

The Measure of a Man

by Ten

RATING: PG 13

PAIRING: Angel/Buffy (mostly)

SUMMARY: Alternate universe -

Angel chooses to remain human in "I Will Remember You" instead of asking the Oracles to take back the day. The story includes Buffy, Holtz, Connor, James, Buffy, Doyle, the Angel Investigations gang and changes that might have occurred because of his decision.

SPOILERS: Up to season 6 on Buffy and episode "Sleep Tight" on Angel

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DISTRIBUTION: Ask and ye shall receive

DISCLAIMER: All characters and some of the storyline belong to the god that is Joss Whedon (all hail and bow low before him), and WB, UPN, ME and some other people, but not me. I just enjoy playing with them for my own personal, greedy gratification. :-)

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CHAPTER 1

-MARCH 2002-

The last remnants of golden light reflected off the now cold, watery horizon leaving dull reflections on Angel's pain-stricken face. It had been slow coming, this everlasting sunset. It seemed to deliberately keep him from the solace he sometimes found in this tiny, unusually private corner of the strand. Though he came often in daylight, he preferred the cover of darkness, a cold comfort from a centuries old habit. When he needed alone time, this is where he would come and stare into day's end as if he were staring into some distant past to watch it unfold or somehow change it. From here he could still see the bridge where he and Buffy had first kissed in sunlight. If he tried hard enough, he could still see a shadowy reflection of them standing there, bathed in the glow of midday, experiencing the first moments of their new life together, warm and full of promise.

Now, more than two years later, he hadn't thought it possible he could feel so much pain and still survive. Even breathing had become a labor. In truth, it was a living testament to his determination and strength that he survived at all, but every day his heart became heavier, his tasks more difficult, and his life had become what seemed like ceaseless pain. Once he had become human, his life both began and ended. Once he had become a father, it began and ended once again. So much joy. So much loss. So much pain. And in the deep recesses of Angel's mind played long ago words from a man who insisted strength grew from adversity, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands in moments of challenge and controversy." Of course, that man was dead now, and in so many ways, so was he. Angel lay down in the wet sand, looking up into the heavens, and covered his eyes with his left arm.

-SEPTEMBER 2001 - Los Angeles-

"Get up, Mr. Lazy!" Buffy padded across the cool, wooden floor of their new flat, wrapped in a towel, wet hair dripping down her back and leaving a little droplet trail behind her. "Come on! Wesley said we should be there by 9!" As Angel groaned and turned over rebelliously, she forced the issue by ripping open the heavy drapes and flooding the bed, and Angel, with sunlight.

"Argh! Buffy!! Come on, it's only--"

"It's 8:45 and no you don't!" She snagged the covers before he could bury himself beneath them again. "Come on, Angel, this is a big client. We need to make a good impression if we want to be able to pay for this Southern California lifestyle."

Reluctantly he rolled out of the enormous four-poster bed and plunked to the floor, pledging silently to remind Wesley how off-putting these early meetings were. Staggering to the bathroom he playfully swatted Buffy's shapely behind and mumbled something about 'nice hair', which was quickly met with, "Speak for yourself, Bedhead." Looking into his mirror Angel couldn't argue. His hair had obviously been styled by the passionate midnight tumblings of Hurricane Buffy. Though it was rather ghastly to look at, the reason behind it made him smile and glance toward her. She was amazing. Hard and soft at the same time, painfully strong but able give herself over completely to love and passion. He never looked at her that he didn't want her, to be touching her, to be inside her. He wanted to breathe her into him and hold her there, letting each of their atoms mix and scatter until they were indiscernible from each other. She was such a miraculous creature, and yet, there she was, bent over drying her hair upside-down, completely unaware of his expression, the emotion rising in his throat, much less his train of thought. Fifteen minutes wasn't very much time, but ...

He slipped behind her and freed her from the towel, pressing his hips against the warm, soft flesh of her backside and trailing his fingertips up her bare back. On the surface, she ignored him and continued drying her hair, but inside she felt that rush of excitement that always accompanied his touch. In the two years he had been human, that thrill had not diminished in the slightest. She had thought that over time, their hunger for one another might lessen a little, but that had not been the case at all. In fact, it had seemed to her that they became more passionate over time rather than less.

His warm hands slid down her sides, his fingers spread to feel every inch of her he possibly could, peppering her back with the airy brush of his lips on her spine. He was rewarded with a tiny sigh of contentment from her. They were going to be late for that meeting.

Bursting through the door of the old hotel at 9:35, they were carrying coffee and a huge box of donuts. Cordelia looked up to scold them just as Buffy presented her with the prized jelly-filled. "You're forgiven," and she dug in, mumbling to them with raspberry filling running out of the corner of her mouth. "Day already stawted," and she tossed her head toward the main conference room.

Angel Investigations had gone through a staggering metamorphosis when Angel became human. True, he had lost his superhuman strength, but he had gained the ability to work in daylight, an advantage most LA beasts did not have. He was still strong, and with his crack back-up team watching each other's backs, serious injuries were rare. Buffy, of course, had been an invaluable addition to the firm when she decided not to return to Hellmouth central. Having the Slayer around had saved their hides more than once and had been a wonderful boon for the business, not to mention Angel personally. Wesley had joined them a year later with his traveling library of reference material and infinite knowledge that seemed useless to most people and priceless to those fighting the good fight. Doyle's visions kept them up on the newest baddies. Lorne and Fred had been invited to become a permanent part of the team after their netherworld trip. Cordelia had been able to capture an ongoing, featured role on a sci-fi series, which gave her access to a never-ending supply of make-up and special effects for those undercover projects that crept up now and then, but still gave her time to work with the LA Scoobies.

The reputation of Angel Investigations had increased exponentially, as had their effectiveness and profitability, as they quickly became the premiere organization for battling the unexplainable phenomena that seemed to perpetually plague Los Angeles. Buffy replaced Angel as the muscle of the group, Angel himself became the magnetic field which bound them together in the midst of chaos, and the entire team had begun to function like a well-oiled machine. They were happy. All of them. It was perfect. Except when they were late.

"Nice of you to join us." Wesley Wyndam Price smirked at the pair and introduced them to the businessmen at the conference table. Once settled in, explanations were made, negotiations discussed, and it was agreed that Angel Investigations could remain in the hotel indefinitely while remodeling was completed in exchange for some side work for the construction company which was having difficulty with it's employees vanishing in a particularly secured area of another project.

Hands were shaken, checks written, smiles exchanged, and everyone seemed pleased with the arrangement. After the clients left, Wesley lifted an eyebrow at the pair and let out a little sigh. "At least try to appear penitent when you're that late. Now, let's get to work," and with that the group dove into research on the mysterious disappearance of seven construction workers on the vamp side of town. The day's plans changed as Doyle collapsed forward, burying his face in his hands and screaming in pain.

-1760-

Holtz lifted his head from his hands once again, and stared into the fireplace, trying not to equate it with his sweet daughter bursting into flames earlier that day. The monsters that had murdered his wife and infant son had done their worst by turning his 7-year-old daughter into creatures like themselves. She did not understand what happened to her. She did not understand why her beloved father threw her to her death in the bright morning sunlight. Her piteous words would echo in his mind for all eternity, as would the faces of those who did this to him and his once happy family.

He paced through the small cottage, like a restless animal looking for food, or a bird in search of nesting, or a father in search of his revenge. He had to do something, he couldn't let his family be destroyed and then do nothing about it. He finally stopped in the nursery. Staring at the empty, rumped bed that belonged to his daughter, he approached it and then turned to the small crib of his murdered son. There was not even bedding in it, only the cold wood framework where his son once slept, replaced now with a cold wooden box buried in the ground where he would sleep for all eternity. He returned to the room carrying the empty cradle, intending to toss it into the fire and burn the painful reminder, but instead he simply stood before the fireplace silently transfixed by the flames and drowning in the sorrow and hatred he felt toward the creatures that had destroyed his life. He would hunt them down and massacre them.

There was a flicker of bluish light behind him and the demon appeared, taunting him with the promise of exacting revenge on those who destroyed him. He didn't need to think about it for even a moment's time. He set the cradle down and joined Sahjhan, vanishing in a doorway of time, his eyes still focused on the empty cradle he was leaving behind.

-FEBRUARY 2002 - Los Angeles-

Wesley gently but swiftly lifted Connor from the bassinet and left the old hotel. As much as he hated to betray Angel, he knew if he didn't all would be lost and the prophecy would be fulfilled -- "The Father will kill The Son."

In the months since Buffy had died Angel had been on an emotional roller coaster. He was devastated by her death. No matter how many times they had insisted to him that he had no control over the madman who

murdered her, Angel knew that his association with him in the distant past brought it full circle. He blamed himself for everything.

Lost and vulnerable, Angel had been susceptible to Darla when she seemingly appeared from nowhere. She took one look at her "darling boy" and knew it was their time to be together again, now that the Slayer was out of his life forever. It was too easy for him to fall into a pattern of seeking her approval, he had done so for much of his vampire life. She was his sire and his confidant and his lover for well over a century. He was a tasty morsel ready for her to devour. Darla drew him into her bed, presenting him with a tempestuous night of angry, violent lust and ultimately urging him to let her turn him so they could be what they once were

He awakened from their night together a changed man, but still human, more focused on his life and purpose ahead, and more able to accept whom he had chosen to be. He rejected her completely and had sent her packing.

Angel had no idea that a vampire could become pregnant. Along with everyone else, Angel was stunned to see her four months later enormously pregnant. She claimed he was the child's father, but the timing was off. It hadn't been that long, but yet it seemed as if the baby had developed at twice the rate of a human child. She insisted that she was just as puzzled as everyone else as to how it happened. It made no sense and even after the child was born, it remained a mystery. Darla sacrificing herself to give birth to the boy had confirmed to Angel what he had known all along, he was to raise his son alone. It had been difficult for him, but the love and help of his friends had made it easier on the former vampire. Still, the prophecy insisted that Connor was in danger and Wesley couldn't continue to see this child, who because of his heritage must be important to the world, living at such risk.

Hours later, as Angel lay crumpled in the darkened, burning street of LA, he was lost once again in the anguish of loss. Wesley had not only failed to protect Connor, he had all but given him to Holtz, and Holtz had taken the boy and leaped into an unknown hell dimension summoned by Sahjhan, who himself seemed very pleased with the outcome. Angel, lost in the agony of losing his son in the glowing vortex, lifted his head just in time to see it close and vanish, leaving behind the residual flames of the explosions.

-1760-

In what seemed like a burst of flames, Holtz appeared back in his cabin, the fire still burning just as he had left it. In his arms was the bundle he had traveled across time to claim. He set the squirming child in his dead son's cradle and left the room, returning minutes later with a packed satchel and a torch. Lighting it from the fireplace he went about the cabin setting everything on fire, all furniture, clothing, all evidence that he and his family had ever lived there. All of it was set to burn. Holtz lifted the cradle into one arm, hoisted the satchel on his shoulder and left the burning house.

Once outside, he tossed the satchel into the hitched wagon, gently lowered the cradle near the driver's seat and climbed in himself. Reigns at the ready, he didn't look at his home, now engulfed in flames and crumbling on it's meager foundation. He turned the cart around and rode away, all the while talking to the unsettled baby in the cradle at his feet.

"Now, my son, your name is Steven James Holtz. You are my son. You were fortunate enough to escape the massacre of your mother and sister by demons who will dearly pay for what they have done. And we will have a happy, quiet life together -- hunting them."

The collapsing house behind them could scarcely be heard over the pounding of horses' hooves thundering into the hard dirt road in a hurried journey to their new life.

CHAPTER 2

1767 - Marseilles, France

Horses' hooves pounded the cobblestone road in a relentless race toward the barn where the two vampires were said to have been holed up.

"Where are the others? There should be four of them all together." Holtz barked angrily at the inept men around him. He had been close to capturing them for nigh onto two weeks, after months of tracking them throughout France, the Pyrenees, and northern Spain only to miss them by hours. He would not be disappointed this time. He had planned well, assembling a lynch mob of suffering humans who had lost their loved ones to monsters of the night. He would have his revenge.

"There are only two, sir, males." Holtz growled at the messenger, annoyed that the females had escaped. No matter he could get the information from the males, there was rarely any loyalty amongst these creatures.

Within minutes his carefully planned capture backfired once again due to the ignorance around him. Where he had discovered the females were at the pier, the males had escaped again, even though they were in his hands, he had spoken to them, and had planned a long, horrible, lingering end to their undead life. His anger was seething beneath the surface.

Angelus & James were running, both laughing and angry at how things had played out. James was still shocked Angelus had so easily given up the women's location, but he also knew they would most likely have no further problem escaping Holtz. Still, James's anger at Angelus was substantial. How could he take such a risk?

As they ran toward the pier, the victorious smile on James's face, transformed into an evil, maniacal expression. Angelus would pay for this.

LATE SEPTEMBER 2001 - Los Angeles

Madness shown in James's frantic eyes as he looked toward Angel with seething hatred.

"Now I'm going to kill the woman you love."

"You can't. She's"

"Gonna kick your sorry ass?" Buffy appeared in the connecting doorway of the subway car, a slight smirk on her face directed squarely at James.

"What took you so long?" Angel asked teasingly.

"Ran into another old friend of yours back there. Man, that guy Holtz sure gets around." As she spoke she moved into a strategically advantageous position, flanking James and in clear view of Angel, their unspoken signals to one another flying through the air like bullets.

"Holtz?" James's eyes widened at the name, recognition and worry reflecting on his hardened features.

Buffy saw her chance and lunged toward him, grabbing his arm and twisting him around trying to immobilize him as Angel sprang at him head-on. James easily tossed Buffy to one side and met Angel's attack with ready arms, lifting him over his head and throwing him toward the still open door.

"Your human strength is no match for me, Angel. Why not just let me play with the Slayer?"

Angel cringed and saw Buffy leap toward the now heartless vampire wondering if there was anything he could do to wear him down faster, make his limited time run out since there was nothing either of them could really do to destroy him at this point. James was ready for Buffy, his overpoweringly unnatural strength crushing her before she could land a solid punch or kick. He adjusted his grip on her, turning her around, her feet not yet meeting the floor, and forcing her back into his muscular torso, engulfing her in vice-like arms. She squirmed, her arms and legs flailing about in a vain effort to loosen his hold. His control was complete.

He turned toward Angel, a look of triumph on his face, a look of fear on Buffy's. He squeezed the air from her just enough that she became light-headed and slower, then as his eyes bored into those of his now human sire, he slipped his hands to either side of her head.

"Nooooooooooooo!!!!!!" Angel was airborne, hurling toward them with agility and speed he didn't know he had. His eyes met Buffy's, both of them filled with sorrow and regret, both of them knowing it was too late, as James twisted her abruptly and snapped her neck, dropping her to the ground like so much garbage.

Angel exploded onto James, straddling him, and began pounding him mercilessly and hideously as if somehow beating him would bring life back to Buffy. He continued for what seemed hours, James making no defense, only taking it with very little marking or injury to show for it, as if his mission were accomplished and the only thing left for him to do was bask in the delicious pain he had inflicted on Angel. An eye for an eye. Angel had killed Elizabeth, the true love of his life and non-life. He had triumphantly repaid him in kind. There was nothing more for him to do but wait for death. What Angel was attempting to do to his impervious body didn't matter. Nothing hurt, nothing damaged him.

Angel began to tire, his blows slowing and sometimes missing their target. He fell toward the wall, propping against it, his left leg still lying, almost lifelessly across James's abdomen, sobs catching between his unneeded breaths.

"You ... didn't have to kill her, James. Why? Why did you do it? Elizabeth was an accident, I didn't know it was her until it was too late ... but Buffy, you knew who she was, and you did it anyway. Why?"

James's voice was cold and flat. "She's dead Angelus, why cry about it now? You say I shouldn't mourn Elizabeth because it was an accident? Why mourn at all. They are both dead. It's not like we haven't both killed before."

1785 - France

"Angelus! Why did you kill her? I wasn't through with her yet?" The almost twin vampires ran hard through the forest, dodging trees and rocks with nonhuman speed, their hair wild and untamed, as they were, blood traces still in the corners of their mouths.

"You were taking too long, James, I told you if we dallied we'd be caught." His soft accent belied the vicious nature of his words. He leaped a smaller rock, signaling James to beware of it as his feet padded quietly on the damp, pre-dawn ground.

"But ..."

"No 'buts' James. Their father was coming. Now the shotgun wouldn't have killed us, but it would have hurt like the dickens and might have slowed our escape. You know there were more of them inside, not just him, if we'd stayed, we'd have been caught. Just be glad we got out in time. You had your fun."

James pouted as he continued to run. The girls had been twins, one for each of them. Young, maybe 17, eager to please what they considered older gentlemen, and just naughty enough to accompany them outside. Angelus & James had managed to acquire an invitation to this grand ball and spent most of the evening looking for someone special to amuse them before feeding. The girls has been innocent, but flirtatious, dressed in twin ballgowns of differing colors. They had presented little challenge but proved themselves to be delightful toys willing to kiss and fondle out of the probing eyes of unwary adults inside. Both had managed to seduce the girls out of their ballgowns, close enough to one another that they could hear each other and even exchange a glimpse of an idea to trade at some point just to see how the girls would react to it. But they had been satisfied with their initial choices, hungrily kissing, nipping, and teasing them in their own individual, yet surprisingly similar, way.

As the girls shed their frocks, both men had coerced them to the ground, the inexperienced girls helpless to resist them and easily surrendering their virtue and virginity to the mystery of the attentive men that sent both girls into the heavens with their masterful touches and kisses. They surrendered and were rewarded with ecstasy they had never known and would never know again. The vampires had never even undressed. Once they had enjoyed the carnal pleasures the twins offered to them, and the girls were basking in the afterglow of first love, the vampires revealed their true selves, transforming so that they could feed from the luscious fruit they had just plucked. Angelus quickly drained his victim and was through with her, disguarding her like so much garbage. However, James had toyed with his, feeding slowly while still groping the girl, hungry for another go at her even as he drained the life from her body. This left her conscious enough to scream and cause the urgency of their departure. Angelus had quickly grabbed the shrieking girl, snapped her neck and dragged James by the coat sleeve into the surrounding forest.

"If you're going to play with them, James, you have to make sure they can't call for help. Sure, it's more fun, but not with a crowd nearby. Use your head!"

LATE SEPTEMBER 2001 - Los Angeles

"What were you thinking?" Wesley chastized Doyle. "You let Angel and Buffy go after him alone? They need back up! They'll need all of us! With a glance, Wesley had Fred & Cordy already collecting weapons and searching for a means to find James before the dynamic duo could.

"James is not just an ordinary vampire, he has been changed. He surrendered his vampire heart in exchange for ... for invincibility. They can't defeat him, they can only wait for him to die. They know this, why didn't they just hide out and wait?"

Doyle shrugged as he took a particularly nasty looking axe from Cordy. "You know them, Wes, better than anyone. Do you really think I could have stopped them?"

Wes acquiesced. Doyle was right. Angel & Buffy did whatever they wanted no matter how much sense you tried to force on them. Still, he wished they had at least waited for back up. James was unpredictable, dangerous and had nothing more to lose. He would make the most formidable enemy they had ever faced.

Tracking them to the subway would have been more difficult had Doyle not collapsed in a spasm of agony and vision.

"Subway. Runaway. 56th Street." He looked up at Wes, urgency in his voice. "We'd better hurry." They headed in the direction of the terminal stop for that train. If they couldn't stop the battle, at least they could be there to clean up afterward, and hopefully there was only dust to sweep up around a triumphant Buffy & Angel.

They arrived only moments before the train, its metal wheels screeching as the train's automatic shutdown devices finally engaged. It was easy to tell which car they were in from the shattered glass. Anxiously the back-up team waited for the doors to open.

Angel sat on the floor, cradling Buffy's lifeless body in his arms, his eyes dulled with agony and tears. He stared straight ahead, looking at nothing, making no sound, rocking her slowly and gently as if she were a baby on the edge of sleep. He was pale, his face expressionless. At his feet was the scattered dust of, what they could only assume was, James. Victory. At a terrible price.

Wesley spoke after a long silence, his tone deliberately gentle and soothing. "Angel?"

Angel's tear-stained face turned toward him, focusing only on Wes, his voice tired and dead. "Wes," his voice hitched and two centuries of pain focused on two words, "She's gone." Angel doubled over onto Buffy's lifeless body, crumpled and broken, sobbing uncontrollably.

CHAPTER 3

FEBRUARY 2002 - Los Angeles

Angel's sobs shook him uncontrollably. He could scarcely breathe as his body shuddered with helplessness and agony to the point he wanted to die. He was overwhelmed with loss. How did this happen? Why? What could Holtz possibly gain from taking his son except to inflict pain. What would happen to Connor? Was he dead already? Questions mixed with agony as Angel both tried to think and not to think, as his life once again bled away from him through tears and pain.

Cordelia and Doyle had arrived just in time to see Holtz vanish in the electric blue vortex. They didn't know who else was there, but their focus was firmly on Angel, or rather what was left of him. Cordelia felt hot tears well up in her eyes, almost immediately spilling out onto her cheeks, then flash dried by the exploding car. Angel didn't move. He was crumpled in the middle of the street. Cordy rushed to him, trying to set him upright, as Doyle cased the location, taking notice of Lila and others from Wolfram & Hart as well as a large demon hovering near Angel.

Lifting his face toward her, Cordelia spoke gently to him, calling his name softly, urging him to respond in some way. He was far away in a land of pain and sorrow and neverending grief. They had been taken from him. Buffy. Connor. The two he had loved above all else, even his own life, were both gone. Cordelia settled onto the ground next to him, wrapping her arms around him, willing him to at least acknowledge she was there, to reach out to her in some way, even if it was anger. He stopped sobbing suddenly. He said nothing, he did nothing. For a moment, she thought he had stopped breathing.

As the cry of siren's split the air with their piercing cry, Doyle's phone rang. He said a few words into it and hurried toward Cordelia & Angel.

"That was Fred. She found Wesley. He's alive but just barely. His throat was slit. His flat was ripped apart, it looks like he was trying to get away with the baby when he was ambushed. Poor bugger. In trying to avert the prophecy, he delivered Connor into the hands of Angel's worst enemy."

He helped Cordy stand and they both helped Angel to his feet, directing the grief-stricken man toward their car. As they passed the hovering demon, they noticed the edges of his disfigured lips curl up slightly. He nodded to them, allowing them passage, then spoke cryptically, "Now, he will suffer as he inflicted suffering on so many others."

SEPTEMBER 2001 - Los Angeles

"Hopefully they aren't suffering in some demon hellhole," Buffy commented as they cased the dark, dank area of the construction site. "I mean, if these people are vanishing, let's hope they are either safely in hiding somewhere, or that they had some quick, painless death rather than suffering in the digestive track of some demon."

"Nice visual, Buff," Angel responded as he crawled into a particularly dirty area of the cavern. "Why would anyone try to build something here? It's unstable, it's ... unsanitary. There's nothing here." He brushed the dirt off his hands, shirt, and knees. "We won't find them here."

"Oh really?" Buffy had moved to the opposite corner of the cavern. "Looky what I found." She pulled out some disgusting bedding, blankets, and other trash. "We have a vamp nest. Not surprising, but I would think the bodies would still be around somewhere."

"Then they are feeding on the workers. You don't feed at the nest if you can keep from it. It draws attention to you."

Buffy shrugged, "I'll take your word for it. Let's check out a back entrance. I'll bet that's where they're taking them." A few minutes poking threw the crib confirmed their suspicions. Vamps, feeding where the feeding was good. They could curb that activity fairly easily and made note to return during patrol later and dust them. But since it was such a sweet set up, they thought it best to reduce the risk of another gang moving in.

"Torch?" Angel lit one and handed it to her. Buffy tossed it into the small opening and stood back. "Sure easier than cleaning it."

Angel reached out to Buffy, patting her on the back. "Another job well done by Angel Investigations," he laughed. "We can tell the foreman to shut down this part of the site and seal it off. They'll have to reconfigure some of the plans, but it's safer than risking more casualties."

"And since when do you care about casualties, Angelus?" A dark, shadowy figure emerged from the cavern entrance. Though he was backlit and difficult to see clearly, the voice was familiar somehow. Angel moved closer cautiously just as Holtz stepped from the shadows into the meager lantern light.

"Holtz" Angel's voice was flat, yet threatening. "Haven't you left yet? There is nothing for you here. Angelus doesn't live here anymore. Or, uh, I mean he's dead. He WAS dead. I'm alive, now. Human. I can't hurt anyone anymore."

"I doubt the inhabitants of that nest would agree with you, but it's all semantics anyway." He sneered a little. "I have my reasons for remaining in Los Angeles. There is no shortage of wrongs which should be made right. Surely, you know that yourself, eh, Angelus?"

Angel took Buffy by the hand and brushed roughly past Holtz to the cave exit. Without looking back at him, he spat out, "Stay out of my way Holtz. Don't make me sorry I didn't kill you one of the three chances I've had already. There is no Angelus for you to dust. The time for revenge is long past." They disappeared into the sunlight and headed toward the site foreman's office.

Watching them leave, Holtz murmured quietly to himself, "Well, you know what they say, Angelus," a tiny smile played at the corners of his mouth, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

CHAPTER 4

1783 - France

"Why this constant battle for revenge, Father? Isn't your life wasted in this vendetta and it's empty pursuits? Why do you continue to pursue these monsters who have taken so much from you? Why do you allow them to take still more by devouring your life?" The young man of 23 stood defiantly before him. He was strong, tall, and muscular, with his father's eyes and coloring. Holtz thought to himself how much easier things would be if he had at least a glimmer of his mother in his appearance as well, instead of the constant irritating reminder of who is true father was.

Holtz sighed in exasperation, "I've told you, Stephen, I will have my revenge. They took my life from me, they took everything. These are the monsters who have shaped your life as well. Had I not taken you from them, you would be as dead as the others. Or perhaps worse." Holtz's reply was harsh, but it was time the boy saw the truth of things. He should know more about these creatures of the night, these demons who not only feed on humans but torture them as well for sport and pleasure.

The young man snapped at him, "I told you, I despise the name Stephen, that is your dead son's name, it is not mine."

"You are what I call you, boy. Now go to bed, we have a long day ahead before we reach Marsailles and hopefully the end of our quest."

The boy begrudgingly did what he was told. However, once he reached his room, he picked up his sack, slipped out the window, and quietly claimed one of his father's horses. He'd had enough vampire hunting, it was time for him to live life as he wished instead of under the vindictive heel of the bitter man who had raised him. There was no legacy for him, no footsteps to follow in, no career he could learn from this man. He would return to their small village and offer himself as an apprentice to the owner of the largest plantation in the area, the one with no sons, and a daughter who needed a husband. He smiled to himself. It was a good plan.

Unfortunately, not all plans come to fruition. Lost in his dream, he hadn't noticed his horse slowing, nor the crowd of hooded bandits which surrounded him. He startled when he realized he was in trouble. He had nothing but his clothes, a knife, and a little food, what could they possibly want from him?

"So, lad, why not come down here and show us what ye have?" the lilting accent belied the sinister intent of the words, and the boy's world went black.

As morning broke, Holtz was in a panic that the boy had left. He barked orders at everyone as he tried to get to the bottom of things. "He left last night, sir, the stable boy saw him take a horse and leave shortly after nightfall. He hasn't returned." The day's travel plans changed.

"Gather everyone together and we'll search the hills and forest for him. He can't have gotten too far."

After hours of searching by over 20 men, they were no closer to finding the renegade as they had been at daybreak. At supper they met at the tavern and discussed options. It was decided they would continue on to Marseilles that evening instead of waiting for the morning. They had lost enough time looking for a runaway who should have known better and should be able to take care of himself.

As they rode out of town and into the countryside, there was a forboding in the band of vigilantes, as if they were being followed or tracked, which indeed they were. Hooded figures suddenly surrounded them, issuing a silent challenge. They numbered substantially more, though all the humans were on horseback and most of the hooded figures were on foot, all save two.

Angelus pushed back the hood of his cloak and chuckled. "Holtz, we meet again, sir. Are you still determined to punish me for my deed?" an overly loud laugh echoed through the trees. "You just don't give up, do you? What shall we do about that?"

The secondary horserider came closer to Angelus and touched his arm. "Let them go, Angelus. You got what you came for, didn't you? Let him rant and waste his life in pursuit of revenge, for all the good it will do him. That in itself is more torture than you could ever inflict on him." The rider shook off his hood and glared at Holtz, vindication on his face.

Holtz sat high in the saddle, staring back at his adoptive son's eyes. They were cold, dead, and no longer belonging to the child he had raised. "I'm sorry I could not save you from this living death, Stephen," the young man visibly bristled. "I'm sorry, not Stephen, you prefer your middle name, don't you, James? It doesn't matter. Neither is your true name anyway."

He turned to the leader of the hooded figures. "You have no idea what you have done, Angelus. Perhaps one day I will show you." A smile played at Holtz's mouth as they silently rode away from the hooded figures. Glancing back at James, confusion clouded the cold darkness of Angelus's eyes.

LATE FEBRUARY 2002

Angel's face was twisted in confusion and torment. There had to be something they could do. There had to be some way they could discover where Holtz had taken his son, whether or not he was alive and, if that was true, then there was a way to get him back.

Wes was still sorting through the newer books and texts. He tried to take things slowly, his bandages restricting his movements and the stitches at his throat causing him difficulty in breathing and speaking. Cordy, Fred, and Doyle had convinced Angel that, though what Wes had done was a terrible and unforgivable, he had acted in love and protection for Angel's son. Wes had painstakingly showed Angel the prophecies as he had translated them repeatedly, not taking just one source for the definitive reference. They all came out the same way ... "The Father will kill The Son." Angel had tried to find a way around any justification for the prophecy, but under the strange circumstances of his erratic behavior before Wesley had taken Connor, he had to admit that Wes had tried to act in the child's best interests.

"You should have told me, Wes. Maybe I could have stopped it, or helped you, or at least understood what you were doing! You might not have been at such risk!" Angel felt the anger well up in him again. It was a useless emotion. He sighed deeply and tried to refocus. "But, lets find something more positive, a way to find them and bring him back." He looked at Wes with piteous eyes.

The man had suffered enough. And Wesley chastised himself hourly for the additional pain he had placed in Angel's life. After Buffy died he didn't think Angel would ever know joy again, and here, though his own actions, Angel had lost the small joy he had found under such strange circumstances. They were in anguish over the events of that day, but none more than Angel and Wesley, two men trying to sort out how they could fix the convergence of time, dimensions, and their own mistakes.

No matter what else they found, any hints or suggestions of a remedy, the prophecy continued to ring in both their heads ... "The Father shall kill The Son."

LATE SEPTEMBER 2001 - Los Angeles

"He was my adoptive father," James told Angel as they both sat motionless on the floor of the subway car. "Holtz, I mean. I never knew my real father, he refused to speak of him and would instead give me lectures

on evil demons and creatures of the night." He laughed. "Ironic, huh. His tyrades may have been what led me to not fight you that night more than a hundred years ago."

Angel was spent, physically and emotionally. There was nothing he could do but wait for James to die and wonder whether or not James would dust him first, a prospect not all that unpleasant at this point in his afterlife.

James spoke of his childhood with Holtz, the isolation, the vengence that seethed in the older man. He told Angel things he had not told him in their many decades together, after he was turned, after Angel turned him that night on the road more than 200 years ago. The two men sat, talking about their lives, their losses, their loves, their regrets. In the abstract, they were both soulless beasts, yet both men seemed to cling to their undead lives, expressing everything they could to one another and sharing their last moments of life. Well, James's last moment of life. "It's funny, I never even knew my real name, nor my father's, nor my mothers. It's just as well, I'm sure they are both long dead."

Angel saw the distant look in James's eyes as he felt the end coming; first panic, then calm. "It's time Angelus. I regret that I killed your love ... I should have killed you, and ended both our pain. Instead, you get to live with this and the memory of all the horrible things we did ... to each other." He reached out to Angel, neither man with any strength left, and just as his fingertips reached the outstretched hand of his sire, his hand crumbled and he dissolved, without their final touch.

At that moment, Angel also crumbled and dissolved into the heap of a broken man that Cordelia and the others found only a few moments later. As they left the subway tunnel, a figure hung in the shadows watching, and smiling. Holtz stepped into the light unseen, and murmured to himself ... "The Father will kill The Son."

LATE FEBRUARY 2002 - Los Angeles

More research, more books, more translations. Still, nothing came of any of it except the same prophecy over and over again. Wesley was more than frustrated, he was defeated, when he called the others into the lobby of the old hotel.

"I can find nothing. I don't know where else to turn, where else to look. Even the extensive library at Wolfram & Hart holds nothing about this prophecy or Angel or his son. I'm lost. All I found were vague references to Holtz and his son after the rest of his family was murdered. They left, Stephen grew up elsewhere, Turkey, I think. Holtz himself continued his rampage to kill vampires and find you and Darla. At that point there was no more mention of Stephen."

"James," Angel croaked in a dry throat. He had neither eaten nor spoken for weeks. Right before them, he was wasting away while they desperately tried to find a solution, a means to find the child and restore him to his father. They had failed. All of them had failed, in their jobs, their loyalty, their efforts to find Connor. A heavy blanket of surrender and despair hung over them all, so heavy you could taste it, acrid and bitter.

"What?" Wesley looked at him incredulously. "What did you say?"

"James, he liked to be called James. He didn't like Stephen. Stephen was Holtz's real son's name and Holtz insisted on calling him that. He hated it, so he went by his middle name, James, though he didn't know what his real name was. Holtz had taken him in when he was an infant and raised him like his own, but he ... wanted ... to ... be called ... why are you all staring at me?"

Everyone WAS staring at him. No one blinked, no one wanted to even breathe. And no one seemed to be able to form the question that needed to be asked. Finally, after an interminable silence, Wesley managed it.

"Angel, did you sire James?"

"Well, yes, back in the late 1700's, I guess. He was running away from Holtz and the other vampire hunters and ... wait." There was something there, he could almost touch it, knowledge, information, a revelation. "Oh my god" He stood stiffly, every fiber of his body screaming and on fire.

And the words tumbled from Wesley's mouth for the thousandth time ... "The Father will kill The Son ..."

They sat in silence. Staring. Numb.

CHAPTER 5

And the words tumbled from Wesley's mouth for the thousandth time ... "The Father will kill The Son ..."

They sat in silence. Staring. Numb.

A dimensional doorway opened and Sahjhan stepped through, appearing in a hazy glow of, oddly enough, hope. No one moved. It was as if this was the last demon come to destroy them and they had no fight left to defend themselves. Wordlessly, they simply looked at him.

"Well, don't you look like a herd of deer caught in headlights." No response. "I've come to reveal what I know. It is time. It is past time."

Sahjhan began by confessing his identity. He looked at Angel tenderly for the first time and spoke to him gently but loud enough for the others to hear. "Father. I am Connor, your son. Or rather what remains of him."

Silence hung in the air for a moment, then the room burst into arguments and challenges and confusion with everyone talking at once, asking questions, yelling at Sahjhan, yelling at each other, some just yelling.

"STOP!!!!!!!!!" Angel roared, nostrils flaring, his eyes wide in confusion and anger. "Sahjhan. Explain. NOW!"

The demon swallowed hard, formed his thoughts, and confessed everything. "I am what is left of your son. When I first came here it was to force others to kill the infant that was me so that I would never have to live this awful existence, loved by no one, despised as both a vampire and a demon."

"But how? I mean James, uh, Connor, whoEVER, was dusted last year on the subway," Cordelia argued. She looked around at the stunned expressions of the others. "Well? I just said what you were all thinking."

Sahjhan continued, "Holtz had told me that my father was indifferent and even hated me, so I grew to hate him, uh, you," He looked apologetically at Angel. "Once I found out who my father was, I swore revenge, just as Holtz had done. Who says your environment doesn't shape who you become? Only I did not discover who my father was until after my vampire body had died." He glanced around at the gaping faces. "Something about truth being revealed in the moment of death. I never really understood that, since I was technically already dead as a vampire, you would think that truth would be revealed then ... but ... sorry, babbling."

He took a deep breath and continued, "I still did not know who I was when I went to that demon doctor, I also did not understand the consequences of what I was doing. I was too overcome with anger and a need for revenge against Angelus for my love whom he murdered, uh, dusted. When my heart was taken and I was given invincibility, only my vampire body was sacrificed. I did not know that as long as my heart remained undestroyed, the demon part of me would survive. I could travel in time and dimension, but I could never be solid. I can neither touch nor be touched, and, in fact, have no real home where I belong. I guess I am spirit

of some kind." He shrugged. Initially, Holtz was contacted by another of my kind, a formless soul who had a grudge against you, Angel, and he set things in motion. He has since been, um, dealt with and can cause you no more problems."

Lorne lifted an eyebrow, "Gee, cupcake, is there anyone you haven't pissed off?"

Sahjhan continued, "And, as painful as this is to admit, I've discovered that I am, myself, responsible for most of what happened to me in my own life. I am responsible for Holtz abducting me, for Angelus changing me, for ... a great many things.

Sahjhan let his words sit untouched for a few moments, then added. "Boy, would Freud have a field day with this." He smiled sheepishly. "Tough crowd." Lorne spoke up, "Tell me about it."

Timidly, Fred asked, "What ... what made you come to us now? I mean, all this has happened, and everyone is confused and there's been so much pain and ... why now? Her deep, soulful eyes looked into the demon, searching for the man who should be there.

He nodded to her and then approached Angel, close enough to touch him, if he could. "I saw the anguish and pain in my true father's eyes at the moment of my disappearance." He looked at Angel with such love and admiration. "I had not realized the full depth of Holtz's deception, until I saw him step through the portal with my infant self."

There were no words. So much was explained and revealed. So much was strangely healed. The only thing left was the obvious, which came from Doyle. "Sahjhan, Connor, whatever ... can we change any of this?"

"I'm not sure." He hesitated, "I think I've thought of a way, but if it works none of this, this meeting, will ever happen. In fact, a lot will not have happened, and we could even cause a chain reaction that would destroy the universe as we know it..." he paused, "You all know this part, right?"

A sea of nodding heads understood. "We're from Sunnydale, of course we know," chirped Cordelia.

"I will do what I can. If I fail, at least you will know I tried to make it right for myself and for my father, and for all the lives we've hurt."

And Sahjhan vanished in a misty cloud of dimensional fog.

FEBRUARY 2002 - Los Angeles

As the vortex opened, Holtz headed for it, gripping the infant tightly in his arms. He cared for nothing else except to inflict pain on Angelus, intense, blinding, emotional, eternal, pain. As he reached the edge of the vortex, a hazy figure appeared in front of him, blocking his way. Sahjhan.

"I don't think so, Holtz."

Holtz froze. Confused, he looked back at the Sahjhan who had opened the portal, then again at the Sahjhan in front of him. "Let me through," he demanded.

"No, I will not." With a glance to Angel, Sahjhan spoke gently to him, "It is up to you now, Angel. Love and care for your son, always" and with a wave of his hand, the portal closed. Both Sahjhans were gone. Holtz was gone. Silence was pierced by the scream of an infant mingled with the sirens of police. No explanations were made, and Lila left quietly with her entourage, as did Connor, now safely in the arms of his father and his rather odd "family."

A month later, as Wesley and Angel were discussing some of the more unhappy details of what happened, including Wesley's betrayal and the reasons behind it, Angel mentioned something surprising.

"Wes, do you think Holtz could have gotten away with Connor if ... if I had still been a vampire? Wouldn't I have been better equipped to protect my son with the superhuman strength and keen senses I had? I mean, with my soul, of course, but .. I mean, I want to make sure he is safe. I couldn't go through this again.

"I don't know, Angel. Perhaps. But I guess we'll never know, will we?"

EPILOGUE

Angel watched from a shady alcove near his favorite spot on the beach. He saw Buffy up on the bridge as she waited, the wind blowing her hair as she looked off into the horizon at the ships in the distance. She turned around slowly, as if looking for someone, and her eyes passed him entirely. She hadn't even realized Angel was there. A sting of sadness tugged at his non-beating heart, she used to be able to feel him if he was anywhere near her. Those beautiful eyes of hers, he thought to himself, so full of life and anticipation, looking toward something in her future, something happy and warm and welcoming and in sunlight. Her focus shifted to an ivy-covered archway where a man stepped through. He was tall, though not as tall as Angel, and he carried himself with confidence and joy as he rushed toward Buffy and took her in his arms.

"That was a brave and wonderful thing you did, Champion." The shadowy figures of the Oracles seemed to shimmer about him. "Removing that day from all but your memory saved many lives, but it cost you much, including a dear friend's life and your humanity," they glanced at Buffy, "and more."

"Yeah, well, she deserves to be happy, and, as much as I hate to admit it, so does he." Angel looked away from them. It hurt a little more than he thought it would to see her so happy with him, wrapped in his arms, kissing him with such passion. The sunlight danced off her hair as the wind swept it about them, leaving tendrils of gold mixed in with the bleached blonde of his. A leather-clad arm slid around Buffy's waist as they walked further out onto the pier, the open black duster flapping in the breeze like wings. At the end of the pier they sat down, their feet dangling over the ocean, relaxed and carefree. "Big bad, indeed," Angel scoffed quietly to himself.

The gentle voice of the Oracle continued, "And this was worth hunting down a Mohra demon again?"

Angel rubbed the still sore muscles of his left arm as he looked out at Buffy once again and said wistfully, "Oh yes." He forced his mood to something lighter, "And, who knows, maybe there is a market for regenerative blood."

He took a moment, gazing at the lovers on the pier, "They both deserve this," Angel said quietly as an afterthought. More confidently, he confessed to the Oracles, "I still have my memories of us together from our one day, and she'll have happiness and as normal a life as a Slayer can have, and a longer life with him at her side in human form than she would have had with me. I can stay in the shadows and help when I'm needed, but," he almost sighed, "now, she needs him more. She needs him like this more, and he can be the man he was meant to be instead of a monster trying to be a man." Angel smiled sadly to himself and then up at the Oracles.

Their lilting voices spoke in unison as if making a proclamation to the world instead of just to him, "Humans make so little sense, but perhaps the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands in moments of challenge and controversy. Perhaps a good man, a true champion, is one who finds his strength in adversity and his happiness in the joy of others, no matter the cost to himself."

In the long silence that followed he looked at Buffy and William, playful, happy, delighting in each other as if nothing ugly could ever touch them. The transformation in them both was astonishing and made Angel's burden a little lighter.

"Perhaps so," he said, with a gleam in his eye. "Now ... about my watch ..."

FIN

Didn't like that ending, try this one!

EPILOGUE 2 - The Happy Ending

DEDICATION: This alternate ending is for Chloe :-)
Ask and ye shall receive

The last remnants of golden light reflected off the now cold, watery horizon leaving glowing reflections on Angel's face. It had been slow coming, this everlasting sunset. And Angel had enjoyed every moment of it from his unusually private corner of the strand. Though he came here often in daylight, he preferred the cover of darkness, a cold comfort from a centuries old habit. When he needed alone time, this is where he would come and stare into day's end as if he were staring into some distant past to watch it unfold. From here he could still see the bridge where he and Buffy had first kissed in sunlight. If he tried hard enough, he could still see a shadowy reflection of them standing there, bathed in the glow of midday, experiencing the first moments of their new life together, warm and full of promise.

A chilly breeze swept across the water, so Angel wrapped his arms around his knees, hugging them for the body heat. As he stared out over the vermilion sea, graceful hands slid around his shoulders and traveled down his arms, intertwining his fingers with their own.

"Hello, lover," Angel's low, rumbling voice offered. He didn't need to turn around, he knew who it was. Only one woman in the world had this scent and feel to her.

"Mmmmm," a voice cooed softly in his ear. "I love when you call me that. It's so much more intimate than 'wife'." Buffy rested her chin on his shoulder from behind, her arms still wrapped around him,

"You're warm," he said, "I was starting to get cold waiting for you."

"That's because you forgot your coat again." Buffy gave him a playful smirk, as she pulled his duster closer around her bare shoulder.

Looking up at her and smiling, "It seems to fit you just fine," his smile broadened.

"Well, there are a lot of things about us that fit nicely, don't you think?"

Angel looked back out across the ocean and smiled, the warmth of her enveloping him, and he felt that familiar thrill that she brought with her every time they touched. "Mmmmm, yes." He breathed her in deeply, hugging her arms against him. Sometimes life has a way of rewarding you in ways you could never imagine.

They sat in silence and watched the day melt away. Angel's mind drifted to the long journey they had made together, a journey of joy, pain, and love. So many choices influenced so many directions they could have turned; yet they always seemed to make the ones that kept them together, even through the most difficult of times. He thought of the choice he had made to remain human, because that's what she wanted, even though she could have died without his special strengths and skills. He thought of the choices they'd both almost made, sacrificing themselves for the sake of the other. He made a silent, grateful prayer to the Oracles and the Powers That Be for giving them the life together that they thought they could never have.

"Your actions changed much for the better, Champion. You have acted responsibly, charitably, and unselfishly in the face of despair, danger, and great challenge. You lost more than one friend to death because of these actions, and the son you were to have had will no longer be, at least not as was originally

ordained. You have made great sacrifices. At your request, a decision has been rendered. The curse is lifted and your humanity is restored, but, as always, there are consequences," the Oracles had said.

"What consequences?" Angel had asked suspiciously, knowing the Oracles had a way of making things not quite as good as they sounded up front.

"You will have your humanity, but, strong as she is, the Slayer needs a protector for these dark times, and you have been chosen to be this protector. Therefore, you will retain your extraordinary strengths to better enable you to guard her safety. The payment for this shall be your mortality. You will age and die just as any other mortal." They paused, "Do you agree to this?"

"Yes, I do," Angel had jumped on it, hardly able to contain himself. The Oracles had regarded him oddly.

"You understand this means you are no longer immortal," the Oracles wanted to be clear on this, he seemed so oddly happy about it. This confused them.

"Yes, I understand." The grin on his face wouldn't leave, it had just seemed to grow wider, and he had almost laughed right there in front of them.

When he had told Buffy what happened, for the first time in her life, she was speechless.

"You're my what? The curse is what? You're WHAT?" when she had finally found her words. He explained it all to her, and they had spent the following five hours "celebrating." They had a lot of intimate time to make up for.

Now, sitting quietly on the beach together, he could scarcely believe that after 240 years he was finally getting everything he had ever wanted. He turned his head toward Buffy and kissed her tenderly, lingering in the moment of perfect happiness.

After a time, Buffy said, "We should go. You know how Wesley gets when we're late." A mischievous grin lit her features, and Angel's eyes drank her in. All of her. Savoring every curve.

A sly smile met hers, "Let him wait." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her to him and turning her across his lap, laying her gently in the sand next to him. Sand quickly found its way down the front of her sequined dress as he pressed his body to hers, the silk lapels of his tuxedo caressing her skin. His eyes became lost in hers until their souls seemed to mingle as one, and as the last rays of sun melted into the ocean, their lips touched.

*Want something a bit quirkier for an ending? Try this!
This alternate ending is just for fun. :-)*

EPILOGUE #3 - Huh?

The last remnants of golden light reflected off the cool, watery horizon leaving glowing reflections on his face. It had been slow coming, this everlasting sunset. And he had enjoyed every moment of it from his private corner of the strand. He came here often in daylight, but sunset was his favorite time. When he needed a time to reflect and just think, this is where he would come and stare into day's end as if he were staring into another world.

A chilly breeze swept across the water making him shiver slightly. As he stared out over the vermilion sea, graceful hands slid around his shoulders and traveled down his arms, intertwining his fingers with their own.

"Hello, lover," Wesley's rumbling voice offered, laced with that delicious accent. He didn't need to turn around, he knew who it was. Only one woman in the world had this scent and feel to her.

"Mmmmm," a voice cooed softly in his ear. "I love when you call me that. It's so intimate." She rested her chin on his shoulder from behind, her arms still wrapped around him,

"You're warm," he said, "I was starting to get cold waiting for you.

"I had that dream again," she broke in.

"Really? I thought those had stopped," said Wes, a tinge of concern in his voice. "The one about that chum of yours in high school?"

"Yes. Buffy. Strange, huh. This time she died ... again." There was a disbelieving laugh in her voice.

"Are you ready to go then?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Wesley stood up, brushed the sand from his tuxedo and turned to the ravishing woman next to him. She was exquisite, especially in a sequined evening gown, a tall, slim, brunette with her hair piled high upon her head, the sparkle of her eyes brought out by the sparkle of the jewels around her neck. Absolutely beautiful. He put his arm around Cordelia's waist as they walked back up toward the beach house.

"Strange, isn't it?" She repeated. "I mean, really, Wes ... vampires?"