



Fic: *Watcher's Keeper*

Writer: [WickedFox](#)

Rating: NC-17

Notes: Takes place four years after the events of *Chosen*.

Instructions: In the same vein as my fic, [The Watcher That Never Was](#), this story is better with background music. It is meant as a popcorn movie style drama with moments of action and romance. So crank up your best tunes, including those tender rock ballads and sit back and enjoy the shallow fun. And yes, this borrows heavily from a very popular film of the early 90's but with a very Whedonesque twist.

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### Part 1: Unexpected

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Untold dead, dozens injured, a building decimated and all in the name of intolerance. Giles stood amidst the charcoaled rubble, in utter shock of the destruction and loss he'd witness with the explosion. Friends, colleagues, years of laboring to end hostilities between warring demon races, all vanished within the blink of an eye.

He could hear the pounding of hurried boots and the sound of sirens rushing away from the scene as the law enforcement and firefighters rushed to secure the area. A fog of ash hung low in the night sky as the splattering of water from the hoses rained down upon soiled and

disoriented faces. Surrounded by the orderly chaos, Giles was dazed, uncertain what he could do to help except stand clear and watch powerlessly as the professionals worked to save what lives they could.

"Sir... are you injured?" A voice called from beyond the tendrils of smoke dancing around him. "Sir, can you move?"

"I'm... I'm fine. I think someone may still be inside." He motioned toward skeletal remains of once popular Irish pub, pointing toward the far corner where the restrooms once stood. "Near the back, I thought I heard someone."

"All survivors have been extracted."

"But the family of..."

"The survivors have been sent on to Saint Mercies, sir. Are you in need of medical attention?" The young man's sharp tone made it all too clear what he'd meant. No one else survived. The paramedic moved closer, adjusting his medical bag in his grip. Getting a closer look at the distressed victim, his eyes grew wide with concern. "You're injured, sir. Deep laceration, could be a concussion."

Puzzled by the diagnosis, Giles lifted his trembling hand to his brow. The clumsy poke stung and only then did he realize what the warm stickiness was that hindered his vision. He inspected the thick crimson coating his fingertips and shook his head, annoyed, returning his attention to the devastated building. "It's nothing."

The determined medic took Giles' arm and began to lead him away. "At least let me get a better look and clean the wound..."

"No, I can't." He tugged his arm free from the young medic's insistent grip. "I must remain until the Council arrives."

"Sir, there is an ambulance right behind you. If you would just step aside..."

"I'm fine. It's nothing. I deny treatment. I'll sign whatever waivers are necessary, just leave me be..."

"Rupert, please. Listen to the young man and have yourself checked out."

Giles swiveled around a bit too fast and felt his head swim with sickness. The attentive medic caught him by the arm and steadied him. It took a few seconds but Giles felt his equilibrium return as he glanced over at the shorter man gently urging him to submit to medical attention. The heavysset figure moved forward, strolling out from the smoke to reveal the kindly, rounded features of his longtime friend and mentor. He flashed a pleased smile at Giles as he adjusted his black Stetson atop his bald head.

"Roman, about time you showed. It's been over twenty minutes..."

"Forty actually," Roman corrected, dusting the ash from his well tailored suit. He gave the young paramedic an instructive nod. "Make sure you check for signs of shock. Concussions as well, Rupert's had much more than his fair share of head wounds."

"I'm sorry sir, but I must insist on examining that cut." He cautiously maneuvered Giles to the nearest ambulance and settled him against the bumper. Roman followed along, stepping carefully to avoid the waste and debris blocking his path. He moved with a grace uncharacteristic of what was to be expected from such a stout, older gentleman. But then again, Roman never was exactly what people expected.

"There's more alive back here!" Someone called from within the ruins and a group of firefighters rushed by, drawing the young medic's attention away. Giles could see his indecision and decided it best to encourage him to help his colleagues.

"I've many years of practice at this. I can treat myself. Go help them."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him for you, until you can return." Roman offered a confident wink and the paramedic tossed some supply bags over his shoulders and rushed off to help.

Once free from civilian company, Giles' eyes locked on his friend. "What happened? DemRev? Humantius?" He ripped open the packaging to a gauze sponge and dabbed at his wound, tossing the quickly blood-soaked rag aside as he continued on. "Was it Grey Faction? They're suspected to be behind the car bombing in Deli last month." He searched the contents of a medical kit and removed some more gauze pads, adhesive paper tape and wound cleanser.

"We aren't sure. Intelligence is rather sketchy at the moment." Roman shifted closer to aid in bandaging the wound. Giles accepted his assistance, handing off supplies and listening attentively. "Political juggling is getting ruthless these days. We've got our agents scouring the streets but can hardly get a peep out of our sources. It's drying up and running scared out there. Only one thing is certain..." Roman's face was taut with a stony seriousness as his eyes met Giles', "...someone wants you dead, Rupert, and they are willing to kill others in order to accomplish that task."

Giles gaze fell back to the twisted wreckage of the pub. "There were innocent's in there, Roman, good people."

Roman finished his bandaging and stepped back, giving Giles adequate space to check the dressing. "You understand these attacks have only recently become an issue. With your increase in meetings, you make yourself an easy target. It's as if they know your agenda, your movements."

Giles could see where his friend's train of thought was leading and wanted to stop the notion in his tracks. "We were connecting. I was making progress."

"I know, and so did those who did this. You're good at what you do."

"What I do... what I did... it cost these people their lives, tonight."

"Nearly cost you your own. I feel it's time we took some precautionary measures."

"Why do I not like the sound of that?"

"Just for the time being, until things settle..."

"What Roman? Stop dodging the subject..."

"A paid sabbatical, just until..."

"No! No Roman. I've come much too far to back down now. We are on the verge of peace between two warring sects. These two cultures have been caught within a cyclical conflict for centuries and are finally coming together in a civilized setting to work out their differences. This is a critical time. I must attend the summit meeting next Sunday."

"Rupert, it's grown much too dangerous..."

"I will not run and hide!"

Roman stroked the short wiry hairs of his peppered beard and with a tug, loosened his stiff collar in preparation for his own battle of wills getting his old friend to listen to reason. "It's not hiding. It's simply a sabbatical."

Giles would have none of it and marched away only to stop perplexed at the curb, noticing his car was nowhere to be seen. They had probably towed it already. Damn their efficiency. He turned back to confront his companion who followed shortly after him.

"It's cowardly and my colleagues will no doubt see it as such. The N'Gravic are a proud warrior race. They need confidence in their allies. They deal in courage. This so called sabbatical could ruin me in their eyes. And the demon Sharifan are just as inclined to view my absence at this summit as the sign of weakness..."

"Tell me, what prevents them from slitting your throat for being a killer of their kind just four years ago?" Roman asked candidly. He could see the discomfort in his friend's eyes with the question. "You have a history, Rupert. One that predisposes you to danger with every meeting you take with these varying species. Some of these professed colleagues would just as soon see you dead as bring them this peace they claim to covet."

"These are species who want to live, just as we do, in worlds where they don't need to fear death at the hand of their own kind. They want peace, Roman. If I can play some small part in giving them that then I would gladly accept whatever risks are associated with it."

"You really are a boy scout, Rupert. Well, if you insist on continually risking your life... we have only one other alternative." Roman sighed and gave a helpless shrug. "We have arranged for an escort..."

"I hardly think a date is what I need at the moment, don't you?"

"Don't be fresh, Rupert. You know what I mean, a security escort; a specialist in the field of protection..."

"Roman, please... a bodyguard?" Giles rolled his eyes. "I lived on a bloody Hellmouth for years, I can handle myself."

Roman continued on, ignoring his companion's stubborn objections. "A security specialist who will make sure you can accomplish your self-appointed duty. You can't mediate if you're too busy watching your back."

"And I suppose I haven't a choice in the matter?"

"You can take the sabati..."

"No." Giles heaved a frustrated sigh and glanced to up to the star filled sky, searching for patience and not finding any there. "Who will it be then, am I babysitting one of Warren's precious graduates?"

"Mrs. Harding has been appointed as head of your security detail along with those she's chosen fit to work under her. She will remain in that position for as long as we deem it necessary. With any luck, her reputation will precede her and scare away any possible threats."

"Harding?" Giles ran the name through his memory and couldn't recall ever hearing it before. "I don't think I know her? Outside recruitment?"

"Not exactly. She is very familiar with the Council and its procedures, though not considered to be directly associated with us anymore. Not to worry, Rupert, she's the best and brightest at what she does. Graduated top of her class, called in repeatedly as a consultant for the FBI, CIA and secret service. Hasn't lost a single man yet."

"Sounds too good to be true," Giles huffed, unimpressed. "To what do I owe the honor of such expertise?"

"Well, seems she'd learned of the recent spree of attempts on your life and offered up her services. You've worked together before, Rupert. I believe you know her as Buffy." With that, Roman strolled away, a smug smile painted along his lips as Giles tried to comprehend what had just been told to him.

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## Part 2: Treading Lightly

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Rupert Giles had faced death too many times to count. He'd battled hordes of demons, witches, werewolves, sea beasts and the occasional insane sorcerer. Been found numerous times to be the focal point of shattered peace accord summits, teetering precariously on the edge of war and yet he never once felt the need to run away... until now. As he paced back and forth within the small space of his dimly lit office, waiting anxiously for his 12 o'clock appointment to arrive, he wished he could be anywhere but there.

"Buffy Harding," he repeated the name softly to himself, strangely bothered by its sound. He hadn't received word of her marrying. But then again, it'd been years since any of the old gang managed a moment to come together and talk. It was something he'd always felt ashamed of, losing touch with the only family he'd known for seven years of his life. Giles figured it was bound to happen, though. With all the travels abroad to collect the activated Slayers, then the specialty assignments gathering up prophecy materials and then the difficult challenge to subdue the Wolfram and Hart menace once and for all. They were all spread much too thin, barely managing their own lives let alone finding time for their old friends amongst the disarray of the new world.

He glanced down at the files littering his desk, the only evidence he had of Xander, Willow, Dawn and Buffy's lives. Naked reports filled with facts and figures, dry statistics of success in missions, degrees earned, awards presented; nothing of any real value or substance. What Giles craved was to know they were safe. That they were happy and celebrating the precious lives they fought so desperately to keep those many years ago.

A faint knocking brought him crashing back to his nervousness and he moved forward to answer the door. He stopped, considering if it would be more presentable to invite the guest in from a seated position at his desk rather than greet them at the door. But that might be perceived as rude so he stepped again toward the door, pausing as another series of faint knocks tied his stomach in knots and pinned him to his spot midway across the room.

"Open the door, Giles. I know you're in there, I can hear your squeaky loafers," the all too familiar voice called from beyond the door, helping diminish his apprehension ever so slightly.

"Just a moment. I'm about done... with ... something..." he took a deep breath, gripped the knob and with a twist and pull, there she was.

Buffy didn't look that much different from when he'd last laid eyes on her. Hair seemed a dash darker, more of a sandy blonde with golden streaks throughout, shoulder length but pulled back into a tight, sporty ponytail. She seemed heavier but it was weight earned by years of disciplined training. Muscled, toned and fit; she looked deadlier than he'd remembered, ready to strike at a moments notice and dressed for the part. Loose fit, acid wash jeans, a comfortable and unbuttoned solid green shirt with a tight grey tank top underneath, heavy soled, ankle-high steal-toed boots, and the most perfectly manicured

fingernails he'd ever seen, delicate and lovely. But her face was what sent him grinning like a schoolboy. She as beautiful as ever and he hadn't realized just how much he'd missed her until she stood there, offering her familiar mischievous grin and teasing glance.

"Hello."

Buffy's eyes went wide for a moment, thrown by the sight of a carefully tended, peppered, short-haired beard now donning her Watcher's face. He looked so different yet very much the same. It felt good to see him. "Hi."

Giles stood there for a minute before realizing he hadn't invited her in yet. "Sorry, I don't know where my head is. Please, come in."

"If you need some more time to think about it, I can keep myself busy out here with this three year old edition of National Geographic," she teased. "The magazines in your little waiting area are bordering on ancient."

"Most people around here aren't kind enough to wait. Perhaps if you could help me update my reading materials we could encourage the practice. It's nice to see you again, Buffy." His face flushed as he waved her to come inside. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, I'm just a bit..."

"Nervous?" she finished, a sympathetic smile playing along her lips. "So am I." She stepped through the door and glanced quickly around the small office. It was dimly lit, but with just enough light to make it comfortable. Walls of bookcases surrounded her, shelves brimming with aged books and the occasional antique adding a touch of spice to the library. Beyond his handsome, mahogany desk was a display of rustic, handcrafted weapons; a shiv, a hatchet, and a stake. Overall, it resembled a miniature version of his old apartment in Sunnydale and she found herself immediately reminiscing the old days with such fondness it put a lump in her throat.

Giles closed the door and watched her as she wandered around, showing that spark of curiosity that he remembered so warmly. "How have you been?"

Buffy noticed the manila files on his desk and grinned. "Been good. Busy mostly, but you know that already, don't you?" She motioned toward the papers and glanced back over her shoulder at him. "Doing some research?"

"Always," he chuckled. "I'm afraid I lost track of you shortly after your travels in Siberia. I figured it might make things easier if I educated myself on your recent activities, as well as the others."

"Everyone's good, Giles. They miss you but they know you're busy. We all are, I guess." She shrugged and he saw the faintest flicker of remorse in her eyes as she took a seat across from his desk. After a brief moment, she leaned forward and lifted the receiver of the phone to her ear, listened for a second and returned it to the cradle. Her attention fell to his laptop sitting open on his desk and with a quick bat at the mouse, she saw the screen flicker awake, displaying the familiar Council intranet flash page. Giles watched curiously as she lifted his

favorite ballpoint pen and scribbled on a scratchpad he had positioned near the edge of the desk.

"Did you need something?" Giles asked, puzzled.

"Huh. See, now I'm confused. All this time and nothing. I figured it was because your phone didn't work or you didn't have internet access or maybe your pen ran out of ink or maybe there was a paper shortage or postage crisis."

"I know it's been a while."

"A while? A while is a week, Giles. A while is even a month or two. Two years, Giles, ever since Dawn's high school graduation. You couldn't call? Couldn't write? Email? Why didn't you do anything that even remotely resembled a form of communication?"

"It's not that I didn't try. Thing's have been much too frantic around here with..."

"Pager, Instant Message, tickertape..." She continued on, talking over him.

"I intended to call but the time never arose when..."

"Pony express, telegraph, carrier pigeon..."

"Why didn't you?" He asked in a surprisingly demanding tone, verging on accusatory.

Buffy didn't answer, only stared at him with disappointment. Without thinking, she'd steered them headlong into the same old routine and she hated herself for it. She took a deep breath, wetted her lips as if preparing to speak, and then decided against it, choosing instead to shift to the edge of the seat, seriously contemplating leaving.

Giles let out a frustrated sigh, already regretting how quickly they'd managed to deteriorate back into trivial quarrelling. He instinctively reached for his glasses only to be reminded that he hadn't worn them for over a year, finally trading them in for contacts. He rolled his eyes at his persistent nervous habit and ran his idle fingers through his ruffled hair.

"Buffy... I'm..."

"I tried calling. I tried emailing and writing but I was too scared to follow through with it," she started quietly, unable to look at him "...and embarrassed. Seems like I was always too busy, forever on the move or trying to get Dawn settled into college, or working odd jobs for the government. I kept telling myself I didn't have the time and that I could do it later. I can be very persuasive, you know. After a while, it had been so long that I'd put it off and put it off again until I'd put it off so long that I figured it would be easier not calling so I could avoid having to answer those really hard questions like why didn't I call in the first place." She finally regained enough courage to look up, offering an apologetic smirk. "So I figured I'd drop the whole communications thing altogether, jump on a plane and show up on your doorstep. Great plan, eh?"

"Bloody brilliant." Giles smiled sympathetically and heaved a sigh. "I don't have any valid excuse for my silence either. I was struggling much as you were, and feeling guiltier with every passing day that I couldn't bring myself to contact you. I was foolish to let this go on for so long."

"Tell you what, let's start over?" Buffy jumped up and rushed over to the door. "Rewind..."

"There's no need to go that far, Buffy."

"Move it!" She ordered and gave him a solid push to remove him from the path to the door. She stepped outside and closed the door behind her. After a moment, there was a knock. He just stood there, amused by her misspent determination.

"Aren't you gonna open the door?" Buffy asked through the barrier.

"I figured I'd put it off until later," he said teasingly. After another moment, Buffy slowly let the door swing open, her face stern, not the least bit amused as Giles greeted her with a playful smile.

"Buffy, how very lovely to see you again. Won't you come in?" He graciously waved her in. "Have a seat."

She kept a straight face as she passed him. "You're not making this any less difficult, you know."

"It's not my intention to make this difficult. I'm glad you're here, though somewhat surprised you'd take on this assignment when you know I'm perfectly capable of handling myself."

Buffy returned to her previous seat in the guest chair. "You're right. You certainly can handle yourself. But I can handle you better." Her face stiffened with embarrassment over her choice in words. "You know what I mean. I'm good at this, Giles."

"So I've heard."

He made his way across the office and Buffy did a double take as she noticed for the first time he was walking with the aid of a cane. He was limping, not severely but enough to warrant support and she felt a tinge of grief at the sight of it. But he moved confidently, ably and she determined it had to be an injury rather than frailty for he looked strong enough and quite fit. His solid black pullover shirt hung nicely over his chest, revealing a hint of the strength fashioned there by his recent change of fitness, upper body working to help take the burden off his leg. He wore jeans, slightly faded and loose fit, allowing for comfortable movement. Though sporting the new look of the strangely fascinating, shapely beard, he was just as handsome as she'd remembered. His hair was somewhat greyer, but thick and a bit longer than he'd used to keep it, making him look the slightest bit tousled and relaxed. Perhaps another thing he couldn't find the time to do. His sharp green eyes seemed to smile with a subtle hint more definition in his gentle lines. And when he smiled, his strong jaw and

high-cut cheeks made for the stunning face she'd missed over the years. She quickly looked away as he took a seat and glanced up at her.

"Your friend said you didn't want me here." She could see the remark was taken wrong. "I meant in a professional sense."

"Roman can't be trusted when it comes to matters of procedure or of a personal nature."

"I like him."

"As do I. But then again, we're incredibly stupid."

"You'll get no argument from me."

"That'll be the first."

"Don't push your luck, Watcher."

"I'm afraid I no longer carry that designation." Giles snapped his laptop closed and leaned back in his chair, trying to get comfortable and hoping it would prompt her to do the same. "And as for luck, don't much believe in it anymore."

"What? Watcherless in Watcherville. Say it ain't so."

"You don't seem particularly surprised."

"I've been doing my research as well. Your pal Roman sent me complete files on your recent activities, including your resignation from the Council. So why do you still get the office? Squatter's rights?"

"He didn't offer up that information?"

"Guess he figured it was your story to tell."

"Perhaps some other time, I'd prefer to discuss your recent occupation. Security specialist?" Giles asked, cocking a disapproving brow.

"What, you think I'm not qualified?"

"Quite the opposite, I assure you. It's beneath you."

"This pedestal is a bit too high. Mind if I step down and join the commoners?"

"Buffy, your expertise in defense are exemplary but you've also gained first hand knowledge of demonology and many mystical defenses as well. These talents are wasted with such pedestrian work."

"One could say the same about you, playing politician for a bunch of murderous beasts."

A look of discontent crossed his face. "I hear Roman in your words. What did he tell you?"

"Only that he suspects your attacker is one of the creatures you're helping."

"Perhaps this isn't such a good idea..." Giles leaned forward, steadying himself on his desk in a motion to stand up and Buffy reached out to prevent him, grasping at his wrist.

"I can play nice, Giles. I couldn't care less about the who's or what's. I just want to know you're safe."

Though she sounded sincere, Giles found it difficult to believe her. He slipped his hand over hers and gave her a tender pat.

"Thank you."

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything?" Roman marched unannounced into the office and Buffy and Giles jerked inelegantly apart.

"What did I tell you?" Giles gestured towards the intruder. "Incapable of waiting, or knocking, I might add."

"Ever considered locking your door?" Buffy smiled as Roman came up along side her. "Oh, wait, look who I'm talking to."

"Nice to see you two jumping back into roles so easily. Not such a challenge after all, is it Rupert?" Roman winked knowingly, receiving a warning glare in response. "Are we still on pleasantries or have we moved on to discussing strategies yet?"

"We were discussing your faulty conspiracy theories on where this threat stems from," Giles corrected. "These attacks are not coming from the N'Gravic or the Sharifan. I would appreciate it if you would keep your misguided opinions to yourself."

"Was he always this difficult?" Roman asked Buffy.

"Worse."

"How did you ever manage?"

"Slaying is very therapeutic." Buffy suggested straight-faced. "And plenty of ice cream."

"Would you two like to be alone?" Giles chided, crossing his arms frustration.

"I'm sure you noticed the evidence that Rupert came rather close to get himself killed last night."

"You mean the head wound? I hadn't, actually. Giles wears head wounds like they're a fashion accessory. I'm more likely to notice if he didn't have one."

"I'll be dead by the end of the week," Giles sighed.

"Not on my watch!" Buffy assured him and got to her feet. "So, meeting tonight. I'll need a list of all possible civilians, attendees or not, the floor plan to the building, map of the commute route as well as all emergency facilities within a twenty mile radius, and I'll need to inspect the vehicle."

"Perhaps you'd like to get settled in at your hotel first? You must have had a long flight?" Giles suggested, rising to his feet to show her out.

"You didn't tell him?" Buffy shot an inquiring glance to Roman.

"Slipped my mind, I'm afraid." He smiled calculatingly.

"Tell me what?"

"Due to the level of immediate threat, the Council determined Mrs. Harding's assignment will be in-house."

"Meaning?" Giles eyes narrowed as he waited for clarification.

"Meaning you have yourself a new flat mate, Rupert. Been a while but I'm sure you'll get into the swing of things. Be just like it was in college, old man. But the company will be far more enjoyable, I'm sure."

"So, where's our home sweet home?" Buffy asked enthusiastically. Giles' face paled a ghostly white as an exasperated smile curled the edges of his lips.

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### **Part 3: Rocky Road**

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"Sorry about the mess, didn't expect to be entertaining." Giles spread out the blankets on his small couch and shuffled the pillows aside, tossing a couple stray newspapers aside and out of his way.

"What you call a mess, others call meticulously organized. Xander's locker, now that's serious mess." Buffy helped move some of his stacks of books out of the way. "Besides, I don't need entertaining, Giles. I can entertain myself."

"Are you sure you wouldn't be more comfortable at a hotel? I've never had overnight guests before..."

"Really?" Buffy's snooping glance made Giles struggle to rephrase his words.

"I meant at this current location. It's smaller than my previous flat. Let's just say I'm ill-equipped to offer a proper room."

"Ill-equipped?" Buffy snickered. "This is perfect, Giles. Look at it as karmic retribution for torturing you with the Summers family couch for close to a year." Buffy helped him situate the blankets. "Besides, I'm used to sleeping in strange surroundings. Not that your place is strange. It's nice... really."

"It's quite alright. I'm well aware I haven't a shred of talent when it comes to interior decorating. The furnishings are minimalist at best. With my recent engagements, I don't find much need for a fully furnished home."

"I know what you mean. I still haven't unpacked from my last move yet."

"Mr. Harding must be quite the patient and supportive chap, with you taking on such a time consuming career that requires frequent travel." Giles diverted his eyes as he asked his own probing question as indirectly as possible. "Not to mention the recurrent dangers involved. Does he work for the US government as well?"

Buffy watched him dance around the issue with a smile on her face, enjoying the sliver of curiosity he was working to conceal. "There is no Mr. Harding, Giles. It's an alias. Don't you ever watch those spy dramas on TV? You're supposed to use an alias."

"Alias?" Giles smiled brightly, strangely relieved. "Of course, I hadn't thought of that."

Buffy noticed the news seemed to uplift Giles' spirit. "But Roman wants me to use my real name, though. Thinks it might scare off any possible nasties."

"It might. You do have a distinctive reputation of being an especially successful Slayer. It might be enough to provide an adequate deterrent."

"Why are you doing this, Giles?" She asked, worried.

Giles stopped arranging the linens and sent her with a curious glance. "I thought the pillows might make the cushions more supportive..."

"I meant the part about risking your life for these creatures. Why you? Roman is right when he says they might hold you responsible for the actions of my past. Why take the risk?"

"Because I can. It's what I have to do." He'd said it in a tone making it perfectly clear the subject wasn't up for discussion, but he couldn't avoid seeing the concern in her eyes. "Speaking of which," He glanced at his watch, "I need to prepare for this meeting. Make yourself at home. We'll leave in a half an hour." He seemed to be in much more of a hurry than necessary and she wondered if she'd struck a nerve. As he disappeared into his bedroom, Buffy decided to take advantage of the time to get a better look around.

Everything about Giles' apartment screamed single. From the plethora of unopened and opened cardboard boxes having yet to be unpacked, to the scarce amount of welcoming furniture packed tight within the very small living quarters, she could tell he was busy and probably spent little time there. He did have a bookcase but it was nearly empty, with only a few computer books and catalogues. There was a small wooden table blanketed with unopened mail and magazines from around the world. Only a single couch was offered for seating, centered in what was barely recognizable as a living room. The walls were bare, no touch of him there. The place didn't feel like Giles, no real flavor of the man. His life was at his office, now. Much like the library must have been in those early years on the Hellmouth.

It didn't take much for Buffy to draw her own conclusions, that he not only lived alone but that he most likely hadn't the time for friends of any variety except colleagues. It made her sad for him but at the same time, some small part of her was relieved and she was at a loss to understand why.

As Buffy wandered around the tight t-shaped space, moving from the living room, past the kitchen, towards a perpendicular hall leading to the bathroom and Giles bedroom, she came to a closed door. It was situated on the opposite end of the hall from Giles room and she couldn't help her curiosity for what lay beyond it. With a twist of the knob, the door creaked open to reveal an empty, hardwood floored room, about twenty feet by twenty feet in dimension. On the walls hung sets of weapons, swords, staffs, knives, all the regular weapons they'd mastered together back in Sunnydale. She realized it was a training room, with the practice pads and dummies tucked neatly away in the far corner. Buffy stepped inside, walking the length of one wall, examining the various tools of her trade on display. She ran a finger along one handsome crossbow and saw a thick coating of dust come off to blacken her fingertip. She'd found him and it made her smile.

"I see you've discovered the training room."

Buffy pivoted around, both stunned and embarrassed to be caught snooping.

"I'm... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

Giles held up his hand, dismissing her concern. "No need to apologize. It's not that I'm hiding this away or anything. It's just... I don't get much use of this place anymore. At times I even forget it's here."

"How could you, it's perfect. A bit small, maybe, but you have a little of everything here."

Giles took a step inside, shifting his weight from his bad leg to his cane as he moved forward. "It is quite nice, isn't it? Amazing use of such confined space." He moved to the wall and with a pull of a string, the blinds lifted to expose a spectacular view of the city below. "I guess I haven't found the time to enjoy it lately."

Buffy's gaze fell to his leg and she prevented herself from asking the obvious. "That's gonna change. I need a serious refresher course and who better to serve as my coach than the man himself?"

"I highly doubt your need for review." Giles offered her a grateful smile but it soon faded off to sadness. "We'll see." He turned and made his way to the door. "I think I could use some tea. Care for some?" he asked without glancing back.

"Naw, I'm fine," Buffy said, bothered by his detachment. "You need help?"

"I think I can handle it, thank you." He answered softly as he rounded the corner. Buffy felt he meant more with those words than he would ever admit to.

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Buffy was nervous. For the first time in years, she felt like a rookie. The only plausible explanation had to be her voluntary appointment to Giles. She recognized that she was intensely possessive and protective of him, perhaps some mythic symptom of the Slayer and Watcher bond. She always felt connected to him. When he'd left her for her own good so many years ago, she had to learn how to let him go. Even with the more recent mutual drifting apart, she again had to adjust to missing something she'd come to accept as part of her. Now, being in his presence again, the old instincts were coming back and with interest, making for a nervous stomach and itchy staking hand.

Much to Buffy's dismay, Giles insisted on driving to the location of their first outing together, claiming he knew the layout of the town much better. She couldn't argue, she was definitely out of sorts in the alien environment. But it worried her that he wouldn't let her do her job when it came time for her to.

They arrived at the location without incident. Buffy was the first in and out of the vehicle, inspecting the surroundings with a speculative eye. Giles had to admit he was impressed by her air of professionalism. Even so, the idea of a Slayer using her abilities for protection of a single being was beyond him. Her gifts were wasted with him and he had to fight the urge to refuse her current post. But he knew better than to argue the point, she was just as stubborn as he was, especially in regards to decisions affecting her friends.

When Buffy felt the coast was clear, she motioned for Giles to exit the car and escorted him to the building, her eyes scanning the area for trouble the whole while. It was the back entrance to an Italian restaurant and the scent of the garlic and fresh baked bread immediately reminded Buffy of how she had forgotten to eat anything for lunch and Giles' kitchen was bare of even the essence of ingredients of food. He must eat out, another assumption that made her sad.

She always enjoyed the adventure of visiting him on a routine midweek post patrol report, when his artistic side would seize him and she'd calculatedly stumble upon a gourmet meal waiting for her. Those were the only times they had to themselves, the rest of the Scoobies having adopted the daylight and early evening hours as their time with the Watcher. Maybe she could get him to cook for her.

As she closed the door behind her, Buffy inventoried the figures in the room and assessed the level of threat was much too high for her tastes. She assumed they would be outnumbered,

but the number of beasts crammed within the dark and smoky room made her uneasy. The attendees were taller, ranging between six and eight feet in height, dressed in long raincoats and all with a distinct feline quality in the facial features but with scales instead of fur. A handsomely dressed, gray faced, elderly demon sat at a table surrounded by a small group of younger demons. All but the older one was armed and Buffy was immediately troubled by the impressive arsenal they carried; the smallest member held a TEC-9, beside him was a brute who towered above the others proudly displaying his MAK-90, and the demon immediately to the right of the older one held an AK-47. Attempting a more subtle approach, the rest had neatly tucked their pistols away within their raincoats, ready for action when needed. It was one thing to deal with armed humans; it was far different dealing with nervous demons. In that moment, she realized that with her new choice of a profession, she'd nearly forgotten what it was like being the Slayer.

"I know this one." The tallest demon grumbled. "That's the Slayer."

"Which one, there are more than a few now, Marcus." His hefty partner said smartly.

"Buffy Summers of Hellmouth fame." Marcus snarled.

"Nice to be remembered," Buffy said flatly, keeping a keen eye on the movements of everyone in the room.

"She slaughtered a gang of N'Gravics in the Southside a few years back. Friends of mine."

"Maybe not so nice after all." Buffy glanced at Giles who remained perfectly calm though it was obvious his aggravated associates were ready to strike at a moment's notice.

"What's the Slayer doing here, Mr. Giles? I thought we had an understanding." The beast motioned at Buffy with his gun.

"I'm here for emotional support," Buffy suggested. "Care to put the pea shooter away?"

"Miss Summers is here to ensure the safety of the participants," Giles explained.

"How, by staking us in the back?" The demon snickered.

"If you will recall, Miss Summers is well known as a protector and friend to demons. She's helped and worked with quiet a few."

"Only those pretty faced ones who know how to tickle her temptation, Ain't that right, sweetheart?"

With that, the older demon raised his hand and the beasts' nervous laughter fell off. They all took their places at the table, some slipping back to their places in the shadows.

"Forgive my son's impudence, Rupert. He often lets his passions rule his tongue. We are honored to be in the presence of the Chu-kar M'wurrow."

Buffy shot Giles a quizzical look. He grinned and mouthed the word "later."

"Thank you, Cane. But it is a privilege to serve as your moderator. I trust you received the contracts I sent?"

"I have. There is much to discuss, my friend." The demon's mouth curled to a pleased smile as he gestured to the chairs positioned opposite him.

"Shall we get down to it then?" Giles pulled back a chair and nodded gently to Buffy. After a brief moment of confusion, she finally recognized the polite gesture and took a seat. Giles then took the offered seat directly across from Cane and began to skim through the papers displayed on the table.

"I hope you don't mind, Rupert. I invited some of my Council to join us in these proceedings."

"Not at all." Giles smiled and stood as the door to the kitchen opened. Buffy hurried to get to her feet as Cane motioned to the guards at the door behind him and nodded.

"May I present the High Priestess Haranka and ambassador to the N'Gravics United Clan, Mordinzor."

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Giles moved through the door and tossed his keys to the table situated beside him. With a hurried stride, his cane pounding the floor beneath him, he made his way across the room and disappeared into the kitchen just as Buffy came in and removed her coat. She shook her head disapprovingly as she closed the door behind her.

"Giles, you really should let me do a sweep before you enter. Someone could have broken in and left a toy surprise."

"P245 Hauser wireless security system networked to the laptop on the desk. Any intrusion triggers a warning signal to my cell." He spoke concisely and Buffy could hear the frustration in his tone. "Besides, I've had quite enough surprises tonight."

"Sorry about that. I didn't realize they would flip out over such a little thing." She gave a discomfited shrug and nervously fiddled with her bracelet.

He returned with a glass in his hand and took a generous gulp of what she could smell was a rather pungent scotch.

"Little thing?" Giles echoed, flustered. "You threatened their ambassador and insulted the high priestess."

"I thought the ambassador was attacking you," Buffy countered defensively.

"He was greeting me with the traditional salutation of his people."

"Looked liked a choke hold to me. Whatever happened to the time-honored, old-fashioned handshake or salute? So much for a friendly greeting. And as for the priestess, all I said was that the robe had to be a bitch to get around in with the get-over-yourself train and all. Did you get a look at that thing? Looked like a wedding gown from hell! And what was with the pointy cap? Was she trying to pick up satellite signals with that thing?"

Giles swallowed down the rest of his drink, his eyes shifting uncomfortably between her and the glass. "This isn't going to work."

"Oh come on! First day jitters, that's all."

"I fear your previous experience may not have suitably prepared you for this particular set of circumstances." He tried to be as gentle as he could, though barely able to contain his irritation.

"I'll be all prim and proper girl with the next one. You'll see. Just need time to adjust, get into my groove."

"And while you're attempting to find your groove, what shall I do? Continue apologizing to my battered and offended colleagues for your presumption."

"Okay... you're tipping toward overreacting now. It was just a misunderstanding."

Giles eyes blazed with anger. "That misunderstanding came dangerously close to devastating years of peace negotiations, not to mention nearly costing us our lives tonight, Buffy. This is not Sunnydale or Los Angeles . It's not about the attack or the defense here. It's about words and subtlety. Every word, every movement must be calculated for its consequences. This work is a delicate balance of tact and cunning, both of which you displayed an incredible lack in with your behavior tonight." He took a sip of his drink, trying to lower his voice and bridle his temper. "These negotiations require patience and tolerance. There is no place for disrespect or rash action here."

Buffy's face fell. She could hear the hidden meaning masked behind his carefully chosen words. "What you're really saying is that there is no place for **me** here?"

He stared at her, eyes regretful at how every word they exchanged since her arrival seemed to spark a disagreement. Perhaps some part of her statement was true. It had taken him years to separate himself from her. Leaving her was akin to removing an emotion, learning to function without happiness, without passion. He'd only recently begun to heal from those old wounds, diving headlong into his new duty to substitute for what he was missing so dearly. Having her back, it brought back those hard memories and emotions he wasn't ready to face. He'd forgotten how to deal with them, with her.

"Buffy, there will always a place for you here, but as my friend, not as my security specialist. You may very well be considered an authority in your field of work but I feel your present set of skills are incongruous with what I require here."

Buffy dragged herself over to the couch and took a seat, sinking in as deeply as she could, wanting to bury herself in the cushions to hide from her embarrassment. The disappointment and sadness in her face stung, he'd hurt her. Racked with guilt, Giles joined her on the couch, giving her shoulder a consoling squeeze.

"I'm truly sorry, Buffy."

"Don't be. You're right, Giles. I messed up."

"Not entirely. I'm still alive and with no new head wounds. More than I can claim credit for on my own."

Buffy gave him an appreciative smirk which quickly gave way to a look of contemplation.

"You know at first, I thought being the Slayer made me special." She rolled her eyes at the recollection. "Took me a long time to realize what responsibilities came with that title. It didn't make me better than anyone else or make me above everyone. What it made me, was expendable."

"No... no, Buffy, you were never expendable." Giles shook his head, reaching out to console her with a gentle squeeze of his hand to her shoulder.

"Sure I was. It was my job to serve humanity, Giles, to put everyone else's lives above my own until I died and someone else took my place. And when I finally clued in to that, it royally pissed me off. I went through the 'why me' phase, said and did things I wish I hadn't." She glanced over at him, her eyes apologizing for the hurtful ghosts of the past. Giles brows lifted, unsure of where she was going with her train of thought but not wanting to interrupt her.

"I opened my eyes, Giles, and realized I was never alone. My job may be to serve humanity and to save lives, but you made it your job to serve me and keep me alive. You didn't treat me like some tool, like the Council wanted you to. You treated me with respect. For better or worse, you let me make my own decisions and my own mistakes and stuck with me, even when I tried to fire you by saying I didn't need you anymore. You stayed with me, supported me. I didn't see it then, but I see it now and I can't tell you how much I love you for that."

His lips curled up to a faintly embarrassed grin and he folded his hands in his lap. "Buffy, I..."

"I'm not good at apologies so this is my way of saying thanks." Buffy reached out and tenderly covered his hand. His gaze lifted to meet hers, touched by her words. "I know I messed up tonight. I know I have a lot to learn. But I'm not letting you fire me, okay. We'll make this work... I'll make this work. Let me do this for you, Giles. Please."

He could feel the sincerity in her words and the gentle caress of her thumb passing along his fingers shattered his resolve. Securing his grip on the arm of the couch, he lifted himself and dipped his hand within his coat pocket, removing a small envelope.

"There is a formal dinner tomorrow evening. It's at the Royal Guardhouse. This is the invitation. Make whatever arrangements you deem necessary." He held it out, a hint of concern in his weary expression.

Buffy accepted the envelope and smiled. "Thank you."

"Thank you." He took up his cane and began toward the kitchen to relieve himself of his glass.

"Giles, Chu-kar M'wurrow?" She asked and he paused. A subtle smile of amusement lifted the thin lines of his eyes.

"A title given to the purveyors of peace."

"What does it mean?"

"The N'Gravic believe only a couple bonded to each other in both the spiritual and physical essences can seal the peace of their people. Roughly translated, it means the pure and joined hearts."

"Roughly translated," Buffy reiterated with a sly smile.

Giles face dipped forward with a hint of a shy smile. After letting out a sigh, he lifted his head and motioned to the phone. "There's a quaint little Thai restaurant on the corner that delivers. The owner is an old friend of mine. Care to join me in a late evening snack?"

Buffy's stomach roared out her approval of the suggestion, eliciting a pleased smirk from him. "I thought you'd never ask."

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#### **Part 4: Stirrings**

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Giles wandered down the hall and to the living room to find the couch bare of blankets and tidied up already. He glanced around, searching for any signs of his guest. He checked the kitchen and nothing; he started back down the hall, taking note that the bathroom was unattended. Then his eye caught the movement of a shadow across the light glimmering along base of the training room door. He made his way down to the end and paused before the closed door, considering if he should knock first before entering. He remembered how the gang never seemed to offer him such consideration back in Sunnydale and decided to take his chances. With a turn of the knob, the door swung quietly open.

There Buffy was at the sun draped window; body moving deliberately slow in the recognizable motions of Tai Chi. She was dressed in her traditional grey sweats and white tank top, riding up as her torso twisted to one side. The delicate, familiar scene sent him back to a simpler time, an innocent time. A time when they made sense together and words didn't seem so difficult.

Her arms swayed slowly with controlled movement, defining every arch she imagined in her mind. A step to the side, a lift of the knee; all so unhurried that the dust shimmering with light in the air seemed motionless, unaffected by her gentle activity. It was beautiful.

"Your form is exceptional," he said softly, trying his best not to startle her.

She jerked around, ages of primal instinct setting her on edge, and relaxed once she realized it was Giles.

Stunned he'd managed to sneak up on her, she gave a half-hearted smile. "You're just saying that."

"Yes, I've always flattered you without fail or call when it comes to your training," he reminded her teasingly. "You've gained patience, I see. Only comes with years of practice."

"Helps me relax. You want to join me?" She asked with an enthusiastic wave.

"Perhaps some other time. Would you care for some breakfast?"

She could see he'd be a hard sell. "I'd love some. But first, would you give me a hand with something?"

Giles face perked up with curiosity in the request. "I'll try my best." He moved forward, cane securely in his grip.

"I think I'm doing something weird with my legs in this one." She went through the motion.

Giles nodded. "Wan Kung She Hu, yes, well... your arms are correct. Your feet should be directed outward, subtle angle."

"Like this?" She tried again, still not quite mastering the ending stance.

"Just about. Bend your leg a bit more..." he gestured with the cane. "You almost have it."

Buffy broke position and moved to him, taking his cane from him in an easy tug and set it gently to the floor.

"Show me?" She asked hopefully, returning to her previous place in the sunlight, standing there with all the patience she'd displayed with her graceful exercises just moments before. He didn't want to deny her but his doubts won out.

"Buffy, I..."

"So, it's like this." She started again, lifting her bended arms up chest high. "What should my feet be doing now?"

"Er... um... aim, aim them out..." he took a step, working hard to hide his limp as he approached her, "Yes... yes, you've got it. Only straighten your hips..."

She went stiff, purposefully overcorrecting. "Like this?"

"Too tense. Relax, natural motion," he reached out, gently placing his hands to her hips and guiding them to the right position. "There... you've got it. That's good. That's per..." his eyes lifted to hers, caught in the radiance of the early morning sun. "...fect." He finished in a whisper, taken by the lovely face staring attentively up at him.

"Perfect," she echoed softly with a smile, spellbound by his olive gaze. With that, he pulled away, a bit too eagerly, and Buffy already missed his guiding touch.

"I think you've got the idea," he bent down and took up his discarded cane, using it to motion towards her and the door. "Continue on with your exercises. I'll see to preparing breakfast."

"Sounds great," she said as enthusiastically as she could, trying to mask the conflicted emotions stirring within. "Thanks for the help."

"Your welcome." He responded with a shy sideways glance, avoiding any real eye contact. When he left, closing the door behind him, Buffy let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "Well, at least I got him cooking."

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The morning wasn't what she'd expected, nor was the breakfast, a bowl of cold cereal. At least it was cocoa puffs and not some inhumanly healthy granola crap. One thing would never change, Giles would never lose his sweet tooth. But the surprising breakfast wasn't the end to the unexpected. The first couple phone calls didn't bother her. The two hours on the notebook computer didn't strike her as odd either, but when Giles headed back towards the phone, Buffy got the distinct feeling he was trying to avoid her. Perhaps she'd made him uncomfortable with her pushing him to help her. Perhaps she'd went too far with intruding on and using his training room. Or perhaps he'd noticed her face flush as he touched her, saw her eyes staring at his lips as he breathed, saw the subtle movement of her inching closer at the moment they stood together in such a familiar yet foreign circumstance. Now *\*she\** was uncomfortable.

Buffy wandered around the living room, trying to busy herself without prying into Giles' personal space. It was no small task. There was an utter lack of entertainment to be found. He was being serious with his comments the day before about not entertaining guests. She moved to the couch and noticed a midsized, glossy black box with some handsome silver

lettering on the lid. She couldn't read it but her shopper's instinct told her it was from a department store, a very pricey one. She heard Giles settle the phone back into its cradle and took the moment to catch his attention.

"You always this busy?"

"I am sorry, Buffy..." he said, making his way over to join her on the couch, "I needed to confirm some things for tonight. That reminds me. I have something for you."

"Ooohh, pressies for me?" She said gleefully and lifted up the box, settling it in her jeans covered, crossed legs. Her excitement brought a smile to his lips as he sat down, nudging his cane between the outer edge of the cushions. He never let that thing get too far out of his sights and it made her wonder.

"The Council delivered your wardrobe this afternoon. Please try it on. I'm unsure if I properly estimated your measurements." He offered a discomfited grin. "We can have it fitted if need be."

Buffy lifted the box lid and folded back the watermarked tissue paper. It was a dress, a gown to be exact. Pale rose, silken fabric threaded with highlights of glistening speckles, giving it the illusion of rain falling as it moved. Thin, spaghetti straps so petite she feared she'd tear them simply by holding it. It was lined with a soft cloth nearly as delicate but so soothing to the touch that she just knew it was meant to be danced in.

"It's... it's beautiful, Giles."

"Do you like it?" He asked with childlike apprehension. "I wanted something I thought would fit with the occasion yet allow for movement. When I saw it, I thought of..." He stopped as his eyes locked on hers, "...you like it then?"

"I love it. I can't wait to try it on."

"Please do."

"It would ruin the surprise. Isn't there some rule about seeing a woman in a dress before the event?"

"I believe that true only if we're getting married. And unless there is something you failed to inform me of, I think all proper superstitions can be satisfied." He motioned toward the dress with a gentle smile. "Let's see if it fits."

She practically leaped from the couch and hurried off into the bathroom. Giles let out a chuckle at her keenness. It soon faded as his previous thoughts returned to him. Though years had past and time had made its mark on both of their lives, he still felt the same old embers glowing. Buffy stirred those long abandoned and tired emotions within him, the ones he needed to shut away. It wasn't what he wanted, what he needed to do his work. If he wasn't careful, he would fall prey to his heart as he'd done before and soon rekindle the

flame he could not let burn. It wasn't meant to be. He knew that and he cursed his hopes for wasting their efforts in trying to win him over.

"What do you think?" Her quiet voice brought him out of his contemplation and he turned to look. She was stunning. The shimmering fabric shaped around her like a second skin, hugging her hips and curving delicately along her bosom, and flowed around her legs with the slightest peek of skin showing through the high cut seam up one side. "You like it?"

Giles stood up without a word, without need of his cane.

"Non-verbal, always a good sign." Buffy smiled shyly, folding her hands in front of her.

"You're beautiful," Giles spoke so softly, as if his breath couldn't even carry the weight of his emotion. "It's lovely."

"It really is. You have wonderful taste. Maybe I should bring you along on all my mall outings."

That's all he needed, a familiar quip to break him from his awe. "Somehow the thought of shopping with you terrifies me more than any demon summit I could face."

"You're a smart man. Negotiations are nonexistent, every woman for herself, take no prisoners," Buffy smiled as she tried to lighten the oddly charged exchange. "Do you see any areas for improvement?" She asked with a subtle turn from side to side, displaying herself.

"Pardon?" He squeaked.

"Do we need to have it fitted or does it look alright?"

"I think it's good. Don't you?"

"More than good, Giles. I can't believe you got it so right?"

"Neither can I," he reached for his cane and moved around the couch and down the hall. "I need to see about my attire for the evening. Feel free to get comfortable. We have some time yet."

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"How are things, Rupert? You two getting along alright?" Roman asked curiously.

Giles glanced at his watch; realizing time was short and decided to hasten the phone conversation by telling Roman what he wanted to hear. "We're getting by."

"You sound so convincing."

"It's an awkward situation. It's been years, Roman." Giles could still hear the shower running, freeing him to talk his mind.

"It was for us as well, as I recall. We managed. A matter of fact, I do believe we get along much better now than we ever did through Council schooling."

"This is quite a different set of circumstances."

"Enlighten me."

Giles could hear the sly interest in his old friend's tone. "Shouldn't you be attending to some Council business?"

"This is Council business," Roman chuckled. "She's seen it then?"

"What?"

"The training room?"

"Yes."

Roman didn't care for the concise answer. Giles was holding back. "It met with her approval?"

"She seemed to like it."

"Rupert, what's going on there? Usually, you're not a man of so few words. Is something wrong?"

"I'm still somewhat apprehensive about hiring her for such a task. While Buffy is the most gifted Slayer I've ever known, her experience in diplomacy is weak at best."

"Diplomacy is your job, Rupert. Hers is to keep you alive. Did she do something wrong?" There was a long pause and Roman felt the tension over the line. "Rupert, what is it?"

"It's nothing. I'll report back after the dinner." He didn't give Roman a chance to respond and hung up the phone. His attention shifted to the closed bathroom door.

The running water sounded so strange, drawing him closer to the bathroom like some strange call. He wasn't used to guests and the sound of the activity somehow made his empty apartment feel warmer. Repositioning his cane within his grip, he walked down the hall and stopped at the door, staring down at the faint billows of steam drifting out from the crease below. Through the patter of water, he could hear her. She was singing; not a full fledged song, more of a repetitive and restrained chorus she chimed as she bathed. And though her key was off and she muddled up the words, it was charming and it brought a smile to his face as he listened. When the water shut off, he continued on his way toward his bedroom to get ready for the evening. He could only hope for a better outing than their first.

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## Part 5: A New Light

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It had to have been planned. Somehow Giles had managed to thwart her every attempt to see his attire for the evening. She'd gotten ready early, very early in hopes to see him prepare and benefit from the same sort of preview he'd enjoyed of her. Unfortunately, he'd come from his bedroom not only fully dressed but already blanketed in a long, black raincoat covering all hints of what he wore beneath. He'd carefully trimmed and shaped his beard, making her even more curious as to how it might feel. She'd never touched a beard before. Maybe she could steal a quick tickle of his whiskers when he wasn't looking. The thought brought a smile to her lips then she remembered his reaction from the innocent contact earlier in the day and decided against the intrusion. She would play it cool, play by his rules and try to be serious. She had a job to do and she wanted to do it to the best of her ability.

Giles gathered up his keys and pocketbook as he made his way to the door, gesturing for her to come along. She did without a word, focusing on her job as they left. He acted the perfect gentlemen, opening doors for her along the way. He drove yet again, against her objections, though allowing her to check the vehicle before commandeering control over it. When they arrived at the Royal, she jumped out, practically mowing over the surprised valet, and rushed around to Giles' side to keep him inside until she'd scanned the crowd. He sat there, as patiently as he could, trapped inside until she was as certain of his safety as she could be. Once satisfied, she opened the door and allowed him to escort her inside, arm in arm.

Though the building from the outside looked like any other on the block, the inside was a fascinating welcome and Buffy was impressed by the unexpected decor inside. The lobby was warmly lit with soft light aimed at accenting the art covered walls and free standing displays of rare antiquities. It reminded her of the museum her mom worked at. Though silly as the thought was, she half expected to see familiar relics from her old home. It would make her feel more comfortable instead of the hyper aware and overly anxious bundle of nerves she already was. This was it, her last chance to win over Giles to her new job. Something told her it wouldn't be an easy task.

"May I take your coat, sir? Miss?" A tuxedoed attendant offered and stretched out his arm.

Giles helped Buffy off with her coat and handed it over then worked to balance his cane as he tried to remove his own coat. Buffy noticed the cane slip from its precarious spot on his arm and fall. She knelt down carefully to recover it and when she returned upright, Giles stood there, finally revealed in his suit and she was caught breathless at the vision. A midnight black, double breasted, worsted wool tux, perfectly tailored over his frame. Beneath it was a solid white collar shirt without a tie but sporting a glimmering golden rimmed button set off by the companion petite, hoop gold earring dangling from his left ear. He looked so stylish and entirely different than she'd remembered at the prom. He was stunningly handsome and only the attendant's tug at the cane broke her from the spell she'd fallen into.

"Thank you sir," the attendant nodded politely and returned his cane as he turned to Buffy. "Miss." He bowed toward Buffy and wandered off with her coats, leaving Buffy in a daze and trying desperately to gather her thoughts back to the task at hand as Giles glanced around the room.

"Shall we?" he offered her his arm and she slipped hers through his, still finding it hard to take her eyes off him.

"You look... you look amazing," she whispered to him as they moved along through the wandering couples.

"You approve, then?" He grinned, pleased.

"You clean up well," she smiled. "Too well."

"Still a touch rough around the edges but it will have to do."

"I like rough edges." She felt her face flush with embarrassment and was greatly relieved he didn't glance at her at that instant.

The crowd was small, intimate. Mostly human in attendance but Buffy could feel the slight echoes of her once acute physical reaction to the demons hidden within the crowd. There were vampires and shape shifters, witches and sorcerers. Overall, the breed of beasts she labeled 'posers' because they could blend in with the world around them, fake humanity in order to infiltrate a world that fears them and rightfully so. As they ventured further inside, she began to see the more exotic creatures she'd come to face in her years as Slayer, the ones which couldn't hide their otherworldliness. It looked like some upper crust, black tie version of the Star Wars canteen scene.

"You okay?" Giles asked, noticing her wandering eyes.

"Peachy! Just not used to a mixed bag like this."

"It takes some getting used to, I know. But there are good people here, friends of mine. I hope you'll see them as yours as well," Giles reassured her.

"Just give me a heads up when it's not an unusual greeting and I'll be fine."

"Mr. Giles, I'm so pleased you decided to come," a seven foot demon with black, ram like horns approached and extended his hooved limb to him. Giles took it by the wrist, giving him a courteous shake.

"I've been looking forward to this evening. Thank you for the invitation, Sir Crakenfir," Giles bowed graciously and nodded to Buffy. "May I present Miss..."

"Buffy Summers. It is an honor indeed to be in the presence of such a celebrity. I hope we can find time to exchange tales of our adventures."

Buffy smiled and bowed gently, following Giles' lead with the polite demon.

"Sir Crakenfir held a position similar to that of a Slayer in his home dimension. The NidMerdi, if memory serves. I'm sure he has quite the tales to tell."

"Well done, Rupert. You haven't lost your touch." Crakenfir lips curled to a pleased, fang filled smile. "But I won't make any promises on the amusement of my stories."

"I would love to hear them," Buffy nodded politely.

Another ram demon hurried up and whispered in Crakenfir's ear. He gave a single nod and returned his attentions to his guests. "I have some thing's to attend to. Please enjoy some appetizers and mingle about. Dinner will be in a short while."

"Thank you," Giles continued on, walking further within the larger hall.

"He seems nice," she said.

"Yes indeed, quite the gentleman for a mass murderer." Giles smiled graciously at another familiar face and continued along.

"Mass murderer?" Buffy repeated quietly.

"The NidMerdi is a sort of executioner in his world. He's responsible for eradicating the disrespectful and the radicals. Makes for the impressive resume."

"How many other nice murderers do we have here?" Buffy's eyes darted from beastly face to demon face.

"You'd be better off not knowing."

"Why are we here, Giles?" She worked to keep a smile on her face as they walked.

"Simply to attend."

"I don't get it."

"Our presence here is a test of courage. Every other guest in attendance this evening has taken out a warrant on my head."

"Everyone here wants you dead?"

"Not at the moment. My recent pursuits are necessary to further along negotiations of their various treaties." He answered calmly. "They deem me as a necessary evil."

"Wonderful. What does that make me?"

"Actually, they consider you with the highest regard, having the impressive slay profile you do. Body count is a measuring stick for success and you are abundantly productive."

"Mom would be so proud."

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Buffy had to admit it, for being in a banquet hall packed with a crowd of vicious killers, she was having the time of her life. The food was exquisite, even though she didn't have a clue what they ate. Desert was awe inspiring, something like tiramisu but with a heavy vanilla cream to dip each bite in. She'd already had two glasses of red wine which were quickly going to her head. The company, Sir Crakenfir and four of his handsomely suited henchmen were most entertaining with disturbingly humorous stories of their exploits. Her favorite was an ill planned raid to in which Crakenfir and his first in command ransacked what Buffy understood to be a whore house but instead, turned out to be a nunnery. She giggled for over ten minutes at the image of demon penguins scattering into the night. But there was one thing that continued to distract her throughout the evening; every few moments, Giles would look across the rounded table to her, the subtle quirk of a grin creasing his lips, and it sent her mind wandering.

"Rupert, you haven't asked this lovely young woman to dance. It would be quite a shame to waste such an intriguing venture as accompanying her to the dance floor."

"I'd love a dance, if you're offering, Sir Crakenfir," Buffy smiled encouragingly, much to the kindly demons embarrassed amusement.

"I believe I will take my wise friend's advice and accompany you, if you'll have me." Giles stood and Buffy was surprised.

"Uh... yeah, of course." She responded uncertainly, taking his arm as they began to walk out to the dance floor. She was stunned as she glanced back to see he'd abandon his cane for the first time since she'd arrived, leaving it situated at the base of his chair at the table. He still moved with a limp but it was muted, compensated for with a confident stride. As they reached the wooden floor, he directed her around to face him and pulled her in close, wrapping his arm around her waste and raising her hand in his. Buffy was mesmerized; she was not only dancing, she was dancing with her Watcher, with Giles.

"I didn't know you could dance."

"You never asked," he grinned demurely.

"Why didn't you ask me to dance at the prom?" she asked.

He gently spun her around, brought her close and began to sway. "I seem to recall you had prior obligations that evening."

"Obligations; good word for it." Buffy sighed. "I think it would've been better had Angel never shown. Or maybe if you had asked..."

"Nice moves, Watcher," a mocking growl came from beside them followed by a giggle. Buffy looked to see one of Crakenfir's associates strolling on by with his lady companion. "Council training?"

"Outreach program for youthful offenders, actually," Giles responded easily. "The music was thought to tame the more violent tendencies."

Buffy snickered. "You're kinda light on your feet as well?"

The demon snarled and stepped forward threateningly. Giles pivoted smoothly, drifting Buffy clear of the beast and putting himself between her and the disrespectful demon. He stared the demon down, undaunted, always keeping a polite smile on his face.

"It would be a shame to disrupt Sir Crakenfir's celebration, don't you think?" Giles cocked up a brow, waiting for a response.

"Could use a bit of livening up if you ask me, mate. Care to show us more of those pretty Watcher moves or are you shying away from it on account of that bum paw of yours." The demon snickered, amused with his jest. Buffy tried to step forward but felt Giles hold her at bay with a slight grip of her arm.

"Such a stunning beauty as your escort shouldn't be denied a turn on the dance floor. Be the gentlemen your boss assumes you to be and provide her with the treatment she deserves." Giles nodded, politely acknowledging the demon's human female companion.

"He's right, Ricky." She agreed with a whiny tone, "You haven't asked me to dance all night."

"Later, Merna," Ricky grumbled.

"Always later. I tell you what, Ricky. Next time you want someone to help you with that little molting issue you've been having... call Burt 'cause I'm walkin'!" She started off through the crowd, leaving Ricky both embarrassed and steamed.

"We'll finish this later, cripple." Ricky hurried off to catch up with his upset date. Giles' face bowed forward, his eyes falling toward his leg. After a moment, he turned back to face Buffy and extended his hand, offering to continue their dance. She eagerly accepted. He led her with a sure and graceful motion, sending her gliding along the floor within his secure arms and perfect tempo.

"Well done." She smiled.

"That remains to be seen."

"You think he'll be back?"

"Only if Merna doesn't get her dance."

Buffy considered thoughtfully. "So let's review, shall we? You are an expert at defense, weapons and martial arts, skillful practitioner of magicks, speaker of five languages, and to top it off, you can play the guitar and sing and dance?"

"I'm also quite a good card player," he added ruefully.

"Be still my heart," she quipped, trying to hide the truth behind the statement.

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"We had a lovely evening, Sir Crakenfir," Buffy smiled as Giles helped her with her wrap.

"Made lovelier by your presence, I assure you Miss Summers." He reached out with his hoof shaped appendage and without blinking, Buffy offered him her hand. He lifted it to his toothy smile and pressed a gentle kiss to the back of her hand. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to display some of your Slayer skill with your weapon of preference."

"Perhaps next time, I was rather hoping for this night off." She bowed her face just slightly, doing her best to be shy yet insistent. "We'll have something to look forward to in our next meeting."

"You've done well with this one, Rupert." The polite demon's brow rose with curiosity. "Quick witted and deadly. I can hear the hidden threat in her voice."

Buffy's eyes went wide with worry. "I meant no..."

"Please, no apologies, my dear. Your fire is what sets you apart from these impostors. You are a true warrior. One I am fortunate to have the honor of meeting. Thank you Rupert for granting me the opportunity."

"Thank you for inviting us." Giles bowed his head graciously and held out his arm for Buffy. "I trust I will be seeing you at the summit?"

"Will your charming escort be attending?"

Giles considered Buffy with a pleased smile. "That she will."

"Then I shall endeavor to be on my best behavior." Crakenfir bowed respectfully and smiled at Buffy. "Until next time. Good evening, Rupert... Miss Summers."

"Good evening," Buffy responded, looking toward the exit with a cautious glance.

"Good evening, Sir Crakenfir." Giles took his cane firmly in hand and began to lead Buffy out.

Once outside, Buffy chuckled softly.

"What is it?"

"I thought I'd messed up again."

"Quite the contrary, you did well."

"You mean I did better than you expected."

"I've learned to expect the unexpected from you." He glanced sideways at her, his lips curling to a shy grin. "I believe Crakenfir was quiet taken with you."

"And so the trend continues. Little Miss Demon Magnet wins another demony gentleman suitor." She shrugged. "Just give me my tiara and sash."

"Can't blame them, can you?"

Buffy glanced up at the shy grin he wore and smiled. "Was that a half-assed attempt at a compliment?"

"As Xander would say, I was using my whole arse, I assure you." Giles motioned down the street, stealthily trying to avert the subject. "There is small shop just a block from here. Mind if I stop in to grab a few essentials?"

"Personally, nope. Professionally, yes. I haven't checked out that location or the route to it. Which brings us to topic, the second." Buffy turned to face him directly. "Not that I'm complaining or anything, but it's going be hard for me to protect you if you keep up the macho man routine, Giles."

"I wasn't trying to be 'macho'. I was simply confronting a challenge by that Prakintar gentleman. Part and parcel of the work I do is to handle such situations delicately. You'll learn quickly what presents a true threat and what is merely for show."

"I'll buy that but until then, let me take the risks. And that includes not pushing me aside when someone is 'challenging' you."

"I apologize, Buffy. Force of habit, I suppose."

"Just stop it, okay. Let me do my job. Me bodyguard, you body... remember?"

"I will try to get that equation straight."

"There won't be much body left to guard when we're through, mate," the familiar growl came from behind them and Buffy and Giles turned around to a gang of four of the same horned, hooped demons stepping out from the entrance to join Ricky.

"Are we learning yet?" Buffy rolled her eyes at Giles.

"So he's a bloody prat, what can I say?" Giles shrugged.

"And I really had hoped for a night off." Buffy sighed. Giles began to step forward and it was Buffy's turn to hold him back. He glanced over and grinned self-consciously.

"Sorry, habit."

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### **Part 6: Temptations**

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Ricky, the boorish Prakentar, charged forward as three of his demons cohorts watched on, all too anxious to see the Slayer in action. Buffy reacted fast, shuffling Giles clear as she blocked a series of sluggish punches from Ricky. Though the strikes were telegraphed and painfully slow, they carried quite the power and sent her backwards a few steps as each connection to her blocking forearm. Seeing their associate's difficulty with his opponent, two of the remaining beasts joined in, trying to come around from either side to reach Giles. Amid an array of defensive strikes, Buffy realized their intentions and worked to put herself between them and their mark.

Giles backed toward the edge of the curb, watching uneasily as Buffy threatened the beasts with a showy kata. Her arms swept clean and swift in a dramatic and expert motion, obviously trying to warn them of her skill and avoid a confrontation. But Giles knew these demons wouldn't back down from a fight and her attempt to spare them of harm would only serve to encourage them further.

"Come on boys, you don't really want to do this," she warned. "What would your boss, my newest, bestest buddy think?"

"How do you know he didn't send us out after you?" Ricky said with a sly grin and stormed after her again.

Buffy dodged the attack, blocking each slow blow from the brute. She took inventory of the layout of the land as she defended herself, calculating the thin balance between offense and defense based solely on location and obstructions. The fight shouldn't be waged out in the open where innocents could get hurt.

One of the other beasts came forward and Giles stepped up to aid her only to be shoved back by the determined Slayer. Before he could object, she lunged at the attacking trio. The unexpectedly powerful assault sent them stumbling backwards into the fourth Prakentar, taking him with them as they floundered toward the entryway to the building. The quick

thinking and helpful doorman took advantage of the situation and opened the door wide, allowing the discourteous foursome to tumble within the building. Buffy flashed a grateful smile as the older gentleman closed the door and locking it with an oversized key before the beasts could escape back outside. A second later, the heavy wooden door began to rattle, then shake violently on its hinges as the gang tried to force their way back out.

“Best be on your way, Miss,” the doorman urged, bracing against the door.

Buffy swiveled around, trying to hail a taxi as she scanned the street beyond her. Giles joined in on the task, reaching out with the grip of his cane to draw any driver’s attention. All cabs drove hastily by and she quickly gave up hope of a fast getaway. As the shaking of the large, heavy wooden door turned to pounding, she returned to searching for an escape route or at the very least, a better place to continue the fight away from prying eyes.

"Giles, across the way. That alley. Go!" She ordered and Giles stood firm at her side.

"You can't face them alone. You need..."

"I'll be along in a minute. Me bodyguard..." she gestured firmly to herself then to Giles, "You body! Now go!"

“I won’t leave you,” Giles insisted.

Suddenly, the doorman was sent spilling to the sidewalk as the Prakatar demons burst through the splintered door. Buffy gave Giles a nudge, pointing with a demanding finger toward the alley. She glanced back, just managing to bring her hand up to impede a large hoof coming at her head.

Giles checked for traffic and started a few steps but paused, refusing to go any further than the street’s shoulder until Buffy followed. He watched intensely, his fingers gripping his cane tightly as she fought the beasts back. She struggled with every motion, unable to move as quickly as the situation required and barely keeping all four at bay. Giles took a step toward Buffy, cane raised and ready to lash out when out of nowhere, a group of awestruck tourists hurried over to bathe the beasts in a wash of flashing cameras.

The Prakatar’s were stunned, momentarily blinded by the excessive lights. Buffy capitalized on their good fortune, pivoted as quickly as her dress shoes would allow and hurried to join Giles. Meanwhile, the gang of Prakatar's were engulfed in a sea of irritating foreign tourists flocking them for autographs and photo ops. They pushed their way to get free of the crowd as they watched Watcher and Slayer weave through horn sounding traffic to reach the opposite side of the street.

“Get in there!” Buffy gave Giles a not-so-tender push into the darkened alleyway.

He slipped within the shadows and stopped to look back, catching sight of the beasts who were just about free from their unwanted entourage. Giles inspected the dead end of the alleyway as Buffy slipped deeper into the shadows.

"Normally I wouldn't question you're tactical decisions but trapping us in an enclosed alley isn't the best of plans. Why are we here?"

"I wanted a less public location. Hold this for me," She quickly slipped out of the restrictive dress and shoes and stood there in nothing but her scantily covering slip, breezier, panties and stockings.

"What on earth are you doing?" Giles questioned as he hobbled forward only to have the bundle of clothes thrust into his hands.

"I don't want to ruin the dress."

"Dear lord... I'll get you another," he tried to return the clothes with outstretched hands but she shook her head determinedly.

"I know you tried, Giles, but I just can't maneuver in that. Besides, it's too pretty to ruin."

"You're utterly ridiculous," Giles huffed, dropping the bundle to the ground. He removed his raincoat follow by his tuxedo jacket and wrapped it around her as the beasts crossed into the entrance of the alley. "It's just a bloody dress."

"No, it's not bloody. That's what I was trying to prevent." Buffy grumbled as she worked the jacket on. "Now I'm probably going to ruin this, too."

Giles was already marching up to the group, cane gripped in both hands as he called back, "Get covered up. I'll hold them back for a moment."

"Cowards! Fleeing only to hide away in shadows like rats," Ricky growled as he gestured for one Prakeratar to remain behind, blocking the end of the alley. The other two associates remained a few steps behind him, talking amongst themselves in snickering tones at the sight of the half dressed Slayer.

"Giles, body! Remember?" Buffy protested futilely as she hurried after him, still working to secure the jacket as she went.

"Running away? Seems the Slayer isn't what the big guy thought she was." Ricky snarled as the beasts advanced.

"No, she's much more," Giles said evenly and with a twist and tug, his cane separated into parts. With a grand flourish, a shimmering blade slashed out towards the demons who backed away at the sight of the expert swordsman's maneuver.

"That's why he keeps that stupid thing," Buffy grinned and looked on intrigued as Giles slashed the katana like blade boastfully across the path of his foes, pushing the demons back with every slice. Ricky's lips curled back to an amused smirk as he reached within his long leather coat and revealed a large bowie knife.

“That’s enough!” A booming voice echoed down the alley and all eyes turned toward its source. Crakenfir stood at the mouth of the alley as a team of human assistants guarded the path from wandering civilians.

“Explain yourself,” the demon commanded and the four ferocious Praketars suddenly turned meek.

“We were escorting your guests out, sir,” Ricky explained nervously, tucking away his oversized knife back within his coat.

“Seeing that they made it to their vehicle safely,” another added timidly.

“I’m sure you were,” Crakenfir grumbled. “Dismissed!”

“But sir...”

“Dismissed!” He roared and they scampered off like scolded children, leaving Crakenfir standing with his head bowed with regret. “I apologize for the actions of my underlings. They will be properly reprimanded, I assure you.”

“Boys will be boys,” Buffy shrugged, slipping her slight frame behind Giles to try and avoid giving the small army of men a show.

“It’s quite alright. No harm came to either of us,” Giles assured him, sheathing his sword. And with a twist, the weapon became an innocuous cane once again.

“Except for my dress, the only true casualty,” Buffy sighed as she took up the grime soaked remains of her gown.

“Allow me to make amends for any inconveniences suffered. My car is yours for the rest of the evening. My driver will take you anywhere you wish and make sure you find your way home safely. I’ll have my men deliver your vehicle in the morning and I’ll pay any restitution necessary to replace damaged items. Won’t be any skin off my back, I’ll simply take it off the hides of those brash bastards.” The horned demon grumbled as he stared disapprovingly in the direction of the retreating Praketars. Crakenfir nodded to one of his men who dutifully opened the car door behind him. Giles and Buffy walked forward to see a long black limo come into view, parked street side.

“This is very generous of you, Crakenfir, but it won’t be...”

“We’ll take it!” Buffy interrupted giddily, practically skipping up to slip within the inviting car.

Giles stood for a moment, staring impassively at the open door, then turned to smile slightly at their demon host. “I believe we’ll be accepting your hospitality again this evening, Sir Crakenfir. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. It serves my best interest to see you well... to see you happy. If all goes well, you’ll do the same in turn for my people.” He smiled, pleased. The demon leaned forward to steal a glance inside the limo as Buffy happily explored the many trimmings the car presented. He shifted in close to Giles and said in a discrete tone, “She’s quite the special young lady. You’d be wise to open your heart to that one, Rupert.”

Giles’ smile paled as he considered his friend’s advice. He outstretched his hand and Crackenfir met it graciously with a manicured hoof.

“I already have,” Giles responded softly and after a firm shake, bowed politely and moved to join his companion.

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“What do you want to do first?” Buffy asked, eagerly searching every possible nook and cranny within the limo. Giles watched her childlike enthusiasm with a subtle smile.

“Roman will want a field report...”

“What *fun* thing do you want to do first?” She amended carefully.

“After that rather close call, I could use a stiff drink.” Giles admitted, rubbing at his temple as he relaxed back into the plush seat.

“Lucky for you, Crack Daddy has a full bar in this thing.” She started investigating the small refrigerator located near her.

Giles’ eyes fell to the soiled heap of delicate fabric at her feet. “I’m sorry your dress was ruined.”

“It’s not the first outfit I’ve lost in the line of duty, I’m sure it won’t be the last,” she sighed, selecting one of the many small sampler bottles available and a glass. “But the optimist in me says to look at it this way...” she dropped some ice in the glass, gesturing with the ice tongs as she contined, “...at least I had a lovely dinner and quality slow dancing with a handsome gentleman *before* he managed to get me out of my clothes.” She smiled cheekily, catching a quick sideways glance at the blushing Watcher across from her.

Buffy finished making her mystery potion and turned to offer the glass to Giles. “Wah-lah.”

“What’s this?” Giles hesitantly took the glass.

“Your drink. You said you wanted one.”

He inspected the liquid with a critiquing gaze. “How do you know what my preferred poison is?”

“I don’t... well, not really. Educated guess, scotch on the rocks,” she shrugged and then said in her a mock British accent, “Shaken, not stirred.”

“I believe that would be James Bond’s drink, though I believe it was a martini,” Giles corrected cordially.

“Take it from me, Giles, in that suit, you’re the one with the license to kill,” she quipped and returned to probing the contents of the mini fridge. A second passed and the words she’d said ricocheted back within her mind. She was unabashedly flirting ... with Giles, no less. What was going on? It wasn’t just an innocent compliment like the one he gave her... his whole-arsed one. She giggled at the memory. But then again, was *that* so innocent?

The fridge door shut and Buffy settled still, sitting across from Giles and pondering what was happening. Silence filled the car, all except the faint rev of the engine as the driver sped up to pass a sluggish car ahead. Giles seemed unmoved, sipping at his drink, staring at melting ice. She wondered what he was thinking. Had he even heard her or was he too absorbed with organizing the events of the evening into that filing cabinet brain of his? Buffy gave up trying to read his expression and continued to raid the treats hidden throughout the limo.

“Thank you,” Giles spoke softly, catching Buffy off guard. She ceased her search and turned to face him.

“Not that I’m complaining, but what for?”

“For tonight, you did well.”

“You said that before,” she reminded him gently. “Maybe I made that drink a wee bit too strong.”

“I mean it, Buffy.” He seemed to struggle with finding the right words, over thinking every syllable before speaking it. “You were right in that I should let you do your job... I shouldn’t question your decisions or goad some demon into challenging me for a chance to defend my pride.”

“I think I can find it in my heart to forgive you this time, but don’t let it happen...”

“It’s hard,” Giles said quietly.

“What?”

“Watching you risk life and limb... it’s difficult for me.” He avoided looking at her, as if admitting something disgraceful.

“Giles, you watched me do that for over seven years. It’s the definition of Watcher.”

He let out a long, drawn out sigh, as if anticipating her response. "It's not the same thing. When you were acting then, you were acting on behalf of your friends, your family... of all mankind. But now, you act on behalf of one man."

"Must make you a pretty darn special man," Buffy teased, giving his leg a playful slap and moving on to experiment with the stereo settings in a panel near her. She glanced quickly at him, thinking nothing of her comment until she saw his green eyes locked on her. She paused to look at him, really look at him and saw the slightest trace of uncertainty there. "You are, you know."

"What?" He asked blankly, barely drawn out of his trance.

"Special."

Giles felt his gaze fall away, almost ashamed. She'd said it quietly but it echoed through him like a roar. Special. His stomach twisted in knots with the many possible meanings such a word could contain and how he knew she would never realize how it meant in regards to his feeling towards her. It was she who was special. The Slayer, the Chosen One; and yet, he felt nothing was as special as the woman beneath it all, the person he'd come to know and... and what? What was this stirring inside? His nerves were abuzz, his stomach churning, mouth dry and vacant of words, and his heart pounded out a beat rivaling any drum solo he'd ever heard. He braved a look up at her and found her staring back with concern.

Giles didn't move, as if his body was frozen in time, all except the subtle shimmer of his eyes searching out something in hers. She meant it as a compliment. He was special to her, the most special man in her life. But somehow, he looked as if he didn't believe her. Or worse, maybe he did. Maybe that was it. He could see through her jokes, her jibes, her flirtatious ways to see the truth behind it all. And just what was the truth?

"Buffy, I..." He stopped, his lips pressing and parting and pressing firm again, the words working to be free from his mouth.

"Yes?" Buffy asked, encouraging him to continue.

The moment came and passed, fading away on the heels of his retreating courage. His eyes fell to his cane secure in his hand and then shifted to seek escape out the window. "If you wouldn't mind, I think I'd like to call it a night and retire early."

"Sure," she responded quickly, easily, trying hard to mask her disappointment. "I'm kinda spent, myself. With all the excitement and the..." she forced a yawn, "I'll sleep good tonight."

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Naw, really... I don't want to overextend our host's generosity. It's best we get home. I'll inform the driver."

Buffy glanced around until she found a button for an intercom to the front section of the car. As she gave the man directions, Giles eyes were drawn once more to the soiled and ruined dress discarded on the floor of the limo. His grip tightened on the cane until his knuckles went white with strain, then with a sigh, he released it to join the dress.

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Buffy sprawled across the couch, pen in one hand and a pad of paper in the other, having decided to write Dawn about her new position as Giles' bodyguard. At first, she considered emailing but somehow felt the urge to put ink to paper, most likely a symptom of watching Giles organize his journals and notes.

Buffy started by telling how, as the days passed, she found herself and Giles falling into a sort of routine. Buffy would wake to find him up and a freshly brewed pot of coffee waiting for her. He would spend the early part of the morning concentrating on his paperwork as she did her tai chi exercises. He would review his emails and voicemails and catch up on his many calls to the Council as Buffy would eat the breakfast he'd prepared for her while she'd trained. For all intensive purposes, it was the picture of domesticity but without the relations. Then Giles would mysteriously tuck himself away within his bedroom for an hour or so as she tried her best to plan out the day's events and chores.

As she wrote, Buffy reflected on how chores had become the only real challenge she faced, figuring out how best to tackle the days activities safely. She had to admit the record thus far was quite positive. The meeting between the coneheads and spider creatures was uneventful but kind of wiggsome. The assembly of the crusty, crab-like demons was a success, though she still wondered how they could serve seafood hors d'oeuvres. The underground tunnel dwellers convention happened without a hitch and was surprisingly enjoyable in how it reminded Buffy of the good old days in Sunnydale. Fortunately for Giles and unfortunately for her, it had quickly become boring after the events of the dance. She could only assume word must have gone around that the Slayer was in town and keeping a watchful eye on her former Watcher. Roman's instincts were undoubtedly keen. And though he still held concerns for the upcoming conference, Buffy was feeling near overconfidence with her arrangements.

She'd driven the route and the failsafe route, checking the main streets and tributary alleyways that connected to them. The building was only two stories but quiet large, housing over forty small offices, a kitchen, five sets of bathrooms, and a single large hall in which the conference was being held. She had checked and rechecked the guest lists, verifying all parties attending; a more intimate gathering of thirty from five separate species of demons, three of which Buffy had already been introduced to. Parking was offsite which was always safer to avoid the possibility of car bombs but it did generate need for an apprehensive reliance on valets. And though Buffy knew Roman trusted her to keep Giles safe, he'd selected a few undercover Council operatives to keep an eye on things. Everything was meticulously planned out, now all she had to do was sit back and wait for the day to come. So she began to claim the training room for herself.

Buffy's pen scribbled out across the stationary, telling how she spent most of her free time in Giles' training room, dusting and straightening and polishing. As she cared for the space, she began to appreciate it more with every visit there. Giles even took a liking to the room, inexplicably showing up in time to catch the tail end of her training routines. He'd come strolling in with a tray of cookies and lemonade or casually offer her some more information on alterations needing to be made to his daily itinerary. Regardless of reason, he never failed to appear in time to pay her some compliment in her improved skills. Buffy wondered if he was trying to make up for lost time. She wasn't about to complain, she enjoyed his company.

The pen twirled loosely in her fingers as she reviewed the correspondence. She grimaced at the ink stained paper. Her writing was so loopy, so possessive of the page whereas Giles' was so subtle and under spoken, much like his voice. She'd never noticed it before. Then again, she was seeing things differently these days, seeing people differently.

Buffy's eyes perked up at the sound of the bathroom door opening at the end of the hall. She glanced back over the couch to see a billow of steam crawl along the floor and evaporate as it rose. Giles stood over the sink, wrapped up in his comfy robe preening away and it brought a smile to her face. She'd never seen him do anything of a more domestic nature besides cooking and she couldn't help her curiosity. Deciding the activity required further investigation; she discarded the pen and paper and proceeded down the hall. Once she reached the bathroom, she propped a shoulder against the doorframe, watching on.

"Whatcha doin'?" The second the question was asked, she felt idiotic. It was rather self explanatory with Giles standing in a freshly steamed bathroom, leaning over the sink with an electric trimmer in his hand.

"Curing cancer," he offered flatly with a sideways glance, combing his fingers through the mess of dampened curls atop his head. His hair got so curly when wet, go figure.

"Is that hard to do?"

"I would have to believe so, otherwise someone would have already..."

"I meant shaving, smartass."

"Not particularly, though this trimmer doesn't shape very well." With a push of a button, the trimmer hummed alive. Giles took a starting stroke, gliding the comb-guarded end along one side under his chin, triggering a rain of fine hairs to sprinkle down to decorate the white sink below. He paused to acknowledge his audience with a raised brow. "As fascinating as this must be, wouldn't you rather entertain yourself with something a bit more thrilling? Such as watching paint dry."

"Nope," she answered with a shrug. "So when you say 'shape', you mean the edges?"

"That would be it, yes." He responded with transparent sarcasm. He made another pass under his chin and Buffy watched with seeming wonder as another shower of hairs trickled

down to join the others. He paused again, suddenly uncomfortable with his spectator. "Is there something wrong?"

"Nope," she grinned. "So how do you get your moustache cut just above your lip?"

"Extreme caution," he sighed and took another pass under the opposing side of his chin. "Why this sudden interest in grooming, Buffy? I feel like a bloody wildlife program."

"I don't know. I've never felt a beard before."

"You're not missing much, believe me."

"Does it itch?"

"At times."

"Tickle?"

"Occasionally."

"Does it keep you warm?"

"I suppose so."

"Does it..."

"What would it cost me to get you to leave me alone?" He said it with a more playfully irritated tone than actual frustration and Buffy's lips curled to a broad smile.

"Can I touch it?"

Giles brow creased with fret at the request. "You want to..."

"Fondle your follicles, yep." She snickered, amused by her wit. "Something wrong with that?"

"Er... um... no... not that I can..." Giles clutched the trimmer firmly in his hand as if to, at any moment, use it to discourage her off him.

"Tell you what, I'll make you a deal. I'll help you shave; complete with shaping, if you allow me the occasion brush of a roaming finger. Deal?"

"Buffy, this is a rather odd..."

"Long time shaver here, not to mention capable handler of multiple sharp edged weapons. I think you can entrust me with this task, Giles." She gestured to the toilet. "Sit."

He smirked uncomfortably. "Buffy..."

"Come on, Giles. Consider it as part of my Slayer training." She took the trimmer from his hand and nudged him toward the toilet. He rolled his eyes as he took a seat, watching her explore the different speed settings. Once she committed to a speed setting, she smiled pleased and her hand reached out to guide his head to where she needed it. Her fingers gently cupped his chin, taking a moment to appreciate the feel of the whiskers there, and directed his face to lift up towards her.

"Feels soft," she sighed contentedly, drawing a finger along the curve of his jaw.

"Usually is right after a shower. Easier to cut then, as well."

Giles tried to hide the expression of comfort he felt with her touch but with every stroke, he melted inside. She could be so tender at times it was easy to forget how deadly she was. With her fingers pinching his chin to steady him, she glided the trimmer along the underside. Giles watched her eyes shimmering with delight in doing it. After a moment, she giggled as her hand brushed at the lapels of his robe.

"Ooops, one minor flaw in my design." She flushed briefly and with a shrug moved to return the trimmer to its case atop the counter.

"Doesn't matter. I'll get it later," he said softly and saw the grin return to her lips.

"You don't mind?"

"Might as well finish what you started," he smirked, lifting his chin high for her to continue. So she did, carefully skimming the clippers along to trim the remainder of his beard. And with the final stroke, the hum of the trimmer silenced and she set it aside, exchanging it for a set of thin scissors included in the kit.

"Try not to move," she leaned in close, blowing gently along his face to send any stray hairs falling away.

Giles eyes fluttered with the sensation, watching her rose tinted lips pucker before him only to be tickled closed by the airy kiss of her sweet scented breath.

Buffy blew softly, brushing the remnants of the trim away with a hand and glanced up to see Giles eyes closed.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to..." she stammered uncomfortably. "It's something mom used to do when cutting my hair. It's silly, I know."

"No," he assured her with a patient smile. "It's... it's quite pleasant, actually."

"Well, that's done. Time to tame those rough edges," she lifted the scissors to his face and was surprised to see his eyes still intently on hers. "Trust me."

“Implicitly,” he responded softly.

She flushed, anticipating a joke rather than a comment of such certainty. Not to be distracted from her task, she focused on the uneven edge of his moustache. Instinctively, she leaned in, concentrating on keeping steady as she parted the blades and slipped one edge just beneath the path of his upper lip. With a confident grip, she closed the blades, trimming a perfect line with a single cut. Satisfied, she drew the scissors back, brushing the thumb of her free hand along his mouth to clear it of drifting hairs. Soon, the brushing of her thumb slowed to a caress, as she admired the sloping landscape of his slightly parted, velvety plump, pink lips and wondered how they might feel if she were to simply lean down and....

“How do I look?”

“Wha... what? Huh?” she snapped out of her daze.

“Do I pass inspection?” he pressed expectantly.

“Uh... yeah. Looks... it looks good,” Buffy set the scissors aside and began to straighten up the mess she’d left, suddenly embarrassed. “Mission accomplished.”

“Is there something wrong?” He reached out to retrieve a hanging towel to aid in clean up, leaning forward to begin wiping up the hair speckling floor.

“Nope. Fine,” Buffy answered brusquely. She apprehensively peeked down to catch a glimpse of Giles’ robe falling open, revealing the dampened hairs of his chest trailing down within the shadowed line of his torso. The raw sight sent a swell of heat from down low within her and she fumbled backwards towards the bathroom door.

“I’m just... I think I need... was that the phone?” And with that, Buffy turned and hustled back out to the living room, leaving Giles baffled on what he’d just missed.

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## **Part 7: Moments Like These**

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A new day, a fresh new outlook, or at least that’s the mantra Buffy repeated in her head as she went about her normal daily routine. She’d not said more than a few words to Giles for most the morning, giving him polite acknowledgements as they intersected throughout the small flat, but nothing of any substance. And though she told herself she was only being professional, keeping idle chitchat to a minimum, she couldn’t shake the feeling she was purposefully avoiding him. But why?

With Giles tucked away in his bedroom as part of his mysterious midday disappearance act, Buffy decided to take the moment to flush things out, particularly her strange overreaction to her Watcher the day before. Suddenly she missed her sister more than ever. Awkward emotional responses called for consultation of a female perspective and she’d learned to

count on Dawn for such sisterly bonding. Just as she reached for the phone, it rang, startling her.

Buffy sat back, watched and listened. The phone was going on its third ring with no sign of Giles when she considered answering it. She eyed the answering machine, waiting impatiently for it to pick up the call but it seemed determined to ignore her wishes and its intended duty. Finally, with a sigh, she gave in and reached out, snatching up the receiver.

“Giles residence,” she answered a bit too gruffly and cursed herself under her breath.

“Miss Summers?” the polite male voice asked.

“Um... speaking,” she squeaked, unsure of how she should respond.

“It’s Roman, Buffy, is everything alright with Rupert?”

Buffy sighed with relief. “Oh, hi Roman. Yeah, he’s fine. Just taking his sweet time getting to the phone. Plus, the answering machine is apparently on strike. What’s up?”

“Nothing really, just thought I’d check in. How are you two managing?”

She considered spilling her guts out to the friendly stranger but held the urge back, shrugged and settled onto the couch with a frustrated sigh. “Same old, why?”

“Well, it’s probably nothing, really, but he hasn’t phoned in a while. A short while but still, he’s uncharacteristically quiet these days. Anything I should know about?”

“Not that I know of,” Buffy shrugged and started shuffling through some magazines littering the table. “Maybe he’s nervous about the coming conference.”

“Speaking of which, how did it go the other night? He gave me the official report but I much rather hear the sordid details.”

“Went fine,” she said quickly, unsure if she should offer any further information.

“As with Rupert, I can tell you’re going to be a wealth of information.” Roman sighed in disappointment.

“Demons, strange food, strange customs, no death... I’d say it was a success.”

“Good to hear it. He seemed a bit distracted in preparing for it. But I must admit the dress he selected was quite lovely. Took him long enough to decide.”

“Never thought Giles would be such the picky shopper.”

“I think it had something to do with whom he was shopping for.” Roman said craftily. “So tell me, how do you like the room, then?”

Buffy sat for a moment, uncertain what he was referring to. "Um, what room? I'm staying on the couch?" She glanced behind her, checking if a room had somehow mystically appeared out of nowhere.

There was a chuckle over the line. "Of course you are. That wasn't what I meant. Surely you've seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"Oh..." There was a long silence and Buffy was just about to check if Roman was still there when he finally continued. "I thought I remember Rupert mentioning that you'd seen the training room. I'm sorry."

"Oh, the training room... yeah, I've seen it," She responded, relieved that her conclusion jumping mind was way off base. "It's great. He thought of everything. I'd kill for a training room like that. Well, not really. Maybe just a little maiming." She smiled. "It just too bad that after all the trouble it must have taken to fix it up, he doesn't use it."

"Yes, well, it was never intended for him, was it?" Roman dismissed easily. "I can only hope your getting some use out of it currently."

Roman continued on but Buffy ignored him as she puzzled over the phrase 'it was never intended for him'. Never intended for Giles? Of course it was, who else would it be intended for? And then it hit her like a runaway freight train just as she heard the latch of Giles' bedroom door open and his footsteps coming down the hall.

"Gotta go!" she quickly hung up the phone and tried her best to gather her wits about her as Giles appeared from around the corner. "Hi!" She said much too brightly, immediately receiving a curious glance from the Watcher.

"Hello," he responded suspiciously. "Who was that on the phone?"

"Who, what, phone?"

"Yes, the phone, Buffy, I gather you answered it?" Giles asked, making his way into the kitchen. "Surely you noticed the machine is in disrepair due to an unfortunately place soda so you must have answered it?"

"Oh... yeah..." Buffy's mind drew a complete blank. "It was... it was no one."

"Ah... well, in that case, I hope you had a lovely conversation," he offered sarcastically. "Would you be up for some lunch or were you waiting for another call from your nonexistent friend?"

"Lunch?"

“That would be the meal following breakfast and preceding dinner. Unless you’re Xander, in which case all the customary constraints of dining cease to apply.” Giles joked and in getting no response from Buffy, peeked back around the corner at her and asked, “Are you quite alright? You seem rather distracted lately.”

“I’m fine. Good. Never better,” she answered nervously, her gaze shifting toward the hall leading to the training room then back to the inquisitive Watcher. “Lunch would be good. Let’s do that.”

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‘Roman is wrong, it’s as simple as that,’ Buffy thought as she directed her leg forward with a slow, deliberate motion and brought her arms swaying fluidly forward. ‘He was reading too much into the whole thing, is all.’ She pivoted slowly toward the large window and stared out at the rainy night sky. ‘But what if he isn’t wrong? What if there’s something more going on here? What if I’m schizoid girl around Giles because I sense there is something more here?’ She froze for a moment, contemplating. ‘What if I’m just a freak who’s imagining things? I gotta stop this. It’s Giles and I have a job to do. Stop acting like a complete dweeb and get over it!’

Giles quietly stepped up and stood at the doorway, pausing at the sight of Buffy concentrating on her workout. He reflexively combed his fingers through his dampened hair as he watched her move with grace and precision through her Tai Chi routine. He couldn’t help but be impressed; she’d perfected it within a very short time. Then again, she always had been a fast learner. Though he respected her dedication, he thought it odd that she was going through the same routine for the second time in a day. It was as if she was avoiding him. His concern soon shifted as she slowly lifted her arms and arched her back, stretching just enough to reveal a glimpse of her taut abdomen from underneath her short grey tank top. A spattering of small circular scars just off center of her navel caught Giles’ notice.

"Wanna join me?"

“Pardon?” Giles awoke from his daze, "Oh...um, I'm sorry. I've made it a habit of wandering in to interrupt your workout. I'll leave you to it."

"You don't have to. I'm just about done with..." She turned to face him, surprised to see his tall frame draped again in his attractive burgundy robe. It was untied, falling open to reveal black silk pajama pants hugging pleasingly along his hips and long legs. Above was his broad, exposed chest still glistening fresh from the shower he'd just come from. "Uh-oh..." she winced quietly. "I mean, I'm done. You can stay if you like."

‘You can do this. It’s just Giles,’ she silently commanded herself, trying to pry her eyes away from his invitingly formed torso speckled with the most fascinating peppered hairs. "You look comfy."

He glanced down, suddenly sensitive to the fact he wasn't fully dressed. "Um, quite..." He muttered and retightened his robe, "I-I was just getting ready for bed and thought I'd offer you a nightcap. But I can see you're busy so I'll just..."

"I'd love one, if you'll join me."

"Oh... alright," he answered with a trace of surprised satisfaction. "Go on with your exercises. I'll return shortly with... with something," he shrugged.

"Beer."

"Pardon?"

"How about a couple of long necks?"

His brows lifted quizzically for a moment then he grinned with amusement. "Alright then. I'll be back."

"I'll be waiting." She smiled, watching him turn and walk away. She noticed something off, suddenly realizing he wasn't sporting his cane though his limp was still evident. He was rarely without the concealed weapon and she wondered why he decided to abandon it then.

Once he'd turned the corner, she glanced around the room, taking the moment alone to remove a small pile of papers and clothes off the stacked floor pads, making room for them to get comfortable on the improvised couch. Giles returned a few minutes later with two uncapped bottles of a malty, dark beer and offered one to Buffy.

"It's all I have, I'm afraid."

"Perfect," Buffy said, briefly admiring the hint of his chest once again peeking out from his slackened robe. She pulled her gaze back to his face, relieved to see he hadn't noticed her ogling, and motioned to the stack of pads she'd prepared. "Wanna take a load off?"

"Think I'll stand," he said softly, taking a swig of his beer. His eyes drifted to the drizzle spreading along the window. "Been rather inactive today. I'd hoped for a walk but it seems the weather isn't cooperating."

Buffy took a seat and sipped her beer. "If it's a workout you're after, you could try me... I mean join me..." she suggested then with eyes wide, added, "...for some stretching. I need to cool down."

"Perhaps another time," he responded graciously, glancing down with regret to his leg. "You're rather committed as of late. I don't remember your physical regimen being so extreme before."

"Making up for the slacker attitude of my youth."

Giles turned toward her with a patient grin. "You were never a slacker, Buffy. Spirited perhaps, but never a slacker."

"That's not what you said back then." She set her bottle to the floor and leaned back on the pads, comfortably stretching out her back. "Then again, you were never really the motivational type. More of the nagging, scolding, hairy eyeball brand of inspiration. But it was for my own good. You were right."

Giles' gaze again shifted to the smattering of circular scars peeking out from under her shirt and he couldn't help his curiosity. "If you don't mind me asking, how did you acquire those?"

Buffy sat up and noted where he was looking. "Mid range shotgun blast, wide spray, not too deep but a bitch to extract." She stood and gathered up the shirt to offer him a better look. "Hurt like hell but not as bad as the others."

"Others?" He winced, brows creased with concern.

The alarm in his tone didn't slip past her. "Part of the job, Giles. I've been shot eight times."

"Eight?"

"Once in the thigh, twice in the stomach, twice in the chest, once in the right arm, once in the left and once in the right shoulder." She slipped the spaghetti strap of her thin shirt down over the ridge of her shoulder and moved in closer to allow him a better view. "Practically Swiss cheese. See for yourself?" She turned around, directing his gaze with her hand to a spot on the back of her shoulder.

Giles examined her with a macabre curiosity. Sure enough, he saw one perfectly rounded scar, almost resembling a tattoo more than a wound. Impulsively, he reached out, needing to feel it to make it real, and placed his fingers lightly to the scarred skin.

Buffy's breath caught with the unexpected touch, a closeness she hadn't predicted but once experiencing it, craved more. She closed her eyes as he drew his fingertips along her shoulder, tracing the raised skin of her old injury. It was agonizingly gentle, as if he wanted to erase the mark but couldn't bring himself to try. The soothing caress mixed with the soft, warm breeze of his breath along her neck sent shivers up her spine. And in the tender moment, Buffy prayed he'd never stop. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, his fingers left her.

"And here too," she said quickly gathering up her shirt as she turned to display the scar to her abdomen, hoping to encourage his touch to return. And it did, just as gentle and enticing as before.

With the slightest stroke, he could feel the warmth of her tensing muscles against his uncertain hand. Delicate but powerful, akin to wind, able to devastate those who would dare cross her path and yet be as gentle as the breath she sighed past her pouted lips. Her skin was so beautiful, smooth, except for the slight textured bump of the gunshot wound, and Giles

wanted to take it away, the scar as well as the pain that receiving such a wound must have inflicted.

"And... here," she breathed, gliding her fingers over the blemish dimpling her right bosom just above the border of her shirt. And with the hopeful direction, he delicately brushed along the mark with his velvet textured thumb, sending a ripple of heat pulsing out from the contact. Then with a discomfited glance, he realized what he was doing and drew back, suddenly shy. Buffy acted casually, ignoring his retreat though pained by it.

"I seem to be scarring easier these days. Looks like one Slayer perk is a limited time offer." She shrugged it off.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, makes for great stories." She watched a smile pass his lips then fade quickly away as silence filled the room. They stood there, exchanging nervous glances as they considered how best to proceed with the awkward moment.

"I noticed you're limping." She cursed herself for how loud and harsh her voice sounded, immediately regretting bringing it up. With a heavy sigh, Giles stepped away, glancing out the rain freckled window. She followed, watching as depression seeped into his poignant stare and feeling all the more remorseful for prying. "I'm... I'm sorry. I don't mean to be nosey. It's just with the injury inventory and all... I thought..."

"Shrapnel wound from a bombing in Deli last month."

"Wow! Bombing? Can I see?" She couldn't help her strange enthusiasm for such a thing. She always loved locker room talk with the guys, swapping stories with gruesome details of on-the-job hazards like some brutal pastime.

"It's nothing, really." He dismissed the request with a subtle shake of his head.

"Then let me see. Come on, I showed you mine, now you show me yours." She said it playfully in a tone he remembered from so long ago.

"Unlike your stories, mine hardly makes an entertaining tale..."

"Come on. What's the big deal? It's not as if I haven't seen you before, Giles. We used to train together, sweat together, and wrassle together," she teased, trying to make light of the request. "Don't you remember?"

"All too well." He glanced quickly to and away from her, his insecurity getting the best of him when he realized what he'd admitted.

The deafening silence returned. Buffy went to speak only to find herself with nothing to say. All evidence seemed to support what Roman said to be true. There was something happening, she felt it and it was fairly obvious Giles was feeling something as well. But

neither one of them was willing to step beyond that imaginary boundary they'd set for themselves so long ago. Buffy pivoted uneasily on her heels as she admired her surroundings once again. She couldn't stand it any longer; she needed to know the truth.

"It's for me, isn't it?" She asked, carefully watching his reaction in hope for some signal she wasn't crazy. His jaw tensed with restrained emotion and she knew the answer. But would he try to deny it?

"This room, the equipment?" She persisted. "Why, Giles? Why didn't you say anything?"

He let the question hang for a long moment, searching the starless night sky for strength. Defeated, he let out a sad sigh.

"I'd settled for a smaller flat than I'd anticipated," He started quietly. "The market was vicious at the time Willow had returned home to Sunnydale... returned home to you. Though I searched quite thoroughly, there were none to be found with more than two rooms within the commute distance I required. Roman actually found this one for me, suggesting that the largest room could be renovated to suit my purpose. Reinforced floor and ceiling with sound dampening materials installed, various wall mounts to hold the weapons racks." A faint smile curled along his lips. "The contractors thought I was insane and finished the job surprisingly fast."

Giles' head bowed forward as his voice grew solemn. "Then the First began its reign of terror and we were all thrown headfirst into war. The Council fell, a rather sobering casualty and I realized there was no security to be found anywhere here or abroad. Then came the Potentials and with them, the Bringers. Then the Turok-Han, and Wood, and then Spike." He swallowed down his regrets, trying to forgive a past he couldn't change but still answered for.

Spike. The name sent an ache through her. Anger and pain and regrets all came flooding back and Buffy gnawed at her lip in reflection.

"And in a single, regretful night, what we'd built together collapsed and with it, my hopes of..." His voice weakened to silence, unable to go on any further.

"And then Sunnydale was gone, and Spike was gone," Buffy continued. "Or at least I thought he was. And then Los Angeles and Wolfram and Hart and Angel and Rome, then... then years and more years and then this..." she said with a breaking voice, "... then now."

Buffy just wanted to make it better, obliterate those trouble times they both regretted.

"It was never meant to be this way," Giles urged gently, his eyes pleading to her. "If I'd known you were coming, I would have boxed all this up; erased it from this place."

"You didn't want me to know?"

“What good could come from you knowing?” he asked sorrowfully, his gaze seeking escape back out the window. “It was foolishness. I just couldn’t bring myself to face... If only...”

“Don’t,” she interrupted. “No ‘if only’s’. No ‘if I had to do it all over again’s’. I know now, Giles, and this place is... well, it’s perfect. You have no idea what this means to me. Thank you so much.”

Giles stared out the window but lacking focus, his mind still lingering in the past and unable to bring himself back from the hard memories of what once was. It was the gentle touch of Buffy’s hand to his hip that made him flinch, bringing him back to her. Her curious fingers retreated for a moment when his eyes shot down to question the intrusion, but then returned, determined. Giles’ face bowed forward, shyly surrendering to her inspection. He watched her fingers slip inch by excruciating inch until his body ached to escape the feelings she stirred within him.

"Let me see," she asked softly, her fingers traveling around the curve of his hip to slip beneath the folds of his robe. "Please."

He turned a sliver towards her, eyes heavy under the weight of unspoken emotion, and with a tug at the fabric, let his robe fall off his shoulders, down his arms and to the floor. He stood motionless, his gaze locked on her fingers brushing along the hint of what lie beneath his pajama bottoms.

Buffy let her eyes roam, taking in the sight of the man she’d once known as physically as any of her lovers. His torso was fit, more developed than she’d remembered yet lean. She wondered how he managed to be in such good condition knowing he didn’t use the training room he’d built for her. ‘That he built for her,’ she thought, swallowing down the emotions. ‘Built again, for her.’

Giles slowly began to curl the waist band down just enough to reveal the rest of the ghastly scar crisscrossing the rough textured skin of his waist. Buffy heard a wince, not realizing it had come from her as she pulled away.

"My god, Giles," she muttered. The scar ran along the line of his hip and continued down beneath the fabric.

"I almost lost the leg altogether. If it wasn't for the coven's healers, I'd still be in physical therapy." He explained softly. “ Midday , everyday, I have to meditate to encourage the healing process.”

“Your mysterious disappearance act,” Buffy nodded her understanding. "I’ve seen Willow do that type of meditation. Took a lot out of her. I had no idea."

"Seems to be a lot of that going around."

He reached out and tenderly cupped her shoulder. Slowly, his fingers migrated behind to brush along a scar once more, as if a silent apology for not being there when it happened. Buffy welcomed the return of his emotive touch, unconsciously moving in closer.

"Does it hurt?" She asked, glancing briefly to the scar.

"It aches in damp weather, just as that old cliché dictates."

"Aches...?" Her voice was barely a whisper as her fingertips gave into temptation, reaching out to draw along his raised skin. "Does it ache now?"

Giles felt a rush of blood course through him, waking every nerve within as her face lifted to his. Her beauty was breathtaking. "Not anymore."

Buffy moved in the blink of an eye, her hand tugging at his neck to draw him down to her. It was a shift from a longing gaze to apprehensive lips pressing to his face. Innocently clumsy in missing his mouth but so sweet as they touched down just shy of his lips, lightly grazing his beard. The contact was nervous, just as he was, and soft in their mutual trepidation for the line they were daring to cross. Giles held his breath, locked in denial as she ventured to find him. Sightless caresses revealing hunger, nose searching along nose, cheek to stubbed cheek, chin nestling to chin, until finally, with mouths parched with anxiety, they met.

So brief, minimal but insanely potent, their first kiss was glorious; the instant they connected more intimately than ever before. Reluctantly, they separated from one another, each staring thoughtfully at the other with no intention to go blindly into this unknown. Giles cupped her chin, gliding his thumb tenderly along her cheek with a rueful gleam in his eyes.

"Forgive me," he whispered.

"For what?" she asked.

"For this..." He pulled her to him, dipping his face down to lure her mouth to his once more.

She stretched to meet him, pouring everything she felt into that single, illuminating kiss.

Adrift within the gentle taste of each others tender touch, Giles and Buffy moved deliberately, calculatedly, every motion meant to explore the other further as fingers moved to join in on the unfolding experience.

Giles gathered her shirt up above her head and tossed it aside, dipping down to place a tickling kiss to the nape of her neck. Buffy nuzzled into him, twisting her fingers through his hair and bringing him down to bless her bosom with his exhilarating affections. He eagerly followed her silent request, cupping her silken bra with a firm hand as his lips pressed to the bare skin above.

“So very lovely,” he breathed against her, whispering kisses as he traveled further down. He traced a finger along the seam of her bra, barely skimming her covered nipple with a single affecting stroke.

“Again,” she moaned, leaning into his touch and guiding his face to where his hand teased. He nuzzled to her fabric wrapped breast, the fine hairs of his beard tickling through the material sending her shivering beneath him. “Touch me, Giles, please.”

His broad hand glided up her back; rediscovering her body in a new light as he pressed her closer to him. He knew every inch of her petite figure but that which lay hidden away under the shelter of a weave of silken threads. As her firm body rocked into his, unmistakable heat welling between them, he found himself consumed by the desire to learn of those mysteries as well.

“What you inspire within me, it’s astounding,” Giles rumbled as her hand raked through the sensitized hairs of his chest.

“How do you do that?” She asked, eyes darkened with passion.

“What?” He asked with a smile.

“How do you make me melt with your voice... with your lips and touch?” She strummed her fingers along the tensing muscles of his abdomen, seeking out his acceptance with every faint stroke.

He answered with a passionate kiss, silencing her to mere groans and wincing as his hands took to exploring her body again, leaving no bend unnoticed. A tingle chased his touch up her spine as she deepened the kiss, leaning into him. His mouth spoke wordlessly to her, every pinch and suckle admitting his need while she expressed her passions with her hands, urging fingers creeping beyond the margins of his pants.

The passionate kiss evolved, turning ambitious as Buffy slinked her tongue along his parted lips, begging entry. Giles received her, encouraging her with his own savory licks. She began to shuffle backwards and he pursued her, his mouth never leaving hers as she came to rest with her back against the wall. She felt his thigh slip between hers, pressing against her overheated curves, eliciting a grunt of pleasure she was powerless to hold in any longer.

He wanted to hear it again, that delightful sound of liberation. He began to sway, hips moving in a gentle cadence, his firm thigh stroking along the crux of her legs.

“How do you make me feel like this? To need to feel every inch of you touching me, rubbing against me... burying inside me?”

She could feel him stiffen along the inside of her thigh, thick and demanding as he pressed his desire to her again and again. It was frictional sex, a union of rhythm and rubbing that spurred their hunger with every motion. Her mouth fell loose, lost within the sensation of such a basic touch. She'd never known anyone who could drive out such pleasure from her

by the sheer pressure of his intuitive tempo. She clawed at his waist, urging him onward as she wrapped her leg up over his hip. A wince made her eyes shoot open and she could see Giles' face twisted in pain.

"What is it?" Her eyes darted between his clenched teeth and his midsection. He buckled forward, hand pressed to his scarred hip.

"It's nothing," he whispered choppily, straightened with a grunt and moved in to claim her mouth again.

She pulled away. "It's something."

"Buffy, I'm fine." He nibbled again at her lips only to be denied.

"You don't need to prove anything to me. I'm not going anywhere, Giles," She insisted gently and his face fell with disappointment. "Talk to me."

"This is... you don't..." he mumbled, eyes unable to look at her. "I... I should go."

"No, you shouldn't." She stopped his retreat, slipping her hand in his. "Come here."

She slowly maneuvered around him and toward the stacked pads, guiding him along with her. They walked together, Buffy giving him all the time he needed to work his aching leg. She directed him to sit, knelt between his legs, and gazed up at his face glistening with sweat and strain.

"Talk to me," she pleaded gently.

He shook his head in shame and reached out his hand to stroke her cheek.

"I don't deserve this, deserve you. I should have known," he said quietly, pulled away to run his fingers fretfully through his hair, face wrought with disappointment. "I'm not the man I once was, Buffy. I'm... I'm broken and old..." he sighed, "And I can't believe you honestly want this."

She reached up, caressing his scruffy cheek with her hand. "Don't you ever say that! You're not old, Giles. Everything about you is new; beautifully, excitingly new. And I've never wanted anything more in my life."

Buffy leaned forward to grace him with a kiss, gentle lips pressing to his with such sincerity and hope he couldn't deny the tang of passion presented there.

"Let me show you," she said with a whispering kiss and her hip pressed firm to his groin, reawakening his flagging erection with an urging nudge. And as her tongue sought out his and her fingers crept beneath the waist band of his pants, he felt wanted and it excited him.

Giles' hands strayed as if exclusive of one another, one working to release the hooks of her bra, the other guiding her rocking hips to hasten the tempo, all moving to build upon his growing desires. With a skillful twist and flick, Buffy's bra loosened.

Buffy's lips smiled along his, giggling faintly as he slipped the strap of the bra down over her shoulders. He smiled in turn, nipping playfully at her bottom lip and continuing on down her neck. His teeth grazed along her collar bone, changing to tender kisses on her chest until he reached the slack fabric still cupping her breast.

She gasped as his teeth gently bit through the material and scrapped it off, revealing her naked breasts to his awaiting lips. He leaned in to tempt her with a feathery blow, admiring the budding nipple that resulted.

"So beautiful," he whispered and pressed a soft kiss as a preface to bathing it with a tantalizing lick. Soon, he claimed her nipple full within his mouth, arousing her with sultry suckles.

The hot, moist embrace of his mouth to her nipple sent her pulsing with need. Every cell wept for him and with a wrenching grip of his damp curls, she held him to her, forbidding him to escape.

"God yes," she hissed as his tongue swirled around her. She winced as he pulled back only to groan with his return to the neglected breast. "So good."

The panted praise was addictive and Giles sought out more with moan provoking kisses as he dipped his fingers beneath the elastic band of Buffy's sweat pants. With an uncontainable gasp of glee, he saw the awe inspiring sight of her golden head falling back as he introduced his fingers to her, one meandering stroke at a time. Her face flushed a rosy glow, her mouth falling open in a silent cry for more, and her eyes clamped shut, locking herself away in the sensation of the moment.

"I want you," she grunted, slipping quickly off him to strip bare. "I need you."

Giles worked his pajama bottoms and boxers down his legs and tossed them aside, remaining supported on the pads all the while. And in that instant, both naked and exposed, each paused to consider the other.

"Are you sure?" Giles asked with an expression void of expectation.

Buffy responded only with a confident smile, dripping sensuality as she moved towards him. When she reached the edge of the padding, she lifted her leg up and stepped forward, leaning into him as she placed her thigh on one side. Giles took the opportunity to offer a kiss to the smooth, inviting skin tempting him. She shivered with his touch, caressing his cheek as she braced his shoulder and brought her other leg up.

He carefully balanced her as she straddled him, tucking her legs behind to encircle his waist. She inched down, slowly lowering herself to blanket his groin with her eager flesh. His eyes

closed as his forehead dip forward to rest on her welcoming lips, overwhelmed by the pleasure of her actions. Buffy smiled against his hot skin. He was so unbelievable handsome, so real.

“Look at me, Giles. Please, I need to see you,” she instructed him tenderly, directing his face up towards hers with a caress. His eyes opened, glossed over with desire. She kissed him lightly as a reward. “I need you to see me.”

He watched as she began to move, hips shifting, core grinding against him, the most exciting woman he'd ever known slicking him with her glistening flesh. She smiled dreamily as she felt him pulse along her rubbing skin, a ricochet of pleasure to unquenched desire. His shaft, hardened and undaunted, pushed up to claim more of her, searching boldly as she rocked forward and back.

Flesh within and enfolding flesh, bodies taut like bows, ready to fire with the slightest of triggers. The pair concentrated on breath and sight, focusing on each others bodies reacting. Then with a ragged breath, their eyes meeting in one final act of consent, Buffy thrust forward as he dove within her. At last, fused together as one.

Buffy let out an uneven gasp with accepting him, rejoicing in the fullness she'd discovered and never wanting it to end. Giles released the breath he'd held with entering her, savoring being sheathed within intoxicating flesh. They steadied their breathing, refocused their minds, and met each others gazes. With the sweet exchange of mild smiles, his hands curved along her hips and guided her to move.

Buffy followed his request with unhurried and controlled motions. Forward and back, inward and outward, tensions mounting and sensations flaring. He rose to her, wanting depth and she gave into him, sinking until he touched her so deeply she could feel the echoes of his touch ring through the entire length of her body. Increasingly, rhythmically, they came together and pulled apart, bodies working in unison to build upon the already feverish pressures.

They learned from each other with every thrust, chancing new angles of penetration to reach every recess within her. She moaned as he reached deeper still and the sound was like a drug, inspiring him to sample her further. Soon, he was beyond pain, beyond his own pleasure and savoring hers. And with the immersed friction, impulse took hold and drove them onward, shedding all restraint to embraced only desire.

"Giles... so.... close..."

"Lord you're beautiful," he gasped as he worked to drive them toward release. "I want to feel you wash around me."

"Oh god... so good..."

"I'm begging for you, Buffy... please." His thrusts lifted them from the padding and Buffy moaned with the blissful force.

"Harder, Giles... so... hard..."

"Only... for... you..."

It swept them both up like an uncontrollable tornado; muscles contracting, flesh gripping flesh and bodies drenched with sweat and desire. Giles and Buffy cried out in the ecstasy of their orgasms taking them. Their bodies went stiff, shuddering and arching.

Giles groaned, declaring his release as he poured out every drop of what he'd kept hidden away for so long.

Buffy drowned inside, flooded by him and the raw emotions suddenly consuming her. And with his release, she realized her own.

"I love you."

It was said in the heat of the moment, inspired by the throes of passion and it took a moment for either to comprehend who'd actually spoken the words. Giles eyes opened to see Buffy's wide with shock.

"Oh... oh my god. Giles, I... I..." she stammered as realization sank in. "I didn't mean ..."

His face seemed to sink.

"Buffy..."

"Don't, please." She separated herself from him, quickly gathering up her things and rushing to cover herself.

"Buffy, we need to talk."

"I didn't mean it. It was just the..."

"Truth?" He finished softly.

"God, I don't know." She shook her head vehemently, clothes filled hands waving wildly. "Forget it. Forget it all."

"Never." He stood, folding slightly with a tremor of his injury but working through the pain to straighten tall. "I could no more forget this than forget you. Buffy, I lo..."

"Don't say it, Giles, Please!" She interrupted him, shaking her head frantically. "Just... just don't." She quickly escaped from the room.

"I love you, too," he finished softly to the empty space before him.

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Part 8: In the Line of Duty

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Giles woke to the sound of the door closing softly, an old instinct he'd developed from his Watcher days. Buffy would try to come in quietly to avoid waking him so he adapted to waking with the slightest sound. It came to be a sixth sense, as if he knew when she was near.

Sure enough, he opened his weary eyes to see Buffy moving gingerly as she crept past the couch he had sprawled across in wait for her.

"Are you alright?" Giles sat up and quickly struggled to his feet, causing a look of panic to widen the Slayer's eyes.

"I didn't want to wake..." she paused. "Sorry I woke you."

"Are you okay?" Giles asked again, moving closer with an outstretching a hand.

"Yes... I mean, no... not really." She smiled meekly. "Unless the definition of okay has been revised to being a total nervous wreck topped with a hearty helping of anxiety attack and a generous sprinkling of eep-age." She stepped out of range of the consoling hand and headed toward the hall. Giles could see she was soaked to the bone, probably from wandering in the rain for most the night.

"You're drenched. We should get you out of those wet clothes before you catch your death..."

"Not such a good idea," she said uneasily, her eyes quickly darting to and away from him, "Seeing as what that led to before."

Giles relented, uncertain what to make of that; regret and perhaps more than just a little confusion. He could understand completely, battling with his own doubts on what had occurred between them. Their relationship had changed in an instant and now their futures lie at the foreground of a question mark. An awkward place to be, if not hopeful.

"We need to talk..."

"No, we really don't." She turned and swiftly began to walk away, surprised as Giles caught her wrist in an gentle yet insistent grip.

"Buffy, we do. This... what happened last night was..."

"A mistake," she finished, glancing regretfully over her shoulder.

He flinched as if stricken by a ghostly hand across his face and released her.

“I was going to say special,” he sighed, wearing a wounded smirk. Then, as his humor faded, he tucked his disappointment away behind his hand as it combed through his messed hair. “But it seems once more, we’re not on the same page.”

“I’m on that page, Giles. All over that page! I underlined, highlighted and bookmarked that page. It was special... it really, really was.” Her eyes glistened on the verge of tears. “I meant what I said. I do love you, Giles.”

His face softened a little with a faint smile. “Is that so bad a thing?”

“But I **\*can’t\***.”

“And I suppose it makes no difference to know I love...”

She stopped him with a raised hand. “Please don’t say it. It’ll only make this worse.”

“Worse...” Giles got that all too familiar sinking feeling. “I know I’ll regret asking, but make what worse, exactly?”

“Like you didn’t see this coming?” She smiled sadly. “You won. You’re getting your wish. I’ve put in a request for transfer.”

He held back his words of argument for misconstruing his assumed wishes and settled for a curt, “I see.”

“It’s already been approved. After the summit, I’m flying back to the states.” She couldn’t look at him, looking everywhere but at his stony stare. “I’ve already arranged for a replacement.”

Giles bit back his bitterness. “How very... efficient of you.”

“Come on. It’s not like you thought this was a good idea to begin with. And I’m sure me turning into a raging floozy, trampy, ho went a long way in sealing the deal.”

“That’s not at all true and you know it.”

“I messed up, Giles... again!” Buffy wasn’t hearing him, determined to ignore all points to the contrary. “It’s getting to be a bad habit with me when I’m with you.”

“I’d have to agree, present conversation a clear demonstration of that assumption...”

Buffy interrupted him with a submissive gesture, “I know what I’m doing... why I’m doing. It’s for the best.”

“Yours or mine?”

"I'm not going to play the blame game, here. I'm the way guilty party and the gala ends here... ends now." She spoke firmly, as if she were still trying to make herself believe her resolution. "I wanted to help you, to be here for you. But not like this. I never wanted to ..."

"To what?" He urged her sharply, losing patience. "To care?"

"That's not fair. I've always cared, Giles." Buffy objected, wounded and more than a little defensive. "I never wanted to hurt you. But you were right, I shouldn't have stayed. You knew this wasn't going to work. I knew this wasn't going to work but like always I couldn't take no for an answer. At least I had the foresight enough to have a fall-back plan."

"Which entails running away, apparently."

"I'm not running... okay, maybe I am. But this was never supposed to happen."

Giles couldn't contain his frustration any longer, wedging his fists to rest on his hips. "And what would that be, luv? The part where I fell in love with you or the part where you fell in love with me?"

That gave her pause and her eyes shimmered with tears.

"Both," she whispered.

They stood quiet for a long moment, neither one able or willing to break the heavy silence.

Buffy spoke quietly, pained, "I can't stay and watch you do this... this work of yours? I can't send you out to... to endanger you, Giles. I can't watch someone I love risk life and limb out there."

"I did."

"But what if you died under my watch..."

"As you did under mine?"

More silence, stalemate.

"I can't do this. I can't love you."

"You mean you **\*won't\*** love me." His intense stare burrowed a hole through her, demanding her to see things for what they were.

His face softened, almost to the point of looking worn and somehow aged with the burden of the argument. He continued on with a soft-spoken voice, "You know what's in my heart, how I feel about you. Regardless of what you've brought yourself to believe, I think we both know this has little to do with profession but rather, has everything to do with commitment. I'm not a demon. I'm not a soldier or an Immortal... I'm no longer even a bloody Watcher.

You know exactly what I am and who I am. There are no excuses with me, Buffy. It's come as you are or not at all. If that's not enough for you, then you're free to leave."

Buffy's mouth crept open as if to speak then shut with awkward silence. She turned and dragged herself to the bathroom. Before shutting herself away from him as she'd hoped to do with her heart, she said softly, "We'll leave at seven."

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The room was packed with all walks of life and some not of the living at all. A gathering of demons, zombies, apparitions, and otherworldly representatives mingled amongst themselves amidst the festive atmosphere of a southwestern décor and the scent of spicy ethnic cuisine.

Giles did his best to remain focused on the task at hand but found his eyes again searching her out. Buffy stood along a wall, head slowly turning as she scanned the room, looking much more like a human security camera than the beautiful woman she'd been in their last evening out together. She'd made it a point to dress for business and duty, dark grey suit with the minimalist amount of flare. But what bothered Giles most was that her eyes lay hidden away behind cold, sheltering sunglasses. Though he knew well that they were an important tool of her newly chosen trade, he couldn't help but wonder if it was to hide her stray glances to him.

Even with the air of professionalism about her, he ached to touch her, to steal away a kiss in the shadows of the hall or whisk her away into an unoccupied side room. But that was the point, wasn't it? Or at least the point she was determined to stand by as her alibi for leaving him. He cursed himself for having pride enough to deny begging her to reconsider. How hard would it have been to simply say 'stay'... to say 'I love you' and make her feel it with one more promising kiss?

At the very least, he had one unforgettably intimate evening with her.

The dull ache in his chest couldn't help but make him wonder if one night was just one too many.

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"Miss Summers, pleasure to see you again." Buffy forced a smile at the approaching gentleman.

"Likewise, Sir Crackenfir." She wished she had the motivation enough to offer more of a greeting but her eyes kept finding Giles through the crowd and the bothersome discovery left her mouth empty of friendly words.

"I see Rupert has taken to mingling solo this evening. This, I assume, is purely a strategic precaution." The demon raised a curious brow in expectation of an answer.

"Not sure what you mean."

“It would be a shame to cast you to the shadows when you light up the room as you did the other evening.”

She faked another appreciative smile; he was just trying to be polite. “Thank you for your concern but this is a self-induced sidelining. I’m working.”

“Working? Of course. That explains it.”

“Explains what.”

“What such an accomplished warrior would be doing on the arm of a failed Watcher.”

“Failed?”

“Forgive my impertinence. Rupert is a gentle and thoughtful man and I mean him no disrespect. Had he completely failed, you would not have returned to the land of the living. I simply meant that it was kind of you to charity him with your expertise. After all, you are a warrior while he is but a mouth piece for humanities somewhat unbalanced agenda.”

“It’s not charity.”

“Then the Council must be paying quite the handsome stipend.”

“I’m not here for the pay.”

“So it’s a matter of advancement, then. Quite understandable. But a word for the wise, you could fare far better working for me, my dear.”

Buffy felt herself even more tongue-tied with Crackenfir’s assumptions. “You got it so wrong. It’s not charity or money or advancement.”

“Then what holds you to him?” He cocked his head slightly askew and gave a clever smile, awaiting a response.

Buffy was flustered and glanced sideways at her companion for a long moment before shifting her attentions to watch Giles shake the clawed hand of a feathered, goat demon.

“He put you up to this, didn’t he?” She grumbled.

“I’m here on my own behalf, Miss Summers, I assure you.” Crackenfir smiled easily.

“Nothing holds me to him, actually. A matter of fact, I’m leaving after tonight.”

“That would be most unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate or not, I have to.”

“Might I ask why?”

“You can ask,” she smirked sadly, not ready to admit even the slightest of details.

“Forgive the prying of an old sentimental fool but your heart speaks volumes of what your mouth will not.”

“And what is my nosy heart saying?” She grumbled, growing more tired with the conversation and the inquisitive demon.

“One would have to be blind not to see the truth that you care more for him than a person in your station should dare to.”

Finally, someone gets it! “Then my heart would be absolutely right,” She said with satisfaction.

“No, Miss Summers, that is what your mind believes, the lonely mind of a Slayer focused on self preservation and duty. It’s your heart that bears consideration, now... the heart of a woman.” His gaze moved to Giles, drawing hers there with it. “And the soul of the man that longs to capture it.”

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“How goes the good fight, Rupert?” Roman asked as he slapped a friendly hand to the former Watcher’s shoulder.

“Quiet well, Roman. How are things at the Council?” Giles responded with distraction, noticing how all the demon acquaintances seemed to suddenly disperse with the Council member’s appearance.

“As well as can be expected. Things are rather tight at present,” Roman gestured an inviting wave to a passing N’Gravic which quickly moved on, ignoring the pleasantries. “We could really do with the sound voice of experience. Too bad you’re busying yourself in the political stew these days.” He smiled teasingly. “Speaking of which, how does that lovely partner in crime of yours. I see Buffy has chosen to make herself scarce tonight.”

Giles was relieved with the interruption when a voice announced, “Ladies and gentleman... if you will...”

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With a raised voice, a short, stout, multi-armed shape-shifting demon lured everyone’s attentions to him. The crowd hushed with the announcement and followed the request to assemble. The various representatives took their seats at the circular wooden table centered in the hall. Giles waited until everyone was seated before taking his own. He directed the attendees to refer to the documents presented before them and began to go over the details contained within. It was all so formulaic, so dry and dull, like watching the public access

channel when the town meeting is broadcast. And try as she might to be attentive, Buffy quickly found her mind wandering.

Images twisted the concentration of her mind, refusing to remain buried. A sensual motion of hands along feverish skin, passionate caresses tickling slick crevasses. The sizzling heat of his textured tongue as it sought out her lips and more. The pressing of his flesh to hers as it searched for that longing place, that notch that needed to be filled and was so perfectly by him. The churning of rigid heat, all hardened velvet along her most intimate flesh... within her moist embrace. The memory alone was enough to send her body reeling, yearning to revisit those sensations again.

It was the hell she knew would come with what had happened, the unfortunate aftermath of a selfish night of desire with the man she promised to protect with her life. Now all she could manage was a blank stare as her mind filled with the thoughts of touching him, tasting him, making love to him just one more time in a selfish need to fill that lonely void again.

How can she do her job when all she can think about is him?

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The presentation part of the proceedings concluded and the debates began as Giles moderated the diverse representative's heated exchanges. Buffy was impressed. He was exceedingly professional, inspirationally detached and darn-right dead sexy... even with the big words and boring drone. His peppered tufts had relaxed after long hours of heated discussion, curling down to tickle his creased brow. His jaw clenching in restrained anger as one party accused him of favoritism only to be transformed into a brilliant smile, all patience and confident. His long, lean fingers trailed a resolved line across the page of the contract as he read aloud and the sight sent a tingle through Buffy at imagining what it would be like to be that paper.

It was downright maddening and she couldn't wait to escape the temptation and torture.

It was a flash of metal out of the corner of her eye, mere nanoseconds passing as the weapon went from suit coat to hand to air and aiming straightaway toward Giles, brandished by a tall figure dressed in an uninteresting navy tailored suit. Buffy reacted without thought, pure instinct sending her running as fast as her legs could carry her after the assailant. She thought of yelling out but favored against it to avoid alerting the attacker and interrupting the proceedings. The figure stalked through the crowd, making its way closer to a better vantage point and clearer path to its intended target. A murmur rose with the unfolding action as eyes shifted to join the Slayer in her charge.

“With all parties in agreement, I'd have to declare this session...”

Giles finally glanced up from the paperwork, eyes meeting Buffy's panicked expression in an instant of realization. He jerked to his feet, swiveled fast to see the barrel of the pistol come into view. A shot rang out followed by another and another as the crowd scattered in terror for the exits.

In an instant, the assailant was enveloped within a horde of Prakintar's and brutally wrestled to the ground. Giles took a brief inventory of the representatives, searching for any signs of wounded. They all stood shaken but otherwise unharmed. It wasn't until the alarmed mutterings of the remaining crowd drew his attention away that he finally noticed the body collapsed to the floor before him. It was Buffy, eyes closed, body motionless and silent. Giles' heart stopped.

"No," he said with an agonized whisper and fell to his knees beside her. He sat for a moment, utterly stunned by seeing her fallen... again. Forcing a breath, he apprehensively reached out to caress his fingertips along her cheek and pleaded softly, "Buffy?"

There was no answer and he called out for her again, more urgently with a broken, begging tone. Still silence and he swallowed down his fear.

"You can't do this, Buffy. You just can't, you hear me?" He commanded and carefully tucked his hands around to cradle her in his arms. She slumped limply in his grip, head falling back and face ashen. "Buffy, please..."

"Please what?" a shallow voice came from below and Giles pulled back to gaze down at the subtly smiling Slayer, her eyes fluttering open.

"Please don't leave me." His fingers trembled as they drew along the gentle slope of her cheek.

"Okay," she answered with dizzy compliance and carefully pushed herself to her feet, leaving Giles still kneeling and stunned, eyes darting between her and the floor she'd occupied seconds before.

"I... I don't understand..." he said, eyes searching her surprisingly animated body. "I thought you'd been shot?"

"Oh, I was," she responded easily and winced as she gathered back the fabric of her jacket and shirt, revealing a thin, freshly damaged armor plated vest. "You think a lady with my impressive record goes commando? May not the best out there but it works enough and doesn't make me look fat under this suit."

Giles sprang to his feet and rushed to take her into his arms. "My lord, I thought I'd lost you."

"Naw... can't get rid of me that easily." She brought her hands up and wrapped them around Giles.

She'd almost lost him. In an instant, like so many times before, but hadn't. It was like hugging a miracle, lost in the wonderful feeling of being in his arms, in having him in hers. She considered what had just transpired, how she managed to be so completely absorbed within her thoughts of him and still take the bullet. There was no greater proof, except perhaps those beautiful emerald eyes staring relieved down at her. "I meant it, you know?"

“Meant what?” He asked quietly, combing the hair tenderly from her face.

“When you said ‘please don’t leave me?’” She smiled as she stroked the concern from his crumpled brow. “I won’t.”

His lips curled to a smile, that patient, gorgeous smile that said everything was alright. “Is that a promise?”

“No. It’s more of a threat.” She grinned and pulled him in for a deserving kiss.

The few feminine guests still in attendance chorused an approving ‘aw’ with the display.

“Looks as if we are a long way off from sealing the peace in regards to your associates, Rupert.” Crackenfir’s voice interrupted. Giles and Buffy apprehensively separated, turning their attentions on the Prakentar’s newly acquired prisoner, a human member of the Council Special Forces division.

Giles shook his head. “Officer Miller, can’t say it comes as too much of a bloody disappointment...”

“Fuck you, you poncy traitor!” A heavy hoof to the midsection sent the man buckling to the floor and Giles smiled graciously at his defender, none other than Ricky, the bully Prakintar who was donning a fresh black eye and curiously missing a fang in his toothy smile.

“I’m afraid the Council security has oddly thinned to an unimpressive number,” Crackenfir mentioned suspiciously.

“We were not at all a part of this. I assure you,” Roman insisted, pushing through the crowd to reach his old friend. “These... these uncivilized beasts are to blame in this. I think it’s become deathly obvious that this fruitless hobby of yours, Rupert, is getting quite out of hand.”

“Hobby?” Giles protested.

“It was one of your headhunters that let that bullet fly in hopes to end one of your own. Care to explain that, Watcher?” Crackenfir questioned.

“He was acting of his own accord. As for the men’s absence... it was simply a matter of unwise timing, is all.” Roman suggested. “They were momentarily unavailable.”

“I find that highly suspect, don’t you? There is a bold attempt on Rupert’s life by a lone gunman who managed to bypass metal detectors and the Council security detail leaving only a sole protector nearby and the only present Council operative on the premises during the attack just so happens to be the assailant himself? I question your tactics, Watcher.” Crackenfir grumbled accusingly and looked to Buffy. “Are you alright, my dear?”

“Fine. Just stings a little and I’m sure I’ll have a Technicolor rainbow bruise tomorrow. But I’m good.” Buffy smiled. “Really, really good.” She wrapped her arm around Giles’ waist and gave him a relieved squeeze.

“This has gone on long enough, Giles. It’s time you returned to the Council, to attend to more proper work befitting an accomplished Watcher and not this... this futile exercise in interspecies relations.”

“I happen to feel we’ve made progress here, regardless of what your Council believes,” Giles argued. “Much in contrast to your impressively flawed security detail, I might add. If you’d really like a word or two from the voice of experience, I’d highly recommend you focus your attentions more on disciplining your inadequate Reich than on recruiting me back into your self-important fold.”

“I assure you this matter will be thoroughly investigated,” Roman insisted.

“Hmmm.... Quite. Pity I won’t be around to review the entertaining records of the evenings events. I’m sure it would make fascinating reading,” Giles responded tersely.

“What are you saying, Rupert?” Roman asked nervously.

“That I’m no longer in need of the Council’s assistance.”

“That’s absurd...”

“Moreover, I’ll expect my things boxed and delivered to my flat before the end of the week otherwise your astounding failure in this matter will become the laughing stock of all the demon nations in attendance.”

“This is ludicrous. It was simply a matter of oversight, Giles.”

“An oversight that nearly got him killed,” Buffy stormed forward, gesturing back at the Prakintar’s. “I put more faith and trust in these ‘uncivilized beasts’, as you called them, than I do in your so-called security team?”

“Be reasonable in this,” Roman pleaded in frustration. “I don’t envy your chances, one retired Slayer and half debilitated, former Watcher? How do you propose to keep him safe, Buffy?”

“With a little help from her friends,” Crackenfir smiled and stepped forward in a show of support. Ricky quickly joined along side his boss as well as the other Prakintar’s. Cane and his band of N’Gravics made their presence known, coming forward as well. Soon other demons, many of whom Buffy knew were in dispute with one another, stood together, united in their endorsement of the former Watcher turned unlikely peace keeper.

“I no longer work for the Council, Roman,” Giles declared proudly and gestured to the crowd of demons. “I work for them. As it should be.”

Admitting defeat, Roman nodded with as much good humor as he could manage. "So be it. I'll make the necessary arrangements."

"Thank you," Giles said and returned his attentions on the crowd, extending his hand in thanks to his improbable supporters.

Buffy slipped back a few steps, letting him mingle as she watched the Council take the unsuccessful assassin away in handcuffs. She reached out and gripped Roman's wrist, stopping him. The Council man turned to her with a look of surprise.

"What can I do for you Miss Summers?"

"You tried to play me. Bringing me here in hopes of talking him into quitting... to bring him back to you."

"It wasn't my intention to..."

"You better pray that I never find out you had anything to do with this attempted murder." Buffy threatened. "Because if I do, me and all my Slayer buddies along with a certain powerful witch friend and my well-connected contractor friend will introduce you to the darker side of the hero business. You'll learn the true meaning of the term hostile takeover."

With that, she released him and watched until all the Council members left. She turned around to see Giles staring at her from across the room, a contented smile along his lips and a fresh sparkle in his eye.

She returned the pleased smile and silently mouthed, "I love you." It felt so right saying it and even better when he responded with his own silently mouthed, "I love you."

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"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Buffy asked, forehead crinkled with concern.

"As ready as I'll every be," Giles smiled, barely masking his own apprehension.

"You can change your mind, you know. We can make other arrangements."

"It's alright, Buffy. I knew this was an eventuality. It'll be fine."

"Okay then, here we go..." She shrugged and with a turn of the knob, opened the door to a very grumpy faced Dawn.

"What's with making me wait?" Dawn frowned. "This isn't a doctors office, right?"

"Just some last minute preparations," Buffy covered and helped her sister with her bags. The moment the young lady was luggage free, she pushed passed Buffy and charged after Giles.

“OHMYGOD! Sasquatch Giles!” She giggled giddily as she scratched teasingly at his beard then pulled him into a frantic hug. “I so, so, so missed you!”

“I missed you too, Dawn,” he said gently, working clumsily to gain enough space to return the embrace. He just managed an awkward trio of pats to her side as she pulled away and started to tour the small space of the flat.

“Nice place. Really cozy and... um... compact,” She said tactfully. “Way to use the space.”

“Well, I make due.” Giles smiled graciously and helped Buffy with the bags.

“First things first,” Dawn fidgeted a little, “Bathroom and bedroom.”

“This way...” Buffy lead her down the hall motioning toward the bathroom and continuing on by. “That’s the little girl’s room...”

Giles objected with a corrective cough.

“And the not-so-little-boys room so keep it sparkling spic-n-span clean or you’ll suffer the wrath-o-hairy-eyeball, got it?” Buffy warned.

“Hey, I’m not the one who hangs blood and dust stained nylons to dry in the shower...” Buffy’s furious glare stopped Dawn’s observation cold. “Nevermind. Got it.”

“And this is where you’ll stay,” Buffy smiled proudly as she opened the door to the training room. Dawn’s mouth dropped open in wonder as she made her way inside.

“Wow... this is...”

“Perfect,” Buffy concluded, offering a thankful smile to Giles who stood quietly amused in the doorway.

“I was going to say ‘da bomb’, but yours sounded better.” Dawn admired the displays of weapons along the walls and finally noticed the futon unfolded to an improvised bed. “I know it’s only for a month, and it’s not that I’m complaining, but even when Buffy and I were tiny tots, we didn’t share a room. How in the world are we gonna manage with one twin size bed?”

“It’s all yours, Dawn. Well... except for when I need to train, so you’re gonna have to get acquainted with that insanity inspiring enigma that is your folding bed there. Tuck it away when you’re not using it. But other than that, this room’s yours.”

“But I thought you said he only has two rooms. If this is mine, then where...” Dawn turned and froze at the sight of Buffy wrapped tenderly in Giles arms, both facing her with calm and hopeful smiles.

“Riiiiiiight...” Dawn drawled out with a subtle smile curling her lips. “You have to tell me everything!”

Buffy opened her mouth to speak only to be hushed by a demanding hand from Dawn.

“\*After\* I acquaint myself with the loo,” she snickered. “And you say I talk gibberish.” She shook her head as she carefully maneuvered her way passed them both.

“She took it rather well,” Giles smiled, pleased as he watched the door shut behind his new tenant.

“Too well. She’s in shock.” Buffy slipped back into his arms, nuzzling into the scruffy beard tickling along her nose. “Give it a moment to sink in and the shiznit will definitely hit the fan.”

“Are you two going to continue with this butchering of the English language the entire time?” Giles teased, holding her closer. “I distinctly saw a smile there. Perhaps she expected this?”

“That’s rather optimistic of you, Mr. Giles.” Buffy reached up and guided his face to hers, placing a feathery kiss to the very tip of his nose.

“A certain alteration in lifestyle has turned me on to a new way of thinking,” he grinned and returned the kiss, placing another one briefly to her lips. “Or perhaps it’s something in the water.”

“Perhaps it’s that persistent beard of yours growing inward. I think it’s about time for another special visit by the super friendly stylist that makes house calls.” Buffy clawed her nails through his beard, gripped and tugged him down for another, more thorough kiss. “Though that scruff certainly has its benefits, Sasquatch Giles.”

“Too much information. That’s more than enough of that!” Dawn ordered as she returned from the bathroom, rolling her eyes as the couple clumsily separated. “Get a room. Oh, right... done and done.”

Giles hazarded the first in what he thought would certainly be a lengthy conversation. “Dawn, I know this is...”

“Yeah... you could say that,” Dawn interrupted with an easygoing shrug. “But not so much.”

“So does that mean that this... that we’re okay here?” Buffy asked nervously.

Dawn turned around to face them both and a stern look fell across her face. She lifted her hand and pointed sharply. “You two... go to your room!” She smiled, pleased.

“Don’t mind if we do,” Giles nodded obediently and sent Buffy on her way with a wink, following along after her.

Dawn shook her head at the frolicsome twosome as they disappeared behind a closed door. “Always wanted to say that.”

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The End.