

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER: WHIPPING BOY
by
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Whipping Boy

The Croylands – 710 AD

The trip across the marsh and back had been longer and more tiring than Guthlac had anticipated, but he had been in desperate need of bread and wine. *Visitors were coming*, he told himself. *Visitors. We must be ready for them.*

While he had not been to the village proper in the many years since he began his retreat, there was a lovely couple of Believers who lived more-or-less within rowing distance and who maintained a larder of supplies for when Guthlac came scavenging. The wine was old, but the bread was fresh. Guthlac always seemed to know when there would be fresh-baked bread in their hut.

The blessings of living a godly life, the couple imagined.

And perhaps this was true. Guthlac had renounced his belongings to live under the Grace of God for lo these seventeen years. He had embowered himself on an island in the demon-haunted region of the Croylands and had survived against all probability. This was within itself nothing short of miraculous, but his knowing that a fresh loaf was baking in an oven miles across the void of the swamp, ah, this raised the hackles on the backs of the faithful couple's necks.

He's destined for a special place in Heaven, they told villagers.

Perhaps this was also true. Or perhaps as his faculties took leave of him Guthlac's other senses made up the difference. After all, little changed in the depths of the swamp, so a whiff of bread (even bread a few miles distant) would seem to his nose like lightning across a clear night sky would seem to his failing eyes.

This however was true: Guthlac was sick, dying. And he was losing his mind.

Still, guests needed to be attended to, he told himself. Hence the bread and the wine and the trip across the Croylands which had all but drained him of what little strength he had left.

Guthlac stepped from his raft, laid the pole a short, safe distance from the water and began his trudge up the slope to his hut, basket loaded, eyes focused on the mid-distance.

“Good timing on the bread,” said the fishes.

“Oh, the Lord provides,” Guthlac replied feverishly. “The Lord... provides.”

“They’ll be wanting meat, too, Guthlac.”

Guthlac stopped his heavy walk up the hill.

“Fowl? Mutton? Fish.. maybe? Dear friends.”

The fish missed the joke, if there even was one. “Meat,” they replied. “A sacrifice.”

“The Lord will provide that, too, friend fishes,” muttered Guthlac, barely aware he was walking again.

“We’ll wait here,” said the fishes without irony. Fish are many things, but they are not ironic.

* * * *

Great trees littered the Croylands and gave shelter to its native denizens – the crows – for whom the swamp was named. Of all the animals who visited Guthlac the crows were the least social. That is to say if they weren’t outright soiling the saint from above, they ignored him. Guthlac preferred it when they ignored him. Nevertheless, they were always around – skulking in the trees, silently watching everything Guthlac did, listening to his conversation with the fishes and generally trying to make the saint miserable enough to leave their home and go convert people like that loquacious Paul did.

Of late, there seemed to be more of them around, and the “little gifts from above” had almost altogether stopped. Somewhere in the back of Guthlac’s mind a thought rattled around about “the calm before the storm”, and how nice France would be at this time of the year. And, Lord knows, there were enough sinners in France to pray for. Guthlac beat back this rebel thought. He may have been sick and haunted and slightly insane but Guthlac *knew* a divine ordeal when he saw one. Despite all the insults and injuries visited upon him by the crows he never stopped being cordial to them. Perhaps he offered up his suffering to the Lord. Perhaps he thought his purpose

in the swamp was to convert the crows. This much is true however, he always greeted the crows as though they were his brethren. This night was no exception.

“Friend Crow,” chirped Guthlac to a crow who habitually roosted near his door.

“Bugger off, Old Man.”

Ah, this crow. It had been squatting on this bough near his door for several months now. Sometimes other crows would be with it, but they would fly off whenever the saint approached. This one however did not seem scared or wary of the Saint, in fact, there were times when Guthlac could swear it was happy to see him. *This was all fancy,* he told himself. *The creatures of Heaven and the beasts of Hell do not look forward to seeing each other like a child does the circus.*

Do they?

Nevertheless, it was obviously in a fighting mood today. Guthlac decided not to engage it with anger.

“Have I told you lately that I love you?”

The crow seemed to consider this for a moment.

“You say that now, but you won’t mean it later,” it mocked.

“I will always feel that way,” Guthlac confirmed.

Once again the crow paused, as if it might be asked to come in to discuss this further, but Guthlac had already passed into his hut. The crow did not feel this was the end of the matter, however. In a flurry of feathers and shadow it lighted on the ground and strutted to the door.

On human feet.

* * * *

Guthlac opened the door of his hut at the crest of the islet. Truth be told, it was little more than a raised dry patch in the midst of a very still, mossy lake. Seasonal floods did not reach the hut but the pervasive dampness made its elevated position a moot point. The difference between “damp” and “soaking wet” in the Croylands was slight – the difference between bathing in a river and standing under a waterfall. Still, the modest hut had held Guthlac secure for all this time, and

as he passed the threshold Guthlac was thankful – thankful for his fireplace, his high ceilings, the dry stone floors, the profusion of candles which lit the large chamber beyond the foyer, and for his Collection which occupied two niches on the far end of the same chamber. Tonight he was especially thankful for being home.

The Devoted Couple who lived at the edge of the swamp, had they ever seen the impossibly large interior of the hut, would have said *The benefits of being chosen by God* and perhaps would have made vows of leading better lives to reap some of the same benefits. They may not have known however that God's gifts are not free and the payback is drawn from one's soul. Sometimes from one's life.

Payback's a bitch. This is always true.

Guthlac set the bread and wine down on a large table near the fireplace, then trundled over to the first niche where his Collection was stored. His fingers caressed these treasures given to him from God via the swamp. Guthlac particularly loved the Easter Basket sent to him a few years ago. The "grass" which stuffed the basket was greener than that of Glastonbury Tor and never seemed to fade. The ribbon at the top was a delight, a confection of knotty pinkness and soft velvet. The flotsam and jetsam of the Ages came down to Guthlac as gifts from his brother, Saint Bartholomew. Guthlac never knew how he knew what everything was, but when one's brother resides in Heaven and can pass the wealth of Time and Space to a brother on Earth, he learned to accept the gifts and the knowledge. Matchbox car. Corset. Lighter. Teddy bear. All sounded blasphemous but were too engaging not to consider and to poke and to prod in the wee hours of the morning. In those quiet, immense moments the teddy bear provided great comfort when hugged thusly.

He hugged the doll, storing its comfort for later use.

No one had ever seen his Collection, and never would, more than likely. The Croylands encompassed the Mouth of Hell, and so dissuaded many visitors of the sort that would appreciate the need for ursine embraces and Easter grass.

Guthlac wondered vaguely if that young girl, Annora Tunnok', who was overly fond of hunting demons and vampires in the swamp, would be his guest that evening. He sighed. No, the guests who were coming were usually at the receiving end of her sharp weaponry. Too bad, he thought. She was perhaps the one person he might like to give a Gund to. She was barely old enough to be past playing with dolls yet she tore through the swamps on a mission of destruction. These Slayers were odd creatures – young, unlikely to get any older, and driven like no one else.

Except saints. Perhaps.

In the midst of these reveries, a delicate hand placed itself on Guthlac's shoulder, then fell softly to his elbow. Thin but strong fingers stroked their way down his forearm to entangle Guthlac's own fingers. Startled and unable to see his guest, Guthlac nevertheless knew whom it was who held him.

"Welcome, friend crow." He said, but there was no response.

The hand moved from his elbow to his chest and was there joined by another hand. Guthlac felt the weight of someone against his back as he was pulled into an embrace.

Female hands? Guthlac thought as he cast his eyes downward.

Strong and binding, these hands did not threaten, nor did they soothe. Female thought they may be, Guthlac was quite helpless, and utterly abashed. There was no greeting card for this occasion in his Collection. What was he expected to do? Saints were not meant to consort with the Enemy. He offered a silent prayer to Bartholomew for help.

"This is most.. unseemly, my dear," he managed to sputter out. "Whatever will the fish think?"

"Shh, Old Man. My sisters are close by and will soon be here. We have only this moment together." The voice was at once as soft as the feathers Guthlac felt on his neck and as hard as the beak that nudged itself against his ear.

"You told me you loved me. Prove it. Love me."

His heart broke for the voice without ever having seen its owner. Poor, dear crow - to be so damned by an accident of heritage. In that moment, Guthlac resolved to save his friend the crow.

(What was the feminine form of "crow"? Guthlac was sure he had known that at one time.)

"Friend Crow..." he began.

"I tell you, be quiet," said the crow, as she nestled into his shoulder. "I am the vanguard of your destruction, or your only salvation. Love me and I will send my sisters away. Deny me and they will eat your entrails."

Guthlac's pity for the crow turned momentarily to fear, but then he heard her words again. *She said 'they'. Not 'we', but 'they'. She is not beyond hope. Or real love.*

Reading his mood, she added, "Save me."

Guthlac turned.

Her face was barely there. What was not the fine exposed bone and beak of a hollow-eyed skull, was a headdress of feathers. The rest of her was embarrassingly naked, save for vagrant plumage down her arms and back. Lean muscles knotted her body. Her legs seems all at once graceful enough to dance at a prince's ball and powerful enough to kick Guthlac's head off his shoulders. Wingless, she still appeared to be only a moment from leaving the ground.

And Guthlac found her beautiful.

Then the whispering started. Muted voices that piped and cawed and rattled from seeming miles away.

"My sisters are almost here, my love."

"Let them in."

"They are hungry."

"Let them in all the same."

The crow girl hesitated, and in that hesitation Guthlac saw an opportunity for her salvation. She, however, saw an opportunity for solace, and took it. Before moving to the Croylands, Guthlac had been a soldier and the son of a nobleman. He had seen war and he had kissed many girls.

Not a single one of those kisses burned in his heart the way this one did. Though the anatomies were not built to fit together: lips and beak, flesh and feather, there was still a connection between these two souls – one destined for Heaven, the other for Hell.

Unless Guthlac changed that decree now. And he would, for his love.

The whispering had become more urgent, more insistent. Closer.

“Here they are,” the crow girl whispered in Guthlac’s ear. And she knocked him to the floor just as the door exploded inward.

“The prey is here sisters!” she cried to the new arrivals. “We have meat for dinner tonight!”

Through a sticky haze of fever and age and tears, Guthlac looked up to see his guests. Thought not too different in appearance from his crow girl, her sisters gave the impression of being much older, much more malicious and much hungrier. Their legs were bulky and tight, like the Roman wrestlers he had seen in his youth. Their bare chests gave no hint of femininity, so large were they with muscles. And though the black feathers of their crow forms were sparsely littered across their forms, they had full-fledged wings, which beat with a dull thud as they drifted into the hut. Twelve sisters to his love, all of whom reeked like rotting lamb.

His thoughts were broken and raging, how could he be so betrayed? Would a True Servant of the Lord be taken in by a pair of shapely legs and soft plumage? Was he now totally alone against this evil? Guthlac sobbed aloud.

The crow sisters tittered and flounced. They mocked his age and his faith. In a circle, like a ring of hell, they burned and froze him.

Guthlac had had enough. His voice shaking and weak, he nevertheless spoke clearly.

“I adjure you... Sisters, to... to leave... me... be. In Nomine Patris, et Fili et Spiritus Sancti! You cannot... touch me. You... cannot... move... me!”

Faintly, oh so faintly, Guthlac heard the Songs of the Angels, but the shrieks and taunts of the Crow Sisters were louder and more immanent. Still, Guthlac knew he had not been abandoned

by Heaven. He knew he would do what he had always done: guard the world from the evils belched up upon it by the Hellmouth.

He tried to stand and failed. Well, being a Servant of the Lord didn't require standing.

"Sisters, I adjure thee...."

A hand sliding across his chest from behind interrupted Guthlac. This was familiar.

"Old man. Dance with us. Kiss my sisters. Love all of us and we will save you." Then, so no one else could hear, she whispered, "It is too late to save me." She heaved Guthlac up by his ribcage, and gently set him on his feet.

The Sister Crows encircled Guthlac and his love. They began to peck at his feet, which was not altogether a horrible sensation. Guthlac wondered if he was to be nipped to death. He thought of his postcard of the Sistine Chapel – his brother Bartholomew shown holding his own flayed skin, the method of his martyrdom. There was a true saint! The pain! The strength in the face of death! Guthlac wondered how he would be depicted – his feet covered in birdseed? Crows sitting on his head like the sparrows did for Francis? A black feather boa draped rakishly around his shoulders? Was this the end of Guthlac? Could one get into Heaven if one was nuzzled and hugged to death?

"I..."

"Too late."

"...adjure..."

"TOO..."

A flash of lightning interrupted both saint and demon, illuminating a figure in the doorway.

"Bartholomew!" cried Guthlac in despair and fever. "Come to deliver me?"

"Father!" a Sister exhorted. And Guthlac's hope fell a little further.

The Crow Maid nibbled Guthlac's ear. The Crow Sisters' persistent pecking was now up to his knee. Guthlac was bleeding and terrified he had failed his Lord. The Father of the Crow Ladies

did not enter the saint's hut, but rather lurked in the doorframe, taking in the scene, laughing all the while.

Suddenly, the Crow Sisters flung Guthlac to the ground, and poured themselves over him like honey from a broken jar. All over his body they pecked: tore his flesh and licked his blood. His head rested in the lap of the Crow Maid, cradled in her arms; restrained, helpless. Guthlac wept.

"You cry to easily, saint," said the Father at the door. "This is not the worst thing that can happen to you, and yet you cry like a piglet separated from its mother. At the mercy of the wolves. Tender. Sweet. What will you do when the wolves come to feast?"

"I..."

"Yes, yes. You adjure my daughters and me. Begone, foul fiend!" Father chuckled. "Saint, your words have no power over me. We will eat your body and bind your soul to this swamp. Forever. You will bridge the gap between us and Heaven, and we will march in as Vespasian marched into Rome. To conquer."

Ripped and bloodied, horrified and mad, Guthlac turned his eyes upward for a final prayer.

"Bartholomew, my brother, help me!"

A desperate prayer, perhaps, but a prayer nonetheless. It is said that God watches over children and drunks, and perhaps saints are a little bit of both. Be that as it may, Guthlac's prayer was answered. Light roared into the hut, suffusing Guthlac and scattering the Crow Sisters away from him as though he had just exploded.

Which he had: exploded with the Grace of Heaven. An orchestral peal like an infinite number of trumpets charged the air and shook the Earth.

* * * *

Miles away, the Hellmouth trembled, and Annora Tunnok' turned in the direction of Guthlac's hut. For the first time in three years, she felt she could rest from her duties as The Slayer. Tonight someone else would beat back the forces of Evil.

* * * *

From within the nimbus, the figure of a man offered Guthlac his hand and, after it was accepted, lifted him to his feet, where the Crow Maiden cowered, protecting her hollow eye sockets from the Light. She remained there as the Light faded, then looked up to see Guthlac transformed.

Never a large man, Guthlac seemed suddenly to be as tall as the vaulted ceilings of his hut. His gaunt, aged frame still shook with fever and fear, but his eyes were focused and clear. When he spoke, his words reverberated like thunder directly overhead. And in the hand where Bartholomew had lifted him up there was a nasty-looking scourge. It burned for the death of these demons.

Guthlac raised the scourge above his head and lashed out at the closest Crow Sister. The sting of the scourge was like lightning, burning her naked flesh and tearing feathers away. The retort was like the crack of an oak tree falling in a storm.

One by one, the Crow Sisters advanced and fell. Lightning blazed around the chamber punctuated by the terrible screams of the falling.

Within moments, Guthlac's tormentors lay bleeding and broken, strewn around the room. Black feathers littered the floor. None could stand against him and the power of the scourge.

Surveying the carnage, Guthlac's eyes lit on the Crow Maid, who, throughout his attack on her sisters, had remained at his feet, clutching his calves. When she finally managed to look up at him, she was shocked to see compassion and... love in his eyes. And in that moment, her heart knew regret.

"So sad, my love. So sad."

"So it is, Old Man. My love."

"Pathetic!"

Both saint and demon turned to the source of the voice: Father, who still stood in the doorway.

"Pathetic! Both of you! Saint, creatures of hell do not know true love or the beatings of a human heart. She will never love you back and she will never be saved! And YOU!" Father raged

at the Crow Maid, "Angels and saints cannot feel anything for the specific people of humanity. They love everyone equally and uselessly. All this," he indicated the world, "means nothing to them except separation from their God. He will not stay with you now, but would have been yours forever if you had but done your duty to Hell and KILLED HIM!"

Guthlac, possessed by the fire of the scourge, driven to eradicate evil, roughly and carelessly pushed aside the Crow Maiden. He advanced on Father, his footsteps crackling.

"My love," cried the Crow Maid, "Do not!"

Guthlac turned for a moment and regarded her with a curious smile.

"I never knew your name," he said, then again faced Father.

"You have no place here, devil. The Earth rejects you. And God commands you back to The Pit! The Mouth of Hell will swallow you whole!" Guthlac raised the scourge and began his adjuration:

*O monstra ab hoc tempore loque aliena
iubeo, vos ab hoc loco
qua intrare vobis nefas est.
Adite ad sepulcrum irremediabile!*

Guthlac loosed the lash with a heat that made the air scream. Father's confidence faded into an attempt to block the attack with his talons.

CRACK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

* * * *

"Dun DA dun dun..."

He stood in front of a full-length mirror that was kept in the back room for people who wanted to try on the sorcerer's robes before purchasing them. *Oh yeah, this is definitely cool.*

"...dun DA dun."

Dressed in his casual best - jeans, a light cotton shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest and work boots - Xander Harris admired his profile in the reflection.

"Dun DA dun dun..."

If only he had a fedora. And a gun.

“...DUN da dun dun DUN!”

But this whip would do for now. He jumped up on the dressing room’s bench and peered down at the floor as though it were a long way off.

“Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?”

Then, in a piercing falsetto:

“IN-DEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!”

“Xander, are you going to be in there all day?”

“Uh... ahem, ahem.” Xander cleared his throat and unnecessarily deepened his voice.

“Be out in a sec, Ayn, hon.”

Oh yeah, this was definitely cooler than any of the weapons Giles kept in the training room’s trunks. It just screamed out, “Xander, I’m yours. Buy me!” It was butch, yet elegant. Strong, yet supple. And he was sure it would hurt like a mother. Xander uncoiled the scourge. Awkwardly, experimentally, he flicked his wrist.

CRACK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

* * * *

CHAPTER ONE

It was Inventory Day at The Magic Shop. Twice a year, Giles would shut the store down for a day to take stock of what was in the store and to bring in new merchandise. This distressed Anya greatly as she liked having a steady flow of cash coming into her savings account. Er, the store. She wanted the *store* to do a good business. Yes, that was it. Hiring day laborers (the other Scoobies) and closing the store was tantamount to eating money. Giles finally convinced her that taking stock was a good idea and could lead to a White Sale of their entire surplus. Everyone loved a White Sale, and no doubt, people would flock like geese.

Anya relented, asking, "Do we paint the surplus white? Is that how people know what's on sale? What about the chicken eyes? Do we paint them white individually or just the jar they're in?"

The large receiving dock at the back of the store was stacked floor-to-ceiling with boxes, crates and a few sturdy straw baskets. Most of their contents Giles had found at estate sales, antique stores and even eBay. Willow had been most helpful on that last point. It stunned Giles to think that so many occult relics were posted for auction on the Internet. "One has difficulty envisioning Sir Hector Diaz, the leading authority of Neolithic goddess statuary, hunched over his laptop and logging onto eBay under the *pseudo nom* 'bad_juju_2020', hawking artifacts best donated to a museum; yet there it is. I detest this modern age," he concluded.

Most of the Scoobies had tuned Giles out well before he reached his *dénouement*. They exchanged uncomfortable glances that seemed to say *Haven't we been here before?* They had. A few years back when Jenny Calendar had moved her sexy technopagan ways to Sunnydale High and installed a bank of internet-ready computers in the library, Giles protested loudly, favoring his "dusty volumes" over the sterility of the computers.

But no one wanted to remind Giles about Jenny. Not today, in any case.

For most of the morning, the receiving dock was a flurry, if not a blizzard, of activity, almost none of which had anything to do with unpacking, cataloguing or re-stocking. Just before noon, while Buffy was moving a monolithic statue (one that purportedly carried a curse associated with

the god, Dagon) Tara and Willow had started a new round of “Wrestle Dawn to the Ground and Force Her to Eat Packing Peanuts”. This was sort of the pattern for the morning – work, get distracted, let Buffy move the heavy objects, play until Giles glared at them, sheepishly return to work until “work” became too serious again. Playtime, however, was interrupted not by icy stares of disapproval, but by a desperate cry for help.

“HELP!”

The pitch of the cry was such that everyone knew the voice behind it was serious. Tara and Willow stopped horsing around with Dawn. Giles threw his coffee down and ran towards the source of the cry. Anya almost dropped her clipboard. Almost. Xander burst into the room and skidded to a halt, scanning the dock for a person in need. And Buffy...

Buffy was calling for help.

The idol she had been inching across the dock was resting on casters. The casters had run into a crowbar that Tara had left idly lying about. It wedged itself catty-corner from the front of one wheel to the back of another, and, gravity being what it is, the idol pitched forward. Buffy had a tenuous grip on the massive stone statuary, but it was slipping.

“I think I said HELP!!!!”

Though no one had stopped moving towards Buffy, the moment it was taking them to reach her was a moment more than she could keep the idol away from meeting the floor at $(M / t)^{\{(1 + c)^{[(2/M)^*(Work)]1/2 - (r/d)^*(cs1 + s2)\}}$. It was feeling like forever and a ton.

Anya was distraught. “It has no resale value of it’s broken!” she cried. Fear of a loss in profits propelled Anya to Buffy’s side. Wielding her clipboard like a shield, Anya slapped it against the idol’s hip. Both hands on either side of the board, valiantly pushing upwards, Anya defended her investment from an untimely collision with destiny.

But the idol slipped a bit further down.

Willow and Tara might have thought to cast a spell to lighten the idol, to make it float like a balloon, but they acted reflexively and ran to their friends’ aid. They caught the idol at its front

midsection, balancing everyone's efforts. Even so, the weight of the idol was more than they could reset.

Giles and Dawn (who arrived late because she had to pick herself up off the floor and spit out a piece of woven organic cornstarch) joined the others and pushed against the direction of the fall, but it wasn't until Xander arrived

CRACK!

that the blood-stained and massive tribute to a long-dead god stopped its nose (if indeed it could be said Dagon had a nose) dive, giving Buffy the opportunity to gain better purchase thereon and upright the masonry image. She grunted with the effort and while the Scoobies valiantly saved face and pushed right along with her, it was still solely Buffy's Slayer muscles that set Dagon back on the casters. Still, she couldn't help thinking *That was easier than it could have been. I guess my morning spinach finally kicked in. If I ate spinach in the morning.*

Eh. Whatever.

And with that Buffy slid down to the floor in a heap, panting. Easier than she thought or no, her effort was titanic. The others were already on the floor: sprawled, collapsed and laid out. Even though they didn't tip the balance with the same effort as Buffy, they were still shaky and drained. After a few minutes, everyone quietly gathered around Buffy.

"Buffy, are you all right?" Willow asked.

Buffy continued to pant.

"Buffy?" That was Giles.

Buffy stopped panting, and looked up at the surrounding Scoobies with the Hairy Eyeball. She had learned the Hairy Eyeball from her mother, Joyce, who in times of great exasperation cowed Buffy's histrionics with this practiced glance. By not even deigning to raise her head to meet her daughter's eyes, Joyce would stare at her expressionless, her eyes seemingly touching her furrowed brows. The overall effect was one of utter disregard for the feelings and message of the object of the glance.

Like mother, like daughter, everyone fell into uncomfortable silence. Even Dawn, who knew the power of the Hairy Eyeball wasn't immune.

"Thanks for the assist," was all she said.

"Buffy, you're being a bit harsh..." Giles started to say until the Eyeball silenced him.

Willow, who liked peace between her friends, volunteered to defend Buffy's bad mood. "No, no, she's right. We.. we were playing around and she's been moving the big stuff all day. We should have been helping.. more. Sorry, Buffy."

"Well, why else would Fate drop a Slayer in our laps if she wasn't meant to help us move the heavy stuff?" This was Anya.

Willow bristled a bit. It wasn't all that long ago that Anya had sic'ed Vampire Willow on her and her friends in her quest to reclaim her mantle as a Vengeance Demon. Willow still resented Anya for that, even if she was a member of the team now. Trusted. Ostensibly. Still, how could Xander date her? Was he destined to be only with demons and Cordelia?

"I don't think there was an ancient prophecy about 'One girl in all the world, a Chosen One, born with the strength and skill to push around inventory surplus.'"

"Ahem."

Buffy had cleared her throat, indicating that she was ready to communicate again. Everyone turned to her. Would they be forgiven or left in the Land of the Cold Shoulder?

Slowly, Buffy said, "I'm done. If anything else needs moved, call 'You Haul It Your Own Damn Self.'" She let out a breathy chuckle and wiped her forehead.

The Scoobies all visibly relaxed.

"I say lunch." Dawn volunteered.

"Now, see here..." Giles started, but he was drowned out by a chorus of overly enthusiastic voices and sidelong glances. An unspoken conspiracy existed between the Scoobies at that moment – inventory bad, lunch good. Let's get outta here!

"I'm peckish..."

“...not a thing since breakfast.”

“I’m on a diet, but...”

“I could stand some chicken eyes”

“Dawn!” cried Willow and Tara in stereo, giggling.

“Yuk.”

“Well, they are marked for the white sale,” chimed in Anya.

The torrent of thoughts dried up as everyone turned to regard Anya with a mixture of annoyance and “oh no.” Even Giles seemed to caught in Anya’s headlights of literalism (so to speak) waiting to see if she drove forward or let the matter drop.

Taking the silence and the attention as an “all clear” signal (the concept of “qui tacit consentire” – “silence gives consent” – never really sunk in with the Scoobies no matter how many times it proved to be exasperatingly true.), Anya plunged forward into deeper streams of consciousness.

“They’re on sale next week...”

She produced a jar painted entirely white on the outside, obscuring what was inside, removed the lid and offered the veiled contents to everyone.

“...but since we’re all family here, I don’t see why we can reap the benefits of the white sale early. *Bon appetite!*”

No one moved.

“They’re crunchy on the outside and gooey on the inside. Chock full of vitamins and... vitreous humor. Chicken eyes, yum!” Anya had switched to her sales voice but it was too bright and too brittle to bear the weight of the stares settling on her for long. Momentarily, her smile cracked and collapsed into a child-like frown of disappointment.

“Well, if *you* don’t eat them, no one *else* will want to.”

A beat.

“Anya,” Giles spoke calmly. “Chicken eyes are used in obscure forms of zombie-making. They are not an untapped snack food market.”

“They could be.”

Giles took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not. An. Untapped. Market.” He emphasized each word so Anya could take it in as slowly as she needed to.

“I like victorious humor,” said Dawn. Her tone was so serious and without a trace of sarcasm that everyone took a moment and regarded her questioningly. Dawn tried to answer their looks. “As a band. At the Bronze. All ages nights. I’m not a zombie,” she finished weakly.

For the second time that ten minutes the conversation needed redirecting. Xander tried his hand.

“Giles, master of occult trivia, where did you get this?” Xander produced the whip from where he had tucked it in the back of his jeans.

“I... I’m not sure,” Giles said, returning his glasses to their rightful place. “I didn’t memorize the entire inventory list. What does the tag say?”

“Tag?”

“The tag with the inventory number. Ah, here.” Giles had found the tag, little more than a sticker, at the base of the handle after a brief search of the whip body.

“Hmm...” Giles hummed abstractly.

“‘Hmm’? ‘Hmm’ what?” asked Xander anxiously. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “Was that a ‘Hmm, it’s-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it, hmm’ or a ‘Hmm, we-need-to-research-this-more, hmm’?” Before Giles could answer, Xander answered his own question and began a trek down a new path of reasoning. “What does it do? Is it dangerous?” Xander’s voice was somewhere between trepidation and elation.

“Hmm? Oh!” Giles was distracted from his reverie, and answered in his most conversational (and, disappointingly, non-conspiratorial) tones. “According to the manifest, it does nothing. Just an *objet* from a big game hunter’s estate.”

“Oh.” Xander visibly deflated. He fingered the whip and looked at it as though he could will it to be special. *All for the best*, he thought. *Why would Giles trust me with a magic weapon, anyway? Still, I wish I were more than just the Animus of the group – the strong heart.* Xander remembered a few months ago during the last battle with the demon-droid, Adam, when he, Giles and Willow poured their essences into Buffy, merging into an über-gestalt-Slayer. Xander was The Heart of the creature – the grounded center, the repository of all memory and emotion.

Big deal. It's not like I kicked any Adam-butt.

It's not like I kick any butt.

Ever.

Anya sidled up to Xander, fingers woven together behind her back, while the others drifted away. They knew when she adopted this pose that words like “orgasm” or “pee-pee” were soon to follow. Her head faced the ground like a sunflower at nighttime. “Hey,” she ventured.

Maybe once.

From her bowed head, lash-crowned eyes rolled up and took a three-quarter look at Xander. With a double blink and the coquettishness turned up a notch, Anya tried again.

“Hey.”

But I was possessed by a hyena.

Anya's hands disengaged and made a beeline for her now-cocked hips. The coy and shy tones she had put on were discarded like J-Lo's wardrobe after a concert. Her sweetie-pie was not paying enough attention and she was miffed.

“HEY!”

Xander snapped to. “Babe.”

“I was being cute and you didn't see it.”

“You're always cute. I see you being cute all the time.”

Anya softened and tilted her head to the right. Her voice became husky. “Ever used a whip before?”

“What?”

She wrapped her arms about his neck and stroked his hair. “I know you want it. You know how to use it?”

“I... uh...”

Softer now. “Tell me you want it.”

Xander was falling into Anya’s mood. He brushed his nose against her cheek, dragging his lips along for the ride. Just as softly, he said, “I can’t explain it, but...”

“No, no, NO!” Anya yelled. Xander jumped back from the blast in his ear. “Do NOT say that!”

“What?! What did I say?”

In her most condescending tones, bobbing her head from side to side to drive each word home, Anya said, “I can’t explain it, but...’ People say things like that and then it’s Apocalypse. Or someone gets killed. Or Angel shows up. It’s just bad. Don’t you ever learn?”

She thumped him on the chest.

“Uh... ow.”

“Take it back.”

“Take it back?”

“What you said. Take it back.”

“I... I take it back. I can explain it.”

“Oh good.” Anya smiled with relief. She became all business like again. “Do you want it?”

Xander decided to keep things simple this time around. “Yes.”

Anya spun on her heel and went where Giles had gone minutes ago. “Giles! How much is my employee discount? 75%?”

Xander watched Anya leave, feeling like he had the best demon in the world. No demon was better than his. *Anya, you and your employee discount rock!* Xander became aware of the whip still in his hands. He held it to his face and considered the time and patience required by

someone to make the plaiting just right. He thought about who may have used the whip before. How they held it. Where they used it. Giles had said something about a hunter... what kind of animals do people hunt with whips?

Lions? No, that's a lion tamer.

He thought smaller.

Monkeys?

No. Trees branches would get in the way.

Armadillo?

The open desert. Alone at a campfire. Beans are cooking up. Bacon is frying. Coffee is brewing. The day was long and the work was hard, but moments like this made the hurt and the sore worth it. Xander looks up at the stars when the vast silence is suddenly broken by the sounds of sharp nails on rock. Hump-y, bumpy shadows played across the canyon wall. The hair on Xander's neck bristled.

Armadillos.

Damn. Here he was alone and in the open with just his trusty whip at his side. Slowly, surely, he stood, ready to fend off these desperate creatures of the ... nah, armadillo just were not sexy enough.

What do people hunt with whips?

Xander brought the coil up to his nose. He inhaled deeply. Leather. Definitely leather.

Anya peeked back into the room. "Boxed or wear it home?"

His back to her, Xander's voice had an unexpected, husky James Earl Jones quality about it when he answered, "Definitely... wear it home."

Anya started. "Were you kissing the whip?"

It was Xander's turn to start, like he was waking from a dream. He still didn't face his girlfriend.

"No."

“Just checking.” But part of Anya’s brain filed this incident away under “Things to Throw in His Face During Our Next Fight.”

* * * *

She had heard her beloved’s voice all the way in Hell, and so she came to him. The abyss between Heaven and Hell is supposedly of infinite breadth, but the journey to Earth is infinitely shorter. Especially when she had been called.

But she couldn’t find him in throng of downtown Sunnydale. The last time she had been on Earth there were nowhere near this many people on the entire planet, let alone in one town. Hell had been smaller then, too.

It appeared that humans were filling up both places at a considerable pace.

But where was *he*?

The sun was intense. *Oh, for a fog or drizzle or some cloud to cover that damned sun.*

She sat patiently, like she used to. The Old Man always would come to her. Always. All she had to do was wait. She had waited this long. She could wait longer if necessary, though a moment later it became unnecessary. A voice drifted up to her on her perch.

“Yes, sweetie, I can believe you talked Giles down to under cost.”

“Which of course means with all the money I saved you, you can take me out to lunch. I like this gift-giving thing. It means my turn to get a gift comes sooner. Is there anything else you want, because there’s a necklace I’ve been eyeing...”

Then they passed out of hearing, though she knew she had seen her beloved.

With that hideous girl on his arms.

And... no! The scourge.

Are we still enemies then? All this time and I’m still unforgiven?

She considered this.

Very well.

Then let go of the branch she had been resting on and flew off into the too-bright sky.

* * * *

CHAPTER TWO

Night fell ponderously on Sunnydale, like an ancient tapestry from a rotten wall. Night meant movies, clubbing, dinner out and more mysterious deaths and disappearances. Even those citizens without occult sensibilities knew something was amiss after the sun went down. They could never consciously say what, of course, but the primitive part of their brain that could pick out and respond to danger in the environment invariably suggested, "Tonight is a good time for us to stay home with the doors and windows locked." There were varying levels of success, but one couldn't blame the amygdala for not trying.

It wasn't that Sunnydale itself was a bad place, it was just built on a bad place: The Hellmouth. And really, could anywhere named "The Hellmouth" be a good place to live? One had to wonder what all those Spanish missionaries were thinking.

Still, Sunnydale had its defenders – The Slayer and her Slayerettes. And tonight, one of the Slayerettes was armed and ready for danger. Xander had his whip with him and was looking to lash some respect into the undead.

The girls thought this was hysterical. Xander took the lead as they patrolled the graveyard, unusual in itself, but Buffy and Willow barely noticed as they were giggling too hard.

"I think he loves it more than he loves Anya," suggested Buffy.

Willow considered this. "Boys and their toys. Though I think Freud would have something to say on the whole "whip as extension of..."

Buffy interrupted her. "I don't even want to think about that, Wil. Xander and his area is between... Xander and his area."

Xander pulled even further forward. Willow turned up the volume so he would be sure to hear.

"I haven't seen him this into a weapon since he got his Blade of Wonder after killing a troll."

Buffy looked confused for a second. "Did y'all have an adventure without me?"

Willow laughed at a memory and not Buffy's confusion. "No, no, no. It was during our Dungeons and Dragons phase waaaay back in the day. Xander fell into a cave shaft and landed on a sleeping troll. He actually broke its neck without having to fight it. The troll had a Blade of Wonder in its treasure trove. Xander took it and loved it for the next twenty minutes until he was killed by a wandering giant slug."

There was a pregnant beat. Willow took the silence as a signal to continue.

"Anyway, we gave up playing soon after that, but Xander always would talk wistfully about that sword until..."

"...Until you both hit puberty and discovered girls."

"Well, he discovered girls. I discovered boys. I've recently discovered girls. But I gave up Dungeons and Dragons a long time ago. Before the girls."

"Xander! Will says you're a geek from way back!"

Buffy looked around.

"Xander?"

Xander had drifted further away from the girls while they were making fun of him. He didn't respond to their quips and jibes. In fact, he seemed to be ignoring them totally. The girls were slightly worried about this. It was not like Xander to not respond to their jibes and quips.

Willow was perplexed. "Is he pouting?"

"I don't know," responded Buffy, equally at a loss.

"Was it something we said? It's not like this is the worst we've ever ridden him."

"I know." Buffy quickened her pace moving towards Xander. "C'mon, let's see what's wrong. I don't like wasting good quippery this way."

Part of being The Slayer was to have a natural sense of the presence of evil. Part of being Buffy was to hang out with her friends in cemeteries. These opposing forces in her personality had an uneasy armistice, but since Buffy had been Buffy longer than she had been the Slayer, her preternatural instincts often gave way to her love for her friends, in this instance, her worry about

Xander's feelings. So, as she and Willow made their way through the graves and tombs, she missed a demonic blip on her radar.

After all, it seemed she and Willow were alone in the cemetery.

Seemed.

From the shadows, a woman stepped, at least, the figure of a woman stepped. She was uninterested in Buffy and Willow, however. She advanced on Xander, slowly, almost respectfully.

And she was cooing, cooing in low, soothing tones much as a baby would make after a bottle. Buffy thought she sounded like a... a dove?

And that was not all that was bird-like about this *femme fatale*.

Lean and muscular (Buffy swore later that she could see the individual muscles ripple under her skin), she was draped in the remnants of a shroud and black feathers. *Feathers?* Her torso was bent forward and her arms were raised in a parody of flight.

And her face. *My God! Her face is half missing!*

Buffy immediately assumed a defensive posture. Friends don't sneak up on friends in a cemetery. If she was wrong.. well, a friend would accept her apology later.

"I think you fell asleep under the deadlamp for too long."

The bird woman made a sibilant hiss, turning her palms to face Buffy, who now saw the long talons where fingers should have been.

"Pointy claws of death? You're soaking in them!"

The Bird Woman crouched near Xander, grabbing the back of his thigh. Xander did not acknowledge the touch at all, and for Xander not to take an opportunity to be squeamish about his parts was a big red flag that all was not right with him.

Willow freaked. "Xander! Run! Xander!!" Xander didn't move. He didn't even appear to be breathing.

Then Willow's posture straightened just enough to make her look like a different person – taller, in command, strong. She planted her feet and thrust her right hand at Xander as if she were

throwing a baseball at him. In a voice that rumbled across the distance, Willow commanded, "Xander! *Evigilare!*"

But before she could know if her awakening spell worked, five crows set upon her hair and began to peck at her.

"BUFFY!"

Buffy had been monitoring the actions of the Bird Woman when she heard Willow's scream. For a moment only, she turned away and the Bird Woman was upon her. Reaching back and grabbing whatever fleshy part she could find, Buffy flung her attacker off her back and against a mausoleum.

Meanwhile, Willow using The Calm Moment she and Tara had been practicing, Willow made contact with her inner power and evoked help.

*From center out be my shield
Morrigan Goddess your power I wield
Proof against the strongest foe
Defend against the crushing blow.*

A blue flame burned brightly over Willow's heart, then concussively blew outwards, encompassing her, protecting her in its spheroid strength. The crows were repelled in all directions, a spray of feathers marking their passage backwards. Now, as Willow prepared to go on the offensive, the crows returned in force. Seemingly hundreds of black bodies hurtled themselves against Willow's shield and while it stood, the crows were putting greater and greater pressure on it.

And therefore, were putting greater and greater pressure on Willow.

* * * * *

Not to far off, Xander's fingers fanned out then re-gripped the handle of his whip.

* * * * *

Buffy and the Bird Woman were circling each other, measuring the other's steps, waiting for a sign of aggression or weakness. Neither gave any sign of rushing forward nor of running away. They were perfectly balanced on an invisible merry-go-round – Terror and The Slayer.

Then The Slayer stopped in mid-circulation and shrugged her shoulders hard in frustration. “Dah-nah-NAH-nah-nah-nah-NUH! Round and round we do the Bird Dance. If I knew you were here for a Polish wedding I would have dressed up.” While it was doubtful this demon even knew how to do the Bird Dance, Buffy's stopping and taking time to talk meant (to the demon) that she was now an easy victim. Wrongly assumed, but nevertheless, she leapt at Buffy, talons aimed at her throat.

Buffy found herself knocked to the ground with scythe-like talons wrapped around her throat. She didn't take a moment to catch her breath, but instantly drove her fists between Bird Girl's arms and forced them apart. She landed a right hook against the exposed eye socket, knocking Bird Woman to the ground several feet away.

She reached into a false pocket inside her jacket and pulled out a stake. Buffy was ready to send this molted budgie back to hell, but then she hear a cry that seemed to be coming from the bottom of a hotel laundry pile.

Someone was crying for help.

Buffy turned and saw the last of Willow's blue flaming shield disappear under a murder of hundreds of crows.

* * * * *

Strange. I know that smell.

It's her.

My love. My enemy.

Yes.

* * * * *

Buffy was out with friends in L.A. one night hitting all the clubs, waiting on line, flirting their way past the doormen when she almost went deaf. A beefy man with an air-horn was blasting the damn thing at the row trees near the door. As he did so about two hundred birds took off from the branches, flying away from the noise. Buffy didn't know how much of the nighttime noise was made by these birds until they were gone. L.A. seemed a bit quieter for a moment until a new nest of opportunistic birds flew into the now-vacant trees. They didn't stay long when the doorman shot the horn at them again, but that wasn't the point. The point was *Where do I find an air-horn in a cemetery?*

Could she fake it and maybe just scream them away? Buffy inhaled deeply just as she heard a twig go *snap* behind her. Birdwoman was up and about, head bobbing like a Janis Joplin fan at Woodstock. For a moment, Buffy was torn between kicking to poo out of this harpy and rescuing Willow, but then the choice was taken away.

The Birdwoman started to screech. As she had cooed and toddled for Xander minutes ago, she now wailed like a baby whose mother had pulled her off the teat. No, a thousand babies. All sobbing and screaming their pain and hurt to the cold, hungry world. Buffy's ears rang all the way through her head. She could feel the nerves firing in succession like a small lightning storm across her brain.

She collapsed, trying to cover her ears with hands that would not obey. All her muscles went overcooked-spaghetti limp, and her next to last thought was *I'm dead. Done in by Tweety-Pie.*

Then

CRACK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Thunder and lightning stopped the Birdwoman's maniacal wailing. Buffy's eyes settled on the Birdwoman, who was hunched over, arms raised in a gesture of defense. The scene became blurry and another lightning bolt pierced the night, and the Birdwoman started to whimper.

Buffy's last thought before she slumped over in an unconscious heap was, *The bad guys usually like a good storm. Drama queens.* Then all was blackness and quiet.

* * * * *

The Crow Sister froze in place, bent at the waist and shoulders back; her torso shifted allowing her head to look behind her, confirming what she already knew. The boy with the scourge stood near enough to touch, but his stare forbade her from coming any closer.

She flattened herself to the ground her head swaying in obeisance, cooing again. Her dead hand lifted up and the spongy digits begged for him to come closer.

Xander lifted the whip, threatening to bring its rapid wrath upon her again. He thrust his chin out to indicate Willow and raised the whip higher still.

A scratchy *ayyaaa* from the Crow Sister and Willow's attackers flew away. Willow was on her knees, then she crumpled on the grass. Her shield, now cracked and thin, vanishing with a soft *pop*.

Xander looked pleased. He nodded to the cemetery's exit, indicating it was the Crow Sister's turn to depart. She scraped at the ground and crawled infinitesimally nearer to Xander, then flew at him in a sudden leap. Instinctively, Xander covered his eyes, but he was mistaken. The Crow Sister's clawed foot lit on his shoulder, powerful muscles then propelling her upwards as she tore a bloody gash into his back.

In pain, bleeding and feeling pretty vague, Xander thought *What the...?* Then vertigo overtook him as he gracefully genuflected to throw up his dinner.

* * * * *

CHAPTER THREE

“So, you don’t know what finally drove them off?”

Giles had been listening to the details of the previous night’s patrol and noted with some trepidation that Buffy’s, Willow’s and Xander’s stories all ended where they should not have ended – with all of them unconscious and yet (relatively) unbrutalized by their attackers. At best, it meant that some outside force saved them. At worst, it meant that The Birdwoman, as Buffy called her, had an as-yet-undetermined agenda that required the Slayer to be alive.

Too many un’s for my liking, he thought.

“No, we have no idea. Right, guys?” asked Buffy, in search of consensual validation.

“Nope,” confirmed Xander.

“Nada,” chimed in Willow.

“The odd thing is...” Giles began.

Buffy interrupted, “You mean there’s just *one* odd thing?”

“The odd thing that concerns me most is the attack on Xander,” Giles explicated. *Sarcasm, always sarcasm*, he thought.

Xander perked up with a quizzical expression drawn across his face. “I don’t remember being attacked.”

“Well, from what you’ve told me, you don’t remember *the* attack. The whole thing. What *do* you remember?”

Xander paused to recollect the previous evening.

“We went to the cemetery on patrol. Buffy and Willow were mocking me and my weapon...”

“Oh, *that* he heard.” Said Willow, somewhat abashed.

“I was hoping that’d’ve been part of the selective memory loss.” Buffy whispered to her.

“...but after that.... I don’t know. Waking up nose-down in a puddle of my own vomit would be next.”

Everyone shuddered.

“Yeah, I know. Why couldn’t I have forgotten that, too?”

“So, does this mean he was under a spell?” asked Willow. “I mean if he was all forgetful and everything someone must have used magic on him.”

“Yes, that is a possibility,” Giles agreed. “But we must also wonder why – beyond a... dirty nose – Xander was in much better shape than the two of you. Only his shirt seems to have suffered any damage.”

“Well, we fought. He didn’t.”

“Thanks for emasculating me there, Buff.”

“No, I mean... I mean,” stammered Buffy. “Will, what do I mean?”

“You mean that Xander... took... the Way of Peace.”

“The Way of Peace!” Buffy confirmed.

Giles removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, squinting. “Xander?”

“Yea, boss?”

“What are they talking about?”

“Ya got me on that one.”

“Right.” Giles pinched tighter. If his nose were the stem of a champagne flute it would have been broken off his face already. “Let’s imagine for a moment that the three of you were attacked last night by an unknown enemy for an unknown reason and that is a worse thing than Xander’s ego being bruised.”

Buffy lent her support. “Right.”

“Nothing but the facts,” upheld Willow.

the three attack victims exchanged glances, silently asking each other who should start. Buffy rolled her eyes and asserted herself.

“We were attacked last night,” began Buffy obviously.

“Except for me,” said Xander.

“By a demon-woman-bird-thing,” continued Willow.

"Who was built like a ballerina on a tackle football team."

"And a whole lots of black birds. Don't forget them."

"As if I could, Buffy. There had to be like three-hundred of them pressing in on me."

"It was very Hitchcockian."

"Poe-esque, almost."

"And that's pretty much it," Buffy concluded as lamely as she had started.

"Giles, do you really think it's possible there's a new demon hunter in town who saved our bacon?" asked Xander.

It was indeed a possibility, as Giles had explained to the group earlier. It would not have been the first time that another Good Guy had found his (or her) way to Sunnydale pursuing demonic quarry. And to maintain their advantage over the Forces of Darkness some choose not to reveal themselves, even to potential allies. There was strength in anonymity. Victory in subterfuge. Still, it would be nice to know what evil had come to roost in Sunnydale. *Oh, well-punned, Rupert*, thought Giles, mentally rolling his eyes.

"It may have been. Still, let's not be caught short again. Willow?"

"Yea, boss?"

"Look through *Etosha's Compendium* and *The Belfast Prophecies*. I seem to recall something in one of them about demonic-bird watching."

"Demons watch birds?"

"Buffy, I want you to go back to the cemetery and look for clues."

"It's probably something they don't put into those big, self-touting volumes they dictate to their minions."

"There could be something there you didn't see in the dark."

"'Norhough the Terrible, Collector of Stamps' doesn't inspire awe the way 'Norhough the Terrible, Eater of Entrails and Be-fouler of Nuns' does."

"Anything might be important, so pay attention."

“They probably have a sewing circle, too.”

“Ahem,” tried Giles, fruitlessly.

“D’Hoffryn enjoyed macramé,” interjected Anya.

Willow’s eyes popped. “I would never have thought that.”

Giles plowed on. “Xander, please take notes for Willow and cross-reference them as she tells you.”

Anya leaned into Willow conspiratorially. “No? Did you ever notice the beard?”

“We’re clearly off-task here,” Giles broke in with a slightly louder voice. The Scoobies reluctantly came back on point. “So, everyone, back to work. Focus.” The group was respectfully quiet and busy-looking as Giles went to his office where he kept his personal collection of grimoires and histories. He passed Xander, who was seemingly pinned against the cashier’s counter, unable to move. Xander looked to be lost, as though he needed his job re-explained to him. Giles tilted his head and looked at Xander, really took a moment and *looked* at him as though he were a stranger. Giles took off his glasses and bit contemplatively at the arm. Finally, he said, “Why you?”

“Because I’m demonlicious?” Xander replied. In all honesty, he had been asking himself the same question for the past several hours.

Without changing expression in the slightest, Giles merely said, “Yes, of course.” and then walked back to his books.

* * * * *

Xander stood at the counter watching everyone get to work. He knew what he had to do, but couldn’t compel his body to move forward and do it. He could feel his shoulders racing up to meet his ears. Tension froze his body.

Why do they love me so? he wondered. *What is it about me and demons?*

Then he thought about Anya. *She’s a demon. Well, an ex-demon. Cute though and I do love her.*

Then Xander did something he hadn't done in ages. He giggled loudly and hysterically. Try as he might though, he couldn't stop. He knew how he sounded – insane.

Anya and Willow turned to look at him, worry rising on their faces like high tide.

* * * * *

Sitting at his desk, Giles leafed randomly through one of his several reference grimoires. A slim volume of daemonic ornithology, it told Giles about the mating habits of Paer Demons of the Andes and the magical properties of Thunderbird eggs. Nowhere did it reveal the wants and needs of a raven-plumed siren in Southern California.

Raven...ravens...

At the back of Giles' mental network, two neurons met, fell in love and gave birth to an idea.

"Did anyone get a feather?" he asked as he walked toward the front room, only to be stopped by the sight of Xander prone on the floor with Anya and Willow hovering over him, panic tensing their bodies. Xander was an inflexible board, arms at his sides soldier-style, his mouth a gaping rictus, laughing softly to himself.

And crying.

* * * * *

CHAPTER FOUR

Buffy wandered through the graveyard under Giles' orders to "look for clues". It was a new experience for her poking around the tombs and mausoleums in the daytime. She could read the names and epitaphs on all the markers and see that there were indeed real people buried here. People who had families that missed them. People who died of natural causes. People who stayed buried.

She felt almost... safe.

I need help. No one else in the world gets warm fuzzies from granite headstones and marble mausoleums. A snap of a twig and a rustle of dry leaves behind her put Buffy's senses on high alert. Except a VAMPIRE!

Stake in hand, so quickly drawn it almost seemed to appear through a magician's trick, Buffy spun around to see... a squirrel.

Disappointed, Buffy said aloud, "Where's the flash of fangs? The feral growl and the flurry of fists?" She mentally reviewed this last question. "And why am I alliterating?"

Unable to give a satisfactory answer, the squirrel simply tilted its head and chittered.

Oh, duh. It's daytime. I guess you can take the Slayer out of the nighttime, but you can't take the nighttime out of the Slayer. Damn reflexes.

Buffy noticed that the squirrel was still watching her, unmoving.

Am I not fearsome in the daytime? Is this rodent mocking me? Then a new thought, Is this squirrel evil? Images bubbled up from Buffy's subconscious and popped open on the surface of her conscious mind. Evil squirrels. Evil flying squirrels that throw nuts on unsuspecting victims like bombs from a plane. Blood-crazed creatures hell-bent on ...world domination? Abruptly, like throwing a car into reverse without braking first, Buffy's subconscious stopped its forward motion. What would evil squirrels want? More trees? Shorter winters? Bigger nuts? Buffy's conscious mind took over and brought the discussion to an end. Without an agenda, it's hard to be evil. Or good. Leave the squirrels be.

But Buffy couldn't leave it at that. She made a feint at the squirrel, yelling, "AAAIUUGH!!!" It scampered off, and, feeling a bit fiercer, Buffy made her way to the scene of the previous night's attack.

* * * * *

In the hospital, the doctor had just sedated Xander.

Giles, Anya and Willow rushed him there when it became clear he was in the throes of some nervous hysteria. His body had been rigid and unyielding as they tried to put him in the car. Onlookers may have regarded the scene with some amusement – a tweedy-looking librarian-type and two smallish girls turning and rotating a young guy to fit into a red, sporty Italian number the way movers would manipulate a dresser to get it up a narrow flight of stairs – but that was the nature of humor – it's funny as long as it's happening to someone else."

Willow finally had to use a sleep spell on Xander to make him pliable enough to get into the car. It lasted all of twenty minutes, though it should have kept him out all day. His being awake did lend credibility to Giles' story that Xander was indeed in distress.

Three hours and a hypodermic full of Adivan later, Xander was asleep in a room, spending the night for observation. With Xander sick, Willow felt like she needed extra support, so she had called Tara, who was now gathered around the attending doctor with everyone else.

No one had called Xander's parents.

"Your friend is fine," proclaimed the doctor.

Cleansing breath, deep sigh, relax.

"Then what's wrong with him?" retorted Giles.

Sharp gasp, tight shoulders, fear.

"Considering the fever and the seizure you described, I'd say he has heat stroke. We're keeping him cool and treating the dehydration."

"Dehydration?" asked Anya.

"It being Southern California and all, we see many kids brought in who have exerted themselves in the sun all day and forgot to drink water. It happens all the time."

"In September?" Willow sounded incredulous.

"And the mania?" Giles probed further.

"Fever, disorientation. Nothing too surprising."

"Frankly, I was surprised," said Anya. "You're not lying to us, are you, so that when his condition becomes serious and he dies in the night you can be glibly ironic and say how surprised you are?" Suspicion and worry had crept into her voice.

"Uh... no," responded the doctor. He was on uncertain ground here. No one had ever accused him of being *glib* or *ironic* before, even in his undergraduate days as an English major.

"Anya." Giles intoned in such a way that said *We can have them put you under, too, if you continue with this line of reasoning.*

Anya stomped her foot, but backed down. "Well, he looks like a frustrated English major."

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There seemed to be nothing special about the area where they had encountered the Birdwoman. All the graves were intact. Nothing had been moved or vandalized. None of the nearby mausoleums had any arcane carvings etched over their doorways (Buffy's view on "arcane carvings" was akin to the government's view on art – she might not be able to describe them, but she knew them when she saw them) nor any signs of ritual activity.

I thought Xander had just wandered into their range, but there's nothing here to suggest they had any business except Xander.

Buffy began to walk her way through the fight, reconstructing what had happened. She hoped she would recall something that would break the mystery of Birdwoman.

Willow and I were here by... ooh, Mr. Hoper's grave. "Blade of Bedazzlement" blah blah blah geek talk mock mock mock "Xander?"

Buffy looked up the crest of the slope where Xander had been standing. *He was pretty far ahead of us.* Mentally, she tagged the place she thought Xander was at the time of the attack, then ran there to see if her estimate was correct. Twenty-five feet later, a pile of sick told her she had been right about Xander's position. *I knew I had seen him near these graves. Hmm.. Bobbin and Turpin. Interesting. So, if Xander was here when the Birdwoman appeared, and she regarded the sick didn't move at all until the end of the attack.*

I have no idea what that means. I have no idea why she went after him initially, why she went back to him or what drove her off.

On the ground near where Xander had voided his stomach were several feathers, some of which seemed to be scorched. *I didn't burn her. So, who did?*

Buffy picked up a few feathers and put them into her pocket.

Maybe Giles will have some theory. Home again, home again, jiggety-jig.

And Buffy left the cemetery.

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"Oh," the doctor started. "He'll need to come back next week for a tetanus shot."

"What for?" asked Tara.

"For the scar on his shoulder. It's a few months old, but our records don't show a recent booster. Better safe than sorry."

"Scar? He doesn't have a scar. I know every inch of that body and there is no scar on his shoulder."

"Well, I'm afraid there is now, miss."

Anya became immediately defensive, not only at his patronizing tone, but at the implication that she wasn't a good enough girlfriend to notice something like a gash across Xander's back deep enough to leave a scar. "I'm sensing glibness, again."

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Xander woke up and, at first, didn't know where he was. *What the...?* was the best he could manage. After a few minutes of staring at the crisp, pristine white sheets and the blue loose knit blanket covering him, Xander knew he wasn't at home in the basement. Then he caught sight of the needle in his arm that connected to a tube leading up to a bag full of a clear liquid. A few more minutes passed. He became aware of a cool wetness in his crotch and armpits. His head lolled to the side to see the source of the sensation. *Icepacks*, he observed. Another minute, then like the sun rising in the East, realization dawned over Xander: *The Hospital*.

The next question was a bit more complex.

Why?

Xander had a vague recollection of the Scoobie meeting and Giles' Giving of Assignments, but it was after that things got dark. What had happened that landed him in the hospital? Were they attacked again? *Oh, my God*, thought Xander. *Is everyone else alright?*

The answer came to him suddenly and clearly, *They're fine. They brought you here.* It wasn't a voice, but rather a feeling that was so strong it was almost like a voice.

They were very concerned which is perfectly understandable. You passed out for no reason they could discern. I'm sure they're still around somewhere. Such stalwart companions would hardly be the type to abandon one in this place... Is this a place of healing?

"Now I'm officially freaked out," Xander announced to the room. He made a move for the nurse call-button, but once it was in his hands, he found he couldn't press it. Much to his great distress, Xander actually let go of the device and settled back into the pillow.

Wait, wait, dear son, wait. Breathe. In. Out. In. Out. Slowly now. Yes, yes. Oh my that Patanjali knew what he was talking about, didn't he?

In the middle of his freak out Xander had, indeed, forgotten to breathe. He tried to inhale and only succeeded in aspirating some saliva. He choked, but started to take in air again. After the coughing subsided, his first real breaths were nothing but tentative shudders. After a few minutes of practice though, Xander was breathing easily again.

Do you feel any better?

Xander nodded to the empty room.

Excellent. So, is this a place of healing?

Xander nodded again.

So different from what I had known, the voice wondered. Are services still rendered free of charge?

Xander, still mute, shook his head.

Ah, the evils of necessity and those who are ready to prey on that need. Sad that money has become the reason to help... the voice hesitated. I may be wrong, of course. Is this place the exception or the rule insofar as payment for healing goes? Oh! The voice seemed to be having a revelation. Will they bleed you?

At the mention of blood, Xander panicked. *I can't stay here.* Whatever was in this room, oh no, in his head with him, he didn't want to face alone. He wanted to be out where people were, where *his* people were. One of them would definitely know how to take care of whomever this was., whether it was Giles or Willow or Tara or Buffy.

A Slayer?

Now Xander knew something alien was here with him. Xander knew Buffy was a Slayer the same way he knew 2 + 2 was 4. There was no question in *his* mind.

The line of the Chosen persists? Oh, my my my my MY. And do the Forces of Evil run from them as night runs from the sunrise? Is the Slayer bold and strong and beautiful? Does she run wild through the hills seeking the ruin of vampires and demons in their desolation? Ah, sch a life. Short and tragic, of course, but still a wonder to behold.

Xander stopped worrying about himself for a second and started to worry about Buffy. "You leave her alone! I won't help you in whatever evil scheme you're plotting against her. She'll stop you and free me!"

Do you think I intend to harm the Slayer? Oh, dear child, no. I admire Slayers. I would actually like to meet the new one. I'm sure she's very pretty. They're all very pretty.

Xander hit his pillows in frustration. Why was it that everyone wanted to meet the Slayer or beat the Slayer or eat the Slayer, but all anyone ever wanted from Xander was directions to the Slayer? He was possessed by a Buffy fan. Well, wasn't that just perfectly par for the course? He was possessed and the thing inside of him just wanted Buffy's autograph. Great, just great. Mentally, Xander slouched and sulked.

You're upset.

Oh, even better, thought Xander. *Pity from people who don't even have their own bodies. Could this day suck any harder?*

Have I said something offensive? The voice sounded genuinely concerned about Xander's feelings. *It would be the furthest thing from my mind to do so. You are my host, so to speak, in this world and it would fly against the rules of a good guest to do anything to offend the hospitality of one's host.*

"Don't worry about it," Xander said.

No, no no. Please tell.. ah! gasped the voice. *You feel that you are eclipsed by the Slayer. That you are nothing compared to her. You believe that she could function perfectly well without you, but without her you would be lost. It's all her in your memories. Oh!* Another gasp. *I see you've met Dracula. And he... oh, dear. Tell me, what exactly is a "butt monkey"?*

Anger rose in Xander. These were things he had a hard enough time saying to himself, let alone having a stranger do a show-and-tell of them for him. "OK, you don't want to offend me?" he yelled. "Then don't go traipsing across my mind without permission, all right? If there's something you need to know, I'll tell you. Agreed?"

A thousand apologies, my friend, the voice consoled. *Again, I was not trying to be offensive, but my natural curiosity sometimes gets the better of me. That was why my brother sent*

me so many gifts from across time. They were there to keep me amused and to further my understanding of people. Have you ever seen and Easter basket?

Xander began, "Yeah. I used to have to look for mine on Easter morning, but my parents usually forgot to put it together, so I'd be looking for hours before they remembered..." but the voice was off and running in a different direction.

Get dressed. Now.

The voice now spoke with authority, with compulsion. It was insistent, and the echoes of the command relentless.

"Where are we going?" asked Xander.

To make us a hero.

Xander perked up. "Nuh-uh!" he exclaimed.

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Buffy made it back to The Magic Box by late afternoon, but no one was there, just a note taped to the front door saying, *We're at the hospital with Xander. Come when you get this.*

Buffy was halfway down the street before the note could hit the sidewalk after she dropped it.

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Xander donned his clothes again, silently thanking whoever was listening that the whip had been left as well. Whoever was in his head with him was as hyper as a fourth-grader after a trip to the Chocolate Factory, which meant that Xander, for once, had to be the voice of reason, the one to propose caution before action.

Is this what it's like to be mature? He thought before being interrupted. Again.

Oh and there will be so much good we can do in the world. I thank God Above that I've been given this opportunity to beat back Evil and to make the world shine the way He intended it to. Why are you just standing there? Shouldn't we be gone by now? There's much to do and time, time is always against us..

Xander was peeking out the door of his room, scanning the hallway for doctors, nurses, his friends, anyone who would try to stop his leaving. *I. NEED. QUIET! Please.* thought Xander. The voice was abruptly quiet. Xander thought it was pouting. *Oh, man, I didn't want to hurt its feelings.* then thought better of the situation. *I'm losing my mind. No, no. I'm sharing my mind with... Hey, you. Do you have a name?*

Guthlac, said a quiet and slightly wounded voice.

Guthlac. I'm Xander. It was irrational, but Xander actually didn't want to be mean to this Guthlac guy. He seemed nice enough, overly enthusiastic and chatty perhaps, but still nice enough for a disembodied spirit that was currently possessing Xander.

A momentary wave of panic swelled within Xander as the reality of the situation crashed on the shore of his consciousness. Trying to sound conversational, Xander asked, *So, Guthlac, you in town for long? Here to take in the sites? Convention, perhaps?*

This was all the encouragement that Guthlac needed. *I'm here because there is a great need in the world. A great need for goodness and righteousness. We shall be a beacon of light to guide people to the shores of peace and happiness. We shall.. why are we still standing here?* Indeed, Xander had not moved from his spot at the doorjamb. He was waiting for a doctrine (chronic?) of doctors to finish their knotty conversation at the nearby nurses' desk. Guthlac didn't seem to understand the need for a covert escape. Everything for him was *now now now.*

Hey, Guthlac, Xander interjected. *Ever see this guy before?* Xander called up his favorite poster of Batman, crouched precipitously on the edge of a gargoyle's head, almost a part of the statue himself. Batman was tall, dark, mysterious and, above all, quiet. He did all his work in the dark so no one could follow his comings or goings. His success depended on his ability to stay hidden in the shadows. Xander gave this image to Guthlac. *If we're going to be a hero, we need to act like one. Now this guy knew the value of being subtle.*

Aaaah! I see, said Guthlac in wonder. *Yes, let's be subtle. SSssshhhh!* he hissed. *Quiet. Quiet.*

Xander couldn't help but smile. *This guy is either five years old or he's hopelessly senile. Either way, he's too funny.*

The doctors just then moved off to complete their various duties. Xander looked left, right and then left again. The hallway was all clear. Briefly, Xander wondered if Willow and Giles had left him here alone. *Nah. They wouldn't do that.*

But then, where are they? For the first time all night Xander felt alone. Even with his new headmate, it wasn't the same as having his friends here. People with answers. People he needed to be here for him.

We're not moving again and the hall is clear, came Guthlac's voice. *What are we waiting for now?*

Hurt and a little disappointed, Xander returned, "Nothing. Nothing. We're gone."

And they were.

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Buffy found almost the whole gang in the waiting room – Giles, Willow, Anya and Tara. Anya was pacing the floor and had been for a while, judging by the trail of scuff marks on the floor. Willow slouched awkwardly in the grip of a stiff, minty-green vinyl couch. Giles was simply standing at the window, staring at the long shadows in the streets below as the sun set. Concern weighed down everyone's spirits like a wet wool sweater. Besides the clack of Anya's shoes across the tiling, the room was quiet.

"Hey," said Buffy, lifting the silence. "What happened?"

"Xander... fell ill after you left," said Giles, removing his glasses. "The doctor said he should be fine, but..."

"...but we don't believe him," interrupted Anya. "He said Xander was heat stroked and dehydrated and," Anya started to weep, "he's going to die!"

Buffy started, but Giles intervened before she could reach full-blown panic. "He's not gong to die. Anya's interpretation of the doctor's prognosis is unduly free. He just needs to rest, is all."

Buffy's shoulders dropped away from her ears as she relaxed, but she frowned at Anya for being so unnecessarily dramatic. "Oh, thank God. I thought he had been injured by those things last night. Some sort of slow, internal bleeding that was couldn't see until it was too late."

Anya whimpered as Willow rose to put her arms around the ex-demon's shoulders. "He's sedated right now," she said comfortingly, "but we can peek in on him if you want." She looked meaningfully at Buffy. *Be positive. We don't want her crying again.*

"I want," said Anya. Willow nodded and led her out of the room.

Alone, Buffy questioned Giles. "Is it really just heat stroke? I mean, that's so... normal."

"I don't know," said Giles. "I suppose it's possible for an otherwise healthy young man to dehydrate from the sun relatively quickly. I suppose it's also possible that last night's attack and Xander falling ill today are connected. I have no compelling evidence either way. For now, we'll just have to trust the doctor and keep an eye on Xander for any unusual behaviors."

Buffy was obviously frustrated by this idea. "The old 'We'll Wait and See' strategy."

"It's better than running of half-cocked in every direction trying to solve a problem where there may not even be a problem," Giles said. "We'll investigate these Birdwomen, as you call them, and hope that Xander..."

Willow's voice crossed and ran over Giles'. "Xander is gone!"

Buffy and Giles turned to the door to see a pale Willow and a tear-streaked Anya standing there. Anya's lower lip trembled.

"What? How? Where...?" Buffy began, but Anya would have none of it.

"I guess this is where we express surprise that we never saw this coming," she said with not a little hint of *I told you so* in her voice.

* * * * *

Who are you?

Guthlac. I told you already.

He was absolutely right. Xander had already asked his name and got an answer. Guthlac was within his rights to be petulant. As far as someone who was possessing him could have rights about what kind of an attitude he could throw at Xander.

Let me try this a different way, Xander ventured. I mean, what are you?

There was a pause, then a sigh. *I'm Guthlac*, the voice replied, drawing out the "ooo" and the "aaa" unnecessarily.

Right. Gotcha. Guthlac. Xander and his spiritual hitchhiker walked for a few minutes in silence. Xander couldn't believe he was this incapable of communicating with a creature who was literally closer to him than anyone in his life had ever been before. Maybe he was no good without the Scoobies. They would figure out what to do in a trice.

"In a trice"?

But hadn't they left him alone at the hospital? Abandoned him? He had been in need and there was no bedside vigil for him? Xander felt suddenly closer to his imaginary friend.

So, you're a saint?

Yes.

You got God on your side?

Yes, a bit more deeply and proudly.

Power to spare?

Yes.

Looking to score some point for the good guys?

Yes.

Then I know where we have to go.

On the Drag, a shop bell rang out as a later-than-usual customer entered. The clerk behind the counter sighed. She had been getting ready to close out the cash drawer and go home. The Costume Shop was supposed to be opened for another twenty minutes, but, the clerk had reasoned, who would need a costume at this hour? Back to the door, she shuddered and tried to

imagine who might be there. A frat brother looking for a last-minute toga? A businessman who wanted to be Little Bo Peep for a night? A wolf needing sheep's clothing? Painting on a fake smile, she turned to greet her patron.

“May I help you?”

Breathless and somewhat wild-eyed, Xander was leaning into the counter, his palms pressed against its glass top. “I need a costume,” he said.

Still smiling and not meaning it, the clerk said, “Good thing you didn’t go to the pet store next door then.”

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