raised her hands in a gesture of surrender, “Let’s not argue about it. Talk to her, OK. If possible, talk to her before this Spike person phones and try and get her on side. We, I could use her help.”

Gradually it got dark, the shadows lengthening until they owned the alleyways and streets of Sunnydale. Across the town the undesirables were gathering on street corners, in warehouses and bars. The word had gone out, things were afoot. Tonight was the night. Even the mortal population felt it. People hurried home more quickly than usual, the atmosphere of suppressed violence frightening them

from the streets. By tomorrow there would be a hierarchy of vampires in Sunnydale or there would be Spike and his form of controlled anarchy.

Catherine met Spike under a disused railway arch some way out of town.

“You brought me a long way,” she said.

“I wanted to make sure you couldn’t engineer a set up.”

He was flanked by five others, she noticed. Five, not many against the dozens Chen must have.

“Where are Buffy and Angel?” asked Spike.

“Waiting a call from me,” she lied, “no point all of us walking into a trap.”

“Do you know how to get rid of Chen,” he asked.

“Yes, but I won’t tell you until we’re there. Let’s call it an insurance policy.”

“If you’re going to call Buffy and Angel I suggest you do it now then,” he said, “I’m meeting Chen for negotiation in the container lot to the west of town in 15 minutes.”

“15 minutes, you’re not leaving much time.”

“So phone them.”

Catherine switched on her phone and dialed Angel’s number. He sounded tense when he answered. Things were, presumably, not going well with Buffy. Hurriedly she relayed the details of the meeting, conscious that Spike was listening. Thankfully, Angel didn’t start trying to explain whether or not Buffy would be coming.

“They’ll be there,” she said.

“Guess what?” said Spike.

“What?” Catherine was always uneasy in situations like these but that unease suddenly deepened into a very deep foreboding. She thumbed redial.

“Change of plan,” said Spike and he hit her.

Twenty years earlier Catherine would have dodged that blow. But twenty years earlier she had been quicker and more supple. The mobile phone beeped as someone picked up the call. Spike ground it underfoot.

Act 4

Angel wasn’t at all confident about talking to Buffy. He waited for dark, sitting alone in his bare room, not sure whether he was waiting with impatience or reluctance. In three hours he hardly moved, pondering what he was going to say and also pondering his own feelings and actions. In the event he didn’t have to go and find her. Buffy was knocking at his door in the later afternoon, before it was

dark enough for him to venture forth. She looked angry, he thought, although he wasn't sure. However, when she spoke, she sounded unconcerned.

"Hiya! I thought I'd just drop round."

"Hello," he said, aware that Buffy had never "just dropped round" before. There was a pause.

"Well, are you going to invite me in? I may not be a vampire but I don't really fancy forcing my way past you."

"Oh, yes," he stood back and let her in. She spotted a note Catherine had left with her mobile number on it almost immediately and walked across, picking it up and fiddling with the small piece of paper.

"Catherine's number," she said in a strange tone of voice, somewhere between a statement and a question.

"Yes, she dropped by earlier."

"I see."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about Catherine," he began and then stopped.

"It's probably about time. You dated her right?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of yes, or sort of no?"

"Sort of yes, it was a long time ago."

"But then you're an old guy, as you never miss the opportunity to point out to me. Will you get back together?"

"It's not like that."

"Then what is it like?"

"It's over, it was over twenty years ago. It wasn't anything, not really. It wasn't like..."

"Like what?"

"Nothing," he mumbled, uncomfortably aware that he'd been through this once today already and the assertion hadn't gone down well then, however true it might have been.

"It wasn't like you and me?" she asked, he could hear the sarcasm in her voice. "I bet you say that to all the girl's," she added bitterly.

"No, honestly, apart from Catherine you're the only one. I just, it was just, I don't know. It's complicated."

"Yes, life is complicated, tell me about it," she looked painfully unhappy. "How come you were happy to date her and you're not happy to date me?"

"It's not like that."

"Oh, you view me just as a friend, right?"

Angel hesitated over what to say. He wanted to say that his feelings for her were so totally different from what he had felt for Catherine that, looking back on it, he couldn't understand how he had let himself believe there was anything there. But he didn't know how to say it in a way Buffy would believe and he wasn't even sure if it would be right to say such a thing, to burden her with it. He fell back on awkward denials, "No, I mean. It was a mistake. I shouldn't have dated her."

"So why did you?"

He shrugged, "I made a mistake. She was... I mean I didn't... I mean when a girl..."

"When a girl throws herself at a man, what's he supposed to do about it? It's not his fault. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"No!"

"So what are you trying to say?"

"I made a mistake. I was lonely and for a while I didn't listen to my better judgment."

Buffy sighed to herself. She didn't really know what to say to this. It wasn't really unexpected, but it didn't seem to take things forward any. She still didn't really know how he felt about her nor did she seem any closer to finding out.

In the silence, the phone rang. Cautiously Angel picked it up glancing at Buffy as if asking her permission, "Hello?"

Buffy watched as Angel listened to someone at the other end reeling off instructions. Catherine, she guessed, not only because of the faintly English tone of the voice, as far as she could decipher it, but also because it was clearly someone who had no second thoughts about bossing Angel around. Angel put down the phone, "that was Catherine. We're to meet her and Spike in that container lot to the west."

"So now we go and do what she asks?" Buffy was still not at all sure she wanted any part of whatever Catherine was up to. Some of it was to do with her relationship with Angel, but some was because of that constricting feeling she had when forced to act simply because she was the Slayer.

The phone rang again, Angel picked it up.

"No one there," he said in surprise.

"So, it was a wrong number."

Angel looked at her with a worried expression.

"Why not check the number," asked Buffy. Seeing his bemused look she took the phone from him and read off the number, "another of your ex-girlfriends?" she asked archly.

“That’s Catherine number,” he said. Buffy pressed the buttons to return the call.

“Mailbox,” she said. “She must have switched it off. I guess she pressed redial by mistake just beforehand.”

“And if she didn’t?” asked Angel.

Buffy made a face. Right now the last thing she wanted to do was go along with Catherine’s plans. On the other hand, she couldn’t actually stand by and let her be killed by Spike, or worse.

“I guess we better check out this container lot,” she said. Obscurely she felt happier. Perhaps rescuing Catherine was a much simpler objective than the web of politics that surrounded Chen. Perhaps it was simply the possibility that Catherine had got something wrong that cheered her. “It’s our best chance to rescue Catherine, if she is in trouble. With a bit of luck they won’t know I’ve got this,” she produced the note Catherine had given her for getting rid of Chen, “which should at least give us an edge.” She tucked it into the back pocket of her jeans, picked up her bag and grinned. “Let’s go slay,” she said.

When Catherine came to, she was bound and there was a bag over her head. She judged that she was in the back of a car. Patiently she waited until she felt the it stop. Spike spoke, “better tell me how to get rid of the wog, there’s not much time left.”

“Go to hell,” she said.

“I’m still on your side, you know. Well, my side anyway. We’re just doing things the more interesting way.”

“You’ll have to untie me.”

“Wrong answer. Lots of vampires watching. If I untie you then it’ll give the game right away.”

“I guess you’ll just have to hope Buffy turns up then,” this was not exactly the witty and biting response Catherine would like to have given, but it was better than nothing.

“Buffy can get rid of him?”

“Buffy has something that might take him out if stuck to his head. Then again it might not,” Catherine almost immediately regretted this, nerves had made her over chatty. She had told him too much. It suggested she might be expendable.

“But only him,” she added, trying to rectify the mistake, “it won’t take out any of his followers and only I know how to make more.”

“Time’s up,” said Spike.

She heard the whir of a window descending.

“Why hello Spike,” said a voice. It was a man’s voice with what Catherine believed to be a Southern drawl, that made her think of big, ponderous, slow farmers. Big, ponderous, slow, murderous and racist, she reminded herself, and wondered briefly what the American south was really like. “Finally admitted you’re beat,” there was an undercurrent of gloating pleasure in the voice.

“Hi, Nathaniel, as you can see, I’ve humbly recognised a superior and come to join the fold. I’ve even brought a small offering.”

The southern man laughed, a slow “Ha, ha,” that was almost spoken. “You know Spike. I never thought I would see you kow tow. I’m looking forward to having you under me.”

“I bet you are,” said Spike, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

Catherine heard the side door open. She was lifted out, carried some distance and tied to a chair. Then the bag was removed. Standing before her was a large black man, Nathaniel, presumably. So much for the burning crosses idea. Catherine shook her head at her own prejudice. Above her was the night sky, but she was surrounded by the gloomy forms of stacked containers. One, to her right, had been opened. In the entrance sat Xin Chen in a large chair, like a throne. He looked like he’d been old when he was sired. There were deep weathered wrinkles on his face and the skin in his cheeks sagged. His hair though, belied this, being thick and jet black. It hung loose and long over his shoulders. In the darkness his eyes were black pits with no sign of white. His finger nails were as long as small knives and Catherine had no doubt they were as deadly. The obvious fear and reverence shown by the vampires around suggested that there was a great deal of raw power in that small wizened form. She knew very little about him, but this was clearly no small time, weak renegade. This was one of the elders of the Chinese tribes. She had not been warned and had not expected him to be this powerful. She was afraid.

Behind him were the dim forms of more furniture and more people. Spike stood before him, a respectable distance away. Nathaniel moved back to stand by Chen, a bodyguard.

“And this is the sign of your good faith?” asked Chen. His head turned slowly to regard her. His dark eyes looked into hers and she almost felt the tendrils of his intelligence probing into her brain. She focused on her fear, hoping the rising sense of panic would block out the knowledge that she could kill him.

“This is part one,” said Spike, “part two should be arriving soon.”

The gaze switched away. Catherine drew short sharp breaths, the fear still with her, clawing at her mind.

“And what is part two?”

“The Slayer, what else?” Spike grinned.

“You have captured the Slayer?”

“She is on her way, as we speak. She shouldn’t be expecting trouble though, so a well thought out ambush would be sufficient.”

Chen nodded and spoke a few quiet words to Nathaniel. Nathaniel left his side briefly and began issuing orders. Catherine saw several vampires slip away into the darkness between the containers.

Cautiously, Buffy and Angel entered the lot. There was no one to be seen, but it was a large place. They began to thread their way between the large containers. Angel heard the sound of feet running on metal. He glanced up but could see no one. There was the sound of more running and this time he saw a shadow of a man briefly skylined against the stars.

“They’re up on the containers,” he said.

“Tell me about it,” said Buffy.

They proceeded in. Buffy removed two stakes from her bag and handed him one. They had walked maybe hundred yards further when two vampires jumped down, one in front and one behind them. Buffy had staked the first almost before she landed. She ignored it and grabbed for Buffy. Apparently expecting the move Buffy danced to one side and delivered two quick kicks to the vampire’s knees, knocking her legs from under her. She ran up the passageway. Angel moved to follow, but someone grabbed him from behind. Buffy was fighting two more vampires up ahead. One had a hold on her, but she was kicking out at the other keeping them back.

Angel saw no more, the adrenaline, or whatever it was fueled him in combat, pumped round his system like blood. He could feel the violence rising within him. He snarled, turning to face his opponent, knowing that his true face must have appeared at the promise of blood. The vampires before him hesitated and he leapt at them. He didn’t think to use the stake, assuming, if he thought at all, that they would all be immune. He succumbed to the instinct to bite and tear. He felt hair in his hands and realised he was dragging a woman, long blonde locks wrapped

again and again around his fist. She was screaming, fear in her voice, while he used her as a shield, thrusting her between himself and the others. She struggled in his grip, but he was older and stronger than she. He shifted his grip to her neck before she decided that her hair was expendable and let him tear it out so she could escape. Someone else was clubbing at him from behind with a baseball bat. He tried to swing round, to bring his shield up between them, but a blow hit the back of his head and made him stagger. In that moment the woman dragged herself free and he felt hands clutch him and drag him down. He struggled for balance, but the second of disorientation had undone him. The woman threw herself back at him, leaping at his chest, knocking him backwards, fatally unbalancing him so that the hands could drag him to the ground. She sat on his chest, screaming and pummeling his face with her fists while the others, holding his arms and legs prevented him from movement or escape. Then someone prised the stake he had been holding from his hand and passed it to her. Her eyes widened and an unpleasant smile gradually appeared on her face. She placed the stake carefully over his heart and then drew it back to plunge in.

Act 5

Buffy managed to kick the man before her in the head, knocking him over backwards. A woman was holding Buffy from behind too far off the ground for Buffy to get a purchase and throw her. Instead Buffy curled up her legs and kicked backwards. The woman yelped in surprise and dropped her. She turned to see how Angel was doing. He was pinned to the ground by four vampires. A woman sat astride his chest, long tangled blonde hair hanging down her back. One hand was raised high holding a stake, preparing to plunge it into his heart. Angel was struggling, his head, the only thing not pinned to the ground, thrashing from side to side. He caught Buffy's eye and she saw in it both relief and silent entreaty. She couldn't reach him in time, she knew.

"Alright, stop!" shouted Buffy. "We surrender." The woman hesitated and looked at one of the men holding Angel down. There was a pause, then he got up and looked thoughtfully between Buffy and the still prone Angel.

"OK," he said, "you," he indicated the woman who had been holding Buffy, "take her."

Rather gingerly the woman took hold of her, then with more confidence placed her in an arm lock. At a sign from the man, the four holding Angel dragged him to his feet.

“We’ll hang on to your boyfriend,” said the leader, “any false moves and Maria, here, will be more than happy to stake the bastard. Do I make myself clear?”

Buffy nodded, the blonde woman stood behind Angel, clutching the stake, its tip pointed into his back. She looked wild eyed, frightened and angry.

“What’s your story?” asked the man, turning to Angel. “She’s the Slayer you know.”

Angel smiled, but said nothing.

Giles and Willow stared dubiously at the ladder Xander was holding.

“Honestly,” he whispered, “we’ll be much less conspicuous if we travel over the containers.”

“But if Buffy needs help we’ll be 12 feet too high,” whispered back Willow.

“We’ll take the ladder with us, that way we can get down if necessary.”

Willow looked at Giles for support.

“Umm... he’s probably right,” said Giles, “they may have patrols on the ground.”

“Right!” said Xander and began to climb.

They were led to the central clearing where Chen sat in state, surrounded by what Buffy guessed were a mixture of vampires of his own making and the local home grown variety who had flocked to his banner. Buffy felt a frisson of fear in his presence, the tingling sensation she so often felt in the presence of vampires coupled with a sudden restriction in her chest. He didn’t look so impressive, she thought, apart from the freaky eyes, perhaps he had some ‘be afraid of me’ magic. Spike was standing near Chen, Catherine’s sword resting over one shoulder. Catherine, herself was tied to a chair before him. She didn’t look too good. She was pale and there was a smudge of blood on her forehead. She was conscious though, and looked up as they approached.

“11” she said.

Buffy wondered if maybe she was concussed. Perhaps she was trying to tell them how many vampires there were, but there were easily more than eleven. She

looked at Angel. He looked back but gave no hint of his thoughts, not even a smile of recognition. Then he turned away looking at Spike and Buffy could see that he smiled. He had stepped forward taking his captors with him.

“Spike,” he said.

Spike looked momentarily confused then his expression changed to one Buffy could only describe as amused cunning. He moved to meet Angel, his arms wide. Confused, the vampires holding Angel let go of him and the two embraced. Buffy could see Spike’s lips moving by Angel’s ear.

“Now wait a minute,” began the leader of the group who had captured them.

“Angelus is on our side,” said Spike, “I set him to watch the girl.”

“You were keeping a bit quiet about it weren’t you?” said the leader suspiciously.

“I thought she still might run,” said Angel. “Let’s face it, you wouldn’t have captured her in the first place if she hadn’t believed you were about to kill me.”

The man shook his head, but clearly had no answer.

“You’ve brought her?” asked Chen. Buffy saw Angel tense as Chen looked at him. His eyes widened and a small muscle began to beat in his neck.

Spike gestured to Buffy, stepping between Angel and Chen at the same time, “Here she is,” he said, “pretty as a pumpkin and twice as tasty. What are you going to do? Kill her or turn her?” He moved back towards her, pulling her head back. His face morphed into the true visage of his kind. Buffy’s blood ran cold, just how far did she trust Angel? She could probably free herself from the arm lock and Spike only held her hair, for the moment. ‘Cordelia will have a field day,’ she thought to herself, imagining turning up to school the next day with half her hair torn out. Beyond Spike, there was a snarl.

“She’s mine!” said Angel. Spike was roughly pushed aside and now Angel’s distorted visage filled her view.

“Mind my hair!” she said, a little crossly, “I’d rather not be dead *and* look like a crow’s nest.”

Angel’s face bent down towards hers. If he’d been human she would have felt his breath on her cheek. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her and the next she felt a flutter of fear that he might actually bite. One hand slipped round her waist and into her back pocket. “We should do this more often,” she murmured quietly. Angel glanced up at that and she could have sworn he smiled, but later she wasn’t so sure.

Angel straightened and began to move away towards Chen, but Spike stepped between them. “She’s a tasty morsel, my friend, but I think our new ally gets first choice.” Something changed hands.

“Is the gift acceptable?” asked Spike, stepping towards Chen himself.

“Indeed,” the elderly vampire nodded, “you have shown your worth. If you wish to join my special guard there is a place for you.”

Spike grinned taking another step towards Chen. One of the two vampires flanking the Chinese emperor, a large black man, took a step towards Spike in a protective fashion.

“I imagine,” said Spike, “we’re talking a lowly position in the special guard,” he took a step forwards again, causing the Black man to square up to him, “under Nathaniel here. And I’ve never liked being at the bottom of the heap.” He took another swift step forward swinging Catherine’s sword at the same time, staking Nathaniel before he had time to react.

Spike brushed off the dust as he walked forward “and let’s face it, Nat was a prat.” Chen rose. His face registered little emotion, but nearly every vampire in the place, with the exception of Spike, fell back a step. Angel glanced round at Buffy and she was startled to see real fear in his eyes. Catherine whimpered. Buffy felt the clutching sensation at her heart again. She realised her breathing was coming in short gasps. The woman holding her let her grip go slack. As unobtrusively as possible Buffy let her arm drop slipping it from the woman’s hand, but she resisted the almost overwhelming temptation to flee. Everyone apart from Spike and herself seemed paralysed, hanging onto Chen’s next words.

“Such crude techniques will not be effective against me.” Every syllable dripped with venom. Spike stepped right up to him, “I rather gathered that,” he said and stuck a post it note to Chen’s forehead. Chen fell back as if he’d suddenly been transformed into the waxwork he had initially pretended to be. Spike stepped over him. Buffy, possibly the only person in the place who’d been watching Spike and not Chen, saw him unclench his left hand and saw dark stains on his nails. Even Spike, it seemed, had not been as cool in Chen’s presence as he was making out.

“Well,” said Spike, “that sorts that out. Now,” he addressed the assembled vampires, “I hope I won’t have to worry about any foolish attempts against my life from the rest of you. Harry,” he added. Buffy had failed to notice a lithe, dark haired vampire, who had sidled up to Angel. At Spike’s word Harry grabbed at him. But Angel must have been prepared. One hand was already in the inside pocket of his jacket and as Harry grabbed him, Angel turned and plunged in the concealed stake. He then charged at Spike.

Taking her cue from Angel, Buffy swung round to punch the woman behind her so she staggered back, this one was immune to stakes Buffy remembered, cursing inwardly, as she drove the vampire back with a flurry of punches. She sensed people rushing down on her from behind. Praying this would be the ‘right’

sort of vampire she bent over and pulled out the two stakes she'd had hidden in her boots. She didn't even bother to look but drove both backwards simultaneously. She felt a weight on each and then nothing. There were days when she could tell the location of vampires with her eyes closed.

She risked a glance at the rest of the scene. Angel and Spike were struggling over Catherine's sword. Catherine had stood up as best she could, still tied to the chair, and was moving out of the way, with luck she'd find somewhere inconspicuous to hide.

"Well help me you fools!" shouted Spike. Several of the vampires began to close in, the woman, Maria, at their head.

There was a clatter at her feet. She looked down to see a stake with a Sunnysdale High branded post-it note attached. On it were scrawled several Chinese characters.

"The one in front of you," shouted Giles from somewhere, "but do it quickly, it'll only last a minute or two. I think."

Buffy thumped the woman before her again. Almost without thinking, she picked up the note in the brief time while the woman reeled and stuck it in place. The vampire paused a dazed expression on her face. Buffy hesitated, waiting for the woman to fall over.

Instead her eyes suddenly cleared and she sprang at Buffy again. "Oh dear," she Giles say. Buffy backed away until she felt the wall of a container behind her. At least this way she didn't have to watch her back.

"Aha! I see," Giles was right above her, she realised, juggling a torch, pen, note pad and Chinese dictionary. "Try this," he handed another down. Once again Buffy stuck it to the woman's forehead and was relieved to see her topple over. A ladder was lowered and Xander scrambled down it followed by Willow and Giles. Buffy surveyed the scene. Most of the attention was focused on where Spike and Angel were struggling.

"Willow, Xander, free Catherine," she said.

"OK," Willow's eyes were wide with alarm. But Catherine had not yet been attacked by any vampires, clearly regarded as no threat. Once free, Willow and Xander would be as safe with her as anywhere else.

"Giles, I hope you have these notes sorted."

"Well, umm., almost, it's more complicated than it seems."

Buffy could no longer see Angel just a scrum of people. She hoped he was still alive under there.

"Follow me," she said and ran at them.

Several she simply picked off and flung to one side. If she saw an opening she staked, about half the time this worked. Giles stayed at her shoulder, handing her more stakes and occasionally post it notes. She quickly found Angel. He was grappling Spike who was still holding Catherine's sword, but in the confusion he had no room to swing it. About three other vampires were hanging onto Angel's back and arms trying to pull him off Spike. One of these was Maria, still clutching a stake, but unable to use it because of the man on Angel's back, although she had clearly tried, Buffy could see the holes in Angel's jacket where Maria must have thrust it in. The rest of the vampires were rather uselessly pressed around the fight, trying to help by swinging blows, but too far from Angel to land anything but the feeblest punches.

"One for her," Buffy said to Giles, nodding towards Maria. He started scribbling.

Buffy staked the vampire on Angel's back and was pleased to see it dissolve. Maria and the other on his arms were immune, but Maria let go of Angel and turned to face her.

Giles was muttering by her ear "... about six foot, so tall, umm... let's see blonde, quite shapely I suppose..."

"Get on with it Giles," she hissed, kicking at Maria to keep her away from Angel.

Giles handed her a note. Maria went down. Giles was already scribbling another. Buffy eyed the field. There were about five vampires left here, not counting Spike and the other one fighting Angel. Beyond the scrum she could see Willow and Xander rushing around with red string. Catherine was marching towards her, a stake tucked under one arm, pen and paper in her hands. Buffy couldn't see anyone else, presumably they had fled or Catherine, Willow and Xander had disposed of them.

Spike had obviously taken all this in as well. As Buffy stuck a note to the last vampire grappling Angel, Spike dropped Catherine's sword. Angel let go of Spike to grab for it. Spike rapidly stepped backwards winked once at Buffy as he caught her eye and then fled.

It was all over pretty quickly after that. With both Giles and Catherine writing notes, three of the last five fell in the next minute. The remaining two tried to flee. Angel grabbed one with a flying tackle whilst Xander tripped up the other, kicking a crate into her path. Buffy, pursuing, sat on her until Giles arrived.

"I need a strong drink," said Catherine. Buffy, looking at her properly for the first time that evening, saw that her whole body was shaking.

"You're in shock," said Giles, "what happened? Did anyone hit you? Were

you knocked out?"

"Yes, Spike," she said. There was a distinct tremor in her voice. "I think I'm going to throw up."

"We're taking you to hospital," said Giles firmly. "We can do a post mortem and compare notes in the morning, but you should be checked for concussion. At any rate, you should be somewhere warm."

Amazed, Buffy watched as Catherine meekly let Giles take her back to his car.

The next morning they met up in the Library, those who could make it through the autumn sunshine, that is. Catherine had bought a new mobile phone on the way over and was attempting to access any messages left on her old one. She looked much better. She was certainly back to her old bossy self. She planned to stay in Sunnydale a few more days and mop up the remains of any of Chen's followers.

"Where did you all come from last night?" she asked, eyeing Giles, Xander and Willow.

"I thought it best to change the plan," said Buffy, grinning. "If it was a trap then someone was going to have to spring it, but that didn't mean everyone had to get caught. It also seemed a good idea to have a few extra stakes concealed about our persons."

Catherine made a gesture, a sort of sketchy salute, and there was a glint of approval in her eye.

"What was that 11 stuff about?" Buffy wanted to know.

"I got the idea when I was young from a girl called Sam. If you often work with someone, you can work out a secret code for situations like that. So Angel and I worked one out, although we didn't actually get to use it much."

"So what's an 11?"

"Pretend you're one of them and get the secret weapon from me."

"But he took the post-it from me," said Buffy.

"Just as well really, since I wasn't carrying any."

"And Angel just worked that out?"

Catherine smiled, "He was always bright that way." She turned back to her messages.

"So, you and Angel?" began Xander, "have you finally umm... consummated your relationship?"

"Mmm?" Catherine was listening intently to her phone.

“I’m sure they have,” said Willow sarcastically, sotto voce, “probably while she was throwing up all over the hospital porter last night.”

Xander had the good grace to look a little ashamed of himself. Catherine, switched off her phone and was looked around in an agitated fashion.

“Is anything the matter?” asked Willow.

“Yes, umm, Roy, that’s my youngest,” Catherine looked distracted and paused for a moment waving one hand, “umm, he’s six,” she said unnecessarily. “He’s broken his leg,”

“Youngest?” asked Xander.

“I’d probably be getting back,” Catherine began digging through the bag, “does anyone have a phone number of a travel agent. I need tickets as soon as possible. I’d be happier if I was there. Bob, that’s my husband, said Roy’s OK, but...”

“Husband?” asked Xander.

“Yes,” said Willow firmly, “Catherine’s husband just rang to say that their youngest son has broken his leg.”

Buffy was smiling broadly, “Exactly, and now she wants to go home. It’s OK, Giles has pretty much worked out the prayers and...”

“Well, I could use a bit more time to study...” Giles began to protest. Willow hastily trod on his foot and he shut up with a yelp, giving her a sharp look. Willow smiled back sweetly.

“I’ll get rid of the last of those vampires,” Buffy finished.

“Thanks,” Catherine nodded vaguely, hardly seeming to have noticed what was going on. She was already packing things into her handbag. “I’ll get back to my hotel and try and book a plane.”

She headed out, “thanks for all the help and rescuing me and stuff. You saved my life you know,” she paused awkwardly by the library door. “So thanks. Give Angel my love.” And she was gone.

“No problem,” said Buffy.