

Tarnished

A Giles/Ethan Novella By Trekker

Acknowledgments

This novella was written for National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). The goal was to write a 50,000 word story during the month of November. At times, it was incredibly painful. Actually, it was incredibly painful most of the time. But, here it is, complete. I owe a debt of gratitude to several people for the completion of this story. The most surprising of these people is my parents. I told them about NaNoWriMo, and they asked me every day how it was going. Granted, I'm fairly sure they had no idea how porny this was, but they knew quite well enough not to ask. Another person I really need to thank is sadbhyl. Without her egging me on, I never would have kept going. Also, mydeira and estepheia were two of my biggest fans throughout the effort, and their assurances that the story itself was worth pursuing were invaluable.

Story Notes

I believe it is the goal of every Giles/Ethan writer (at least, somewhere inside of them) to find a way to get Giles and Ethan to reconcile, and find that elusive happily-ever-after. I, too, wanted to write that story, but I knew that I could never accomplish it with the kind of short fic I'd become accustomed to writing. And, thus... NaNoWriMo. It would provide me with the structure, support, and motivation I needed to get through what I knew was going to have to be a fairly epic fic. The spark of inspiration behind Tarnished came from watching season six of Buffy and season four of Angel in close proximity all while musing on Giles/Ethan. There's the dysfunction of Spuffy on Buffy, the unwilling and barely acknowledged enemy love of Wes/Lilah on Angel... mix that with a bit of self-loathing, centerless Giles, add a dash of slightly-vengeful Ethan, and... yeah. This happened. My main goal was to find a way to bring Ethan and Giles together that did not involve Ethan being traumatized by the Initiative, simply because the plot has been done already, and doesn't need to be done again at this point.

Summary

Giles leaves Sunnydale and Buffy, for her own good, or so he believes, and returns to England. However, he finds that home is less homey than it used to be. His coworkers and his own family view him and his decisions with mistrust, and he himself isn't even sure if he's done the right thing by Buffy. Adding to his troubles, Ethan Rayne turns up living in the very same city. Giles insists they don't have anything to do with each other, but he keeps finding himself drawn back to Ethan, and gradually, what starts as a heartless physical relationship starts to deepen.

Details

Rating: NC-17

Length: 50,200 words

Pairing: Giles/Ethan

Warnings: Slash, some violence, some mild BDSM

Part One

Chapter One Home Again

Deep red sky, like a smear of blood behind the black of the distant windbreak trees edging the field. The sun settled just below the horizon, the last tinge of light still coloring the underside of the clouds.

Rupert Giles sat alone on the pale brick patio outside of his family home, an estate a few miles outside of Bath. They had a small plot of land. The house was old and stately, and now, behind him, the light through the windows cast a soft yellow glow out across the fields.

He looked out across the fields, a forgotten mug of tea gone long cold in his hand, resting on his knee. He thought of nothing. Nothing important, that is. He thought instead of clouds, and of the scent of this place, so different than the scent of Sunnydale. Even breathing was a reminder.

But then, that was what he wasn't supposed to be thinking, wasn't it?

Sunnydale. Thousands of miles away, and no longer his concern. No one there his concern.

He moved his head, shaking off those thoughts, and lifted the mug to his lips. The cold touched his lips and he grimaced, then stood and walked to the end of the patio, tossing the dregs out onto the grass. The mug he set aside on the low brick wall and then he tucked his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

A night breeze picked up and swirled around him and he shivered. California never seemed to get quite so chilled. His blood had thinned.

Behind him, the patio door clicked shut and footsteps approached.

"Still here?" his mother said, coming up alongside him.

He smiled slightly, his eyes still fixed on the black trees that shifted in the cold breeze.

The smile did not hold for long.

"Watching the sun set," he said. "And thinking, I suppose."

He looked at her, then, and again was startled. She looked... old, for want of a better word. Straight grey hair and crinkles around her eyes and mouth. Lines that deepened as she smiled and touched his arm. A hint of melancholy in her eyes.

"How are you doing?" she asked, and he had to look away again, the weight of that question too heavy to bear straight on.

"How should I be doing?" he asked. "I-- I don't even know if I've done the right thing."

"Perhaps you didn't. Or perhaps you did. Only time will tell."

"Sounds remarkably simple when you put it like that," he said. "But it isn't. Nothing ever

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is."

He looked down at his feet now, standing on that pale brick, possibly several thousand miles from where they should be.

"Ah, yes. Of course. But it's a mother's job to make it seem simple."

He smiled again, more easily and more genuinely. But that moment of ease, too, did not last for long. He turned and sat down on the wall and from that angle his mother looked taller and brought back memories of a long-ago youth that, for a split-second, he yearned for with a passion unlike any he'd felt in months.

"That was all Buffy wanted, I suppose," he said. "For it to be simple."

His mother sat as well, and put her hand on his knee.

"You were never meant to be her father, Rupert."

"I know."

"So don't feel you should have been. She's a Slayer and you are her Watcher. I know how these things work, love. Don't think I haven't been watching you, and your father, and your brother. I may not be one of you, but I know."

"I'm not sure anyone knows. I certainly know that I don't know. I--"

The wind picked up again, whipping around them both, pulling strands of his mother's silver hair about her face. He couldn't miss her shiver and her small wince. He stood up again and offered her a hand.

"Let's get inside, shall we? Chilly tonight."

She looked grateful as she took his hand and she struggled, for a moment, when she stood. A part of him, a horrible part that he shied away from, cringed.

Edwin was in Africa, and Margaret had children and a Potential Slayer to deal with, and god knew Paul wouldn't know responsibility if it up and introduced itself. All of which meant that someday, though likely not soon, per se, his parents would need somewhere to stay, and there'd be no one but him there to take up that--

The word that came to mind was burden, and he briefly hated himself for his diction.

She leaned on his arm only slightly as they walked to the door.

Just inside the door, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders--so much thinner--and pulled her into his side, kissed the top of her head and said, "I should head home. Love you, mum."

Her eyes glowed as she returned the words, then she headed off towards the kitchen at a slow amble. He watched her go, wondering just how much of a hypocrite he truly was, then he turned and headed for the den.

His father was embroiled in books; barely seemed to hear him come in. Giles had an odd moment of understanding, thinking perhaps this was how he seemed to the Scooby gang when he himself was deep in research. Closed off to the world, focused, distant.

"I'm... heading home," he said.

"Hmm?" His father said.

"Goodnight."

Only then did his father look up.

"Leaving?"

"Driving back to Bath."

"Right, yes." His father turned in his chair. "Goodnight."

And then he paid Giles no more mind. Not that Giles had been expecting anything more. He knew that no matter what his mother said, or even what gestures towards politeness his father may make, what he'd done was completely unprecedented.

Past experience told him his father was not overly fond of anything unprecedented.

The house was silent as he walked back out into the cold night air.

Bath was a nice town. Small and old and heavy with history. Bath gave the impression of

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something long there and long-lasting. Sunnydale only ever gave the impression of lurking evil and consumerism.

Outside his own apartment, there were people on the streets and cars passing but, as soon as the scuffed old oak door shut behind him, that silence returned in force. The only sound was the hollow clomp of his feet on worn wooden steps, echoing about the stairwell and far too loud. Every time he climbed these stairs, he expected to be shouted at by a neighbor but so far it hadn't been an issue and he'd never had a problem with the noise of others.

This old worry should have inspired a sensation of being home, he thought. After all, he'd lived in this building longer than he'd lived in Sunnydale. He knew its personality and its quirks and his neighbors, all of whom had welcomed him back with the usual detachment of distant acquaintances. Friendly but empty, in a way that normally would have been warming.

Nothing, now, seemed warming.

He reached the third floor and the door to his flat and stepped inside. For a moment, before he could set his keys aside and flip on the lights, it seemed perfectly dark and still inside. He almost wanted to simply turn around and leave.

Having the lights on did not do much to improve things.

His possessions, for the most part, were still stacked in boxes in the disarrayed living room and in the hall. Bookshelves stood empty, waiting for him to summon the energy to unpack and re-alphabetize his collection. It simply seemed insurmountable at the moment.

He'd intended to make something for dinner, settle in for a night of light reading, but suddenly, all he really wanted was to lie down, to not-deal with the massive project of getting his life, such as it was--if he even had one--back on track.

So he told himself he could get started trying to get his bedroom back in order and that was enough of an excuse to get him down the hall and into his bedroom and once he was there, he dropped the pretense. Dropped everything, in fact, and flipped the lights back off and settled down on his back on the bed with his hands knotted behind his head and his shoes still on, staring up at the single band of light on the ceiling.

As far as he knew, no one even knew where he was. What he was doing. No one would knock on his door. No one would need his attention.

Eventually, he fell asleep.

Chapter Two

Old Friends Or Something To That Effect

The Royal Watcher's Council branch office in Bath was down a set of stairs, tucked up underneath a building. Some oh-so-clever child had at some point spray-painted over the "R" in the RWC on the sign at the head of the stairs, and apparently, no one had bothered to fix it in the month or so Giles had been back in Sunnydale.

There were four offices here, a reception area, and a small library, which mostly consisted of duplicates or reprints of the books housed at the main office in London.

Giles' office was still in the process of being reverted back into an office. During the years he'd been gone, it had become something of a storage / filing room for the others, and just a general catchall. So now, much like in his flat, he had to navigate around stacked boxes and scattered junk to reach his desk, which cowered in the corner of the small room like a chastised puppy.

Currently, Giles was sitting at it and sorting through huge stacks of files, trying to recall which were his own, and which were just general files. It was really quite dull, and the florescent light seemed to be flickering, and his eyes ached.

He tossed aside the file he'd been working through and pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them, he was struck, suddenly, by the dreariness of this room. Four bare white walls, one flickering florescent lamp, loads of grey filing cabinets, and the ever-present cardboard boxes.

It actually made him miss the Sunnydale library.

Demons aside, it had been a beautiful place, full of sunlight and dark, polished wood. And books, of course.

Books were, without a doubt, a thousand times more exciting than files. A million times more exciting than files. Books were too good, in fact, to even be used in an analogy with files.

He grunted in listless disgust, nudged the file folder a bit further away and decided, 10:45 AM or not, that it was absolutely time for lunch.

So he stepped carefully over boxes and books and around filing cabinets out into the dim hallway between the four offices that smelled of plaster and dust and a bit of mildew. He nodded at John, the receptionist, and stepped out into the morning.

Sweet air. As he climbed the steps to the street, his mind made some maudlin allusion to escaping from Hades, and he had to laugh at himself. Though, truly, it was a relief. Butter-yellow

sunlight slanted across the stone fronts of the buildings, and the whole city seemed to glow. The sunlight also mellowed the tang of chill in the air, and he found himself relaxing and breathing easier than he had in... he really wasn't sure how long. Possibly since Buffy had taken her... well, yes. Or even before then. Heaven only knew.

And that... that was simply a terrible phrase to use now, it seemed.

He shook off those thoughts, and bought a paper from a corner vendor. During the rest of the walk to the cafe he favored, he deliberately thought of nothing more weighty than pigeons.

Which worked well until the jangle of the bell over the door brought back in sudden and perfect clarity his abandoned shop back home. Back in Sunnydale.

And, damn it, he'd gone and called Sunnydale "home" again.

He sighed and made his way to the counter.

"Good morning, Mr. Giles," the young man at the counter said. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," Giles said, distractedly. Small talk came easy. "How are you this morning, Ron?"

"Doing just grand. What'll it be?"

He realized then that, though he'd desperately wanted his lunch break, food itself was not quite so appealing at this early hour. He'd eaten breakfast at his desk only about an hour ago. He scanned the menu, and then went with, "Just a medium coffee and a turkey sandwich."

Oddly, he had a brief craving for peanut butter and jelly. He mentally rolled his eyes and blamed Xander entirely.

"All right. It'll be out in a moment, sir."

"Thanks, Ron," Giles said, and went to sit down at his usual table near the window in the back. He skimmed the paper until the food came.

It seemed so quiet here. No homicides at all, where in Sunnydale, they got their own page, as did missing persons. In general, vampires preferred large cities, where they could simply blend in. Bath rarely got anything more than small gangs passing through on their way somewhere else, usually Bristol.

So why the hell was he here? Why had he left a handful of children alone to face god knew what?

But they weren't children. Not children. And they needed to figure that out. As did he, apparently.

He turned the page and focused instead on figuring out how the rugby season was playing out this year, sports being one of the many things he'd lost touch with while off in that other world. He lost himself in scores and stats until Ron brought out his lunch. Then, just as the boy was heading back behind the counter, the bell jingled again, and habit drew Giles' eye to the door, and he froze, napkin still in hand.

The man at the door was similarly motionless, still holding the door open, practically in mid-step.

Ethan.

Still tall and lank, but not completely the same. Goatee'd, now, and with his hair grown out just long enough to curl. Ethan's eyes widened, looking at Giles over dark glasses. Then he cursed and turned and left the shop in a swirl of grey overcoat and a clamor of the bell.

And some primal chase instinct kicked in and Giles was up out of his chair and to the door almost before he knew what he'd done. He pounded out into the street, and caught a glimpse of grey vanishing around a corner. Followed, heart pounding, with some kind of rage heating in his chest. Wasn't even sure quite *why* he was so angry, but he didn't spare it a thought.

Didn't run, just walked, a long stride.

He couldn't deny there was a powerful, primal thrill in catching the shoulder of Ethan's coat, yanking him back, turning him and knocking him into the nearest wall.

"You," he growled.

"Yes. Me," Ethan said, one hand raised up in a placating manner between them. He turned his eyes down to Giles' hand, still knotted in his coat.

"What are you doing here?"

Rather than looking cowed, Ethan merely looked annoyed, and said, "What business is it of yours?"

Giles unhandled him roughly, but didn't step back, letting his body and nearness maintain the threat. Feeling Ethan's presence through the scant space between them.

"You're supposed to be locked away somewhere. Being 'rehabilitated.'"

There was another flicker of something in Ethan's eyes, then he purred, "Well, perhaps I have been."

Nothing was intrinsically sexual about the words, but the way they were spoken sent a small unwelcome tingle through Giles' groin nonetheless. He grabbed Ethan's coat and knocked him back against the wall again.

"Ah, well, then perhaps I should just give the Initiative a call, hmm? Thank them for their hard work," Giles said, pleasantly.

"Not necessary, I'm sure," Ethan said, with the same mock-cheer. "Now, I'm as much an exhibitionist as the next rather kinky man, but we are drawing stares, love. Shall we perhaps move this to a less public venue?"

"You haven't answered my question yet."

"Ah, yes. That. Well, you see, I actually live here."

Giles released him abruptly.

"Hell."

* * *

So, they ended up back in the cafe. Giles picked up his things and relocated them to a small nook in the nearly-empty second floor area. He couldn't help but think how badly sharing a table with Ethan had ended up going the last time around. With that in mind, he kept an uneasy eye on him, and kept his drink well away from him.

"How did you get away?"

Ethan just leaned back in his chair and said, dismissively, "Oh, you know me. Always someone who owes me a favor or two."

"Of course," Giles said. Ethan wasn't going to tell him and he really was most likely better off not knowing anyhow.

Ethan had taken off his coat and draped it over the back of his chair, and was dressed in his usual red silk shirt and charcoal slacks. In spite of everything, in spite of himself, Giles couldn't help flicking his gaze over him, taking in those long legs crossed at the ankles, the sensual ease of Ethan's pose. He only looked for a fraction of a second, but it was more than enough. Enough, that was, to send his pulse skittering a little faster, and enough, unfortunately, for Ethan to catch that glance.

He saw the other man's eyes narrow just a bit in speculation, and possibly in interest, and that, too, was enough to nudge his heart rate up a tad more.

Giles forced his gaze down to his sandwich, cursing himself and his idiotic body, and said, "So you just happened to end up here, then? In Bath."

The 'in *my* town' he left unspoken.

"I like the quiet," Ethan said.

The only response Giles could think of for that was a rather indelicate snort.

His turkey sandwich was not doing an adequate job of pushing away that lingering buzz of arousal.

"And what brings you out here? Slayer problems?"

Anger, on the other hand, did a bit to lessen that buzz. He glared, but Ethan merely smiled mildly and said, "Just making conversation. No need to get glowery."

"Why?" Giles said, and now he was truly wondering, why the hell they were here. Why he'd all but invited Ethan to join him. What had he been thinking? Had he had any sensible reason for this?

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"Why what?" Ethan said.

"Why make conversation?"

Ethan seemed confused by the question, as though it were perfectly natural for an almost-evil Chaos sorcerer and a Watcher to be chatting over tea. "Why not? We are old friends. Or possibly mortal enemies. Depending on the day, apparently. Perhaps we should work out a schedule. Just for the edification of all involved, you know."

It occurred to Giles then, though it wasn't precisely a revelation, just one of those moments when something known becomes obvious again, that he did not like Ethan. Everything about the man grated on him, from that devil-may-care sprawl, to that earring catching the overhead lights, to that smarmy smile. His clothes, his hair, his attitude.

And his insistence that they had some sort of relationship.

"What makes you think we're anything at all?" Giles said.

Ethan blinked, and sat up. He even leaned forward a bit and for the first time his eyes lost that casual disinterest and gain some focus.

"Because we are, Rupert."

But they weren't. They hadn't been anything for ages, not for years.

"You know, that's where you've always been wrong," Giles said, his voice cool.

Ethan settled back again, as though to hear a good joke. "Oh? Well, then what is this, then? Enlighten me."

Giles gathered his sandwich and coffee and stood, tired of this already.

"You... are my ex--" He paused over the word, then spat, "my *ex-boyfriend* who still hasn't figured out that I haven't given a damn about you in twenty years. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a life to get back to and I'd prefer you stay out of it."

He stalked out without another word. Anger still echoed through him as he shut his office door behind him, alone again with the filing cabinets.

Chapter Three

What We Are?

An hour and a half on the train to London. One hour waiting. Three hours being berated and interrogated by Quentin Travers. Another hour and a half on the train.

Suffice it to say, Giles was in a mood. Not a good mood. Quite the opposite. He was, to make the understatement of the year, bloody tired of Travers questioning his methods. Even if he himself was, rather, well, questioning his methods.

The fact still remained that Buffy was one of the longest-lived Slayers on record, and one of the most effective. And, of course, much of that was due to her, but he didn't think he was completely out of line giving himself at least a bit of credit.

He paused at the center of the bridge and looked down into the dark, slow river below. Lights rolled sluggishly over the surface, and it was silent in its course. The night air was still colder than he was adapted to, but it was better than being confined in his small apartment, and it was still far safer to wander here at night than it was in Sunnydale.

Though he still had a stake and a vial of holy water in his pocket simply due to habit.

There was still a slight chance of attack from a less supernatural source, of course, but that chance was also slim, and Giles felt that he'd been fighting the undead long enough that a simple human opponent would be a welcome respite. In fact, were he entirely honest with himself, after the day he'd had, he'd almost welcome a scuffle.

He finished crossing the bridge and wandered down the grassy bank towards the river itself.

The park was quiet tonight, and as he walked across the soft grass towards the deeper darkness of the water, he saw the first other people he'd seen in the past ten minutes. A couple strolled along the footpath, wrapped around each other and moving slowly. Giles found his eyes following them for a moment. They were young, university-aged most likely. The girl leaned in closer and tilted her head back, gazing up at her paramour with adoration, and for a moment they reminded Giles painfully of Xander and Anya.

He looked away, giving them their privacy, and finished the short walk down to the edge of the bank, as close as it seemed wise to stand.

Everything seemed so quiet. Darkness wreathed about him, and nothing seemed to move but for the water and the breeze. Of course, that stillness and aloneness was an illusion. The whole town was around him, though the trees and the bridge, which reared up off to his right, shielded it from

his view.

Even then, as though to prove his point, a car passed by over the bridge, throwing a sweep of headlights across the grass around him.

And then, even more damning evidence for the existence of the rest of the world, a voice came from behind his shoulder.

"You're wrong, you know."

Instantly, any relaxation he may have gleaned from the quiet vanished as a trembly tension raked up his spine.

He didn't turn. In fact, he tried his best not to show any of his reaction, keeping his voice low and level as he said, simply, "Go away, Ethan."

But of course, that had never worked before and didn't work now.

"About us."

"There is no us."

"Of course there is."

And he was not about to allow himself to be dragged into this ridiculousness.

"All right, then. Whatever you say."

He turned and walked up towards the path, anger buzzing through his mind at the intrusion on his aloneness. He didn't need this. Not tonight, not ever. He was willing to coexist with Ethan, truly, if it spared him the effort of constantly needing to watch his back, but if this was how it was going to be, then this would never work.

Ethan, of course, caught up and matched pace as Giles stalked up the path trying to wish him out of existence.

"You haven't gotten rid of me yet."

"Clearly not for lack of trying," Giles snapped.

"And, contrary to your obvious opinion, I was not in this town looking for you."

Giles stopped and wheeled towards him, fist clenching almost unconsciously in his pockets. "But now you are, which begs the questions of why, and of how I can make you stop."

Ethan just smirked.

"Most likely, you can't. And I don't think you'd really want to, either."

He couldn't answer that until he'd drawn a long slow breath. He looked Ethan directly in the eye, with one fist slipping out of his pocket, as he said, "My entire life, you've caused me nothing but trouble, Ethan. Believe me when I say I'd be ecstatic to be rid of you."

"You know, Rupert, all that repression really can't be good for your health."

"Sod. Off. Ethan."

And saying that was an honest warning, because the last time he'd been this angry was in the kitchen with Willow. He was so angry, he felt himself breaking into a sweat.

But Ethan just smiled a little wider and shook his head a tiny bit, and even as Giles' mind was screaming *just walk away*, his fist was already connecting with Ethan's jaw, and it felt far, far too good, in far too many ways. It always did, with Ethan.

Ethan, who was just laughing and touching his lip.

"Oh, go on, hit me again, Ripper. I know where this leads."

That voice was still telling him to walk away, but he'd been wanting to hit Ethan since yesterday, and he'd been wanting to hit *someone* all day, and it was simply too easy to bury his fist in Ethan's gut, catch his chin with his knee when he doubled over, and slam him backwards until they both hit the rough stone of the bridge with a bone-jarring thud.

It felt good.

He knew it shouldn't, but it did. That body under his own, that breath rushing pain-fast against his jaw. Felt good to see something other than superior amusement in those eyes, even if it was less like fear and awe and more like fierceness and arousal.

They were both breathing hard, and Giles hadn't pulled away, he stayed plastered over Ethan as heavily as he might be lying over him on a bed, held there by gravity. They were chest-to-chest and hip-to-hip, and Ethan slowly let his arms down and spread them across the brick, relaxation and

surrender running through him.

Giles could hear the soft click in Ethan's throat as he swallowed. Smell him, his cologne and his body.

"So what now? Seeing as you rather have me at the disadvantage," Ethan said.

His lips felt dry, and something drove a spike of heat through his gut, so intense it hurt. They were both still breathing fast, and god, they were in public, though deep in shadow, and this... And he wanted something different now.

Or perhaps not different. The feeling in him, the aching urge, was no less violent, merely redirected.

He stepped back, quickly, too quickly to let Ethan know what he was doing. Threw one cautious glance over his shoulder, and then hissed, "You think we still have something? Fine then. Get on your knees."

Ethan chuckled, dark and deep, and he dropped gracefully to a kneel. Giles could have sworn he could feel that laugh against his skin, in his gut. He didn't care--or at least told himself he didn't care--that this played into Ethan's hand. What the hell did that matter? Ethan was the one on the ground.

Giles eased his feet apart and stepped forward, straddling Ethan, feeling his body pressed between his calves and his hands coming up to rest at Giles' knees. Giles pressed in close enough to make it awkward for Ethan, trapping him against the wall.

Giles splayed his hand against the bridge for support and said, "Go on, then."

And then Ethan's hands moved against him, unbuttoned him, unzipped, and were almost better than sex. Better than anything he'd felt in years. Hard, strangling heat rushed through him, along with a tingle of humiliation, of oh-god-we're-in-public.

But then Ethan pulled him out of his slacks, and Ethan's hand slipped down to grip the base of his cock, and then Ethan's lips folded around the head of his cock, and nothing mattered but that. Nothing in the world. He sighed, and pushed his hips forward, and that wet warmth surrounded him, and...

Yes. God, yes.

Ethan, slut that he was, was good at this. So good. Always had been, it seemed liked, as though he'd somehow been born with this knowledge. His tongue moved just right, and he allowed only a hint of teeth, tingling pleasure-pain.

His other hand curled around behind Giles' knee and then slid up the back of his thigh to settle in the crease between buttock and leg. The sharp tingle of pleasure was enough to make Giles thrust forward, to curse at the sensation. Too long since he'd done this.

He gasped when Ethan's breath cooled his wet skin, and pushed in again, this time beginning to find a rhythm: stroking, shallowly.

Ethan's fingers tightened on the back of his thigh, and he caught the rhythm, moved with it. This wouldn't last long. Shouldn't last long. Someone could notice them anytime now, the sooner the better, so Giles didn't bother trying to draw it out. Fast, inelegant, he let the wave build and then dug his fingers into Ethan's hair as it crested.

Release shuddered through him, freeing and so very strong, a feeling like no other, a relief on some profound instinctual level.

Then he pulled away, zipped up, and swallowed against his dry throat.

Ethan sat back on his heels and looked up at him, and Giles couldn't help a small, joyless smile when he said, "You wanted to know what you are to me? That is what you are, Ethan."

Then he walked back up the hill to the path without glancing back.

Chapter Four

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He woke the next morning with an empty bottle of scotch, a pounding headache, and a bloodstain on the knee of his khaki trousers. He groaned and kicked at the sheet that was tangled around his leg, and when he sat up, it felt as though someone twisted the vice around his head tighter and his stomach rolled in protest. The light around the corners of the blinds seemed hot as a stove's heating element.

He ducked his head and his gaze fell to his knee again. A bright, accusing smear of red laid across pale, wrinkled fabric; a shock of color. His stomach murmured again, and he abruptly stood and wrestled his trousers open and down. He kicked them aside and stumbled to the bathroom in his pants and shirt.

Cold water and aspirin and then a hot shower rendered him, if not exactly human, then at least functional, and so, when he came back out and picked up the discarded trousers, the bloodstain caught his eye again and his higher functions finally began to process it.

What had he done?

Hitting Ethan was nothing new, of course. It had been the pattern of their relationship (though he still denied that was the appropriate word) for at least five years. But in Sunnydale, Ethan had been a threat. He'd been a threat to Buffy, and he had been a threat to the world, since he was on a Hellmouth with the potential to access so much power.

Here, last night, he had been no threat at all. He'd been nothing but an annoyance, and Giles was easily annoyed. Xander had annoyed him almost constantly for at least four years, and yet, he'd never hit him, of course. He never hit anyone, these days, who wasn't a threat to the world or his Slayer.

So what made Ethan different? What on earth had possessed him to think he had the right to...

Do what he'd done.

It weighed on his mind for the rest of the day, and he kept watching for Ethan, but as it turned out, he wouldn't see him again for three weeks.

Work dragged on. Endless translations of books of prophecies, most of which turned out to be hundreds of years out of date or frauds or just plain pointless. It wasn't all that different than what he'd done in Sunnydale, really, except that in Sunnydale, it had always been about accomplishing something. It had been about finding answers to real questions.

This translating felt far more like Council busywork designed to keep him occupied and to justify his paycheck, and it was dreary. Boring. Useless.

His daily routine was likewise unexciting.

He stopped by his parents' house again, but his father's stony, polite disregard continued, and he got the feeling that it bothered his mother, having to deal with the two of them, so he'd let them alone for the most part, restricting his contact to the occasional phone call.

His office-mates, once friendly, were likewise reserved now, regarding him with attitudes ranging from uncertainty to outright dislike.

He'd never liked being so alone in Sunnydale, but it had at least been temporary, in a way. He'd known that one day he'd come back home. What he hadn't bargained for, though he should have, was the reception he may receive once he got back, and now, spending his evenings alone seemed more unbearable than it ever had before.

He missed Buffy, and Willow, and Xander, Anya, Tara and Dawn. He worried about them, but he didn't call. He didn't let himself call. They needed this. Independence. He'd never asked nor claimed to be their father, but he knew that as long as he was there, that was, to a certain extent, what he would be. So he couldn't stay. Children needed to leave the nest, to make their own way. It was the way of things, and it was for the best.

But he still missed them.

By the time he walked into his usual pub and found Ethan at a table, sipping a drink and watching the patrons as though he'd never vanished into thin air, it was almost a relief.

* * *

"Ripper. Well, isn't this a surprise. I thought we didn't have a relationship." There didn't seem to be any particular ill-will in Ethan's expression as Giles came up to his table.

"We don't," he said, by reflex, "But I... I owe you an apology."

Ethan raised his brows.

"My, my. I think that may be a first. Please, join me. This should be good."

"You don't have to be such an insufferable prat, you know," Giles said, as he sat down. There wasn't very much real heat in the words. In fact, he was almost feeling friendly.

"But I'm so good at it," Ethan said, then sipped his drink again. Giles was momentarily captivated by the muscles moving in his throat as he swallowed, then he shook himself away.

"Well, yes. I suppose one should work with what one has."

Ethan's eyes lingered for a moment on Giles' double scotch, then he looked up and said, "So, I believe you were about to beg forgiveness?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Giles said, drily, then sipped his scotch for fortification. "I-- What I did the other night... I'm sorry. I had no right. I shouldn't have--"

"You're apologizing for *that*?" Ethan said, "Oh, please, Ripper. You think for a second you did anything I didn't want? Come now, there are plenty of things you could be apologizing for that actually warrant an apology."

He was taken aback by this, but he supposed he shouldn't have been. After all, sex had, most likely, been what Ethan had been angling for, and sex had, technically, been what he'd got.

"Apologize for what?"

Oddly, Ethan's eyes flickered away for a moment, and then he said, blithely, "Oh, your abominable taste in clothing for one. I mean, really, Ripper, tweed?"

"I haven't worn tweed in-- well, yes, at the office, but only--"

That was not what Ethan had really been going for, either, but he wasn't sure what it was.

"Where were you?"
Ethan quirked a brow again. "Does it matter?"
"No."
"Business," Ethan said.
"Ah."
Giles didn't want to know anymore than that. They'd all be better off if he didn't.

Many rounds later, Giles said, "My father hates me."
"Makes me glad I never met mine," Ethan said.
"No, he... he doesn't really hate me, I suppose, but they all look at me as though I'm some sort of... harmful mutant."
"Well, maybe you are," Ethan said.
"You're not helping," Giles said.
"Oh, sorry."
"You're supposed to... pretend to be sympathetic and nod and say 'there, there.'"
Ethan nodded and said, "There, there."
"Why am I here?" Giles said, suddenly, sharply. Why was he here, in this pub, getting plastered with Ethan, again? Had he no shame? No ability to learn from his mistakes?
"Most likely because you want to get laid," Ethan said.
"I do not," Giles said. Well, ok, that wasn't true. "Not with you," he added, to clarify.
"Of course you do."
Giles felt righteously indignant as he said, "You keep bloody putting words in my mouth. What makes you so sodding sure of yourself, anyway?"
And wouldn't it be nice? To have that kind of self-esteem? That thought came unbidden, and Giles didn't like it.
"Why shouldn't I be? You honestly think there's the slightest chance we won't end up in bed by the end of the night?"
"Of course we're not going to-- no!"
Well, there was at least a chance they'd both be too drunk for such things. He could cling to that.
"Besides," Ethan said, leaning forward, his voice dropping low and intimate in a way that flickered through Giles' nervous system, "I believe you said you owe me."
"An apology," Giles said, "I owed you an apology. Which I gave. And you failed to accept."
Ethan settled back in his chair.
"You owe me a bit more than that, Giles."
"Keeping tabs now, are we?"
"Well, you did rather leave me hanging, so to speak. I'd say it's only fair."
"Since when have you cared about fair?"
"Generally, I care about fair when it's me getting the short end of the stick."
"Ah. Of course."

A slow drizzle was falling when they left the pub, the kind that hazed out distances and cushioned sounds and cast pale halos around street lamps. Beside Giles, Ethan pulled his coat closer around himself and knotted the belt. Giles tucked his hands in his pockets and looked up, letting the cool settle against his face, chilling away the warmth of the alcohol. They walked silently and slowly, neither speaking.
He felt oddly at peace with Ethan's presence. Maybe because this brought back memories of the streets of London, late at night, damp and mostly empty, where sometimes they'd wander for

hours, intruding on the alley cats' nightly rounds. Those memories were the ones that didn't hurt, and it seemed that sometimes he forgot he had them. That there had been good times before the bad, quiet moments that needed no regrets but for the one regret that they had ended and ended so badly.

Still, when he reached his building, the loud steps made him even more paranoid than before, with the echo of two sets of footsteps in the stairwell. Ethan, though, remained eerily quiet even after Giles had unlocked the door to his flat and they'd walked inside.

"Sorry about the mess," Giles said, reflexively, only realizing that Ethan probably couldn't care less about a mess after he'd already said it.

He'd managed to unpack some of the boxes, but most of them were still in residence in his living room. He glanced back and found Ethan eyeing the place like a detective entering a crime scene. Their eyes met, then, and Ethan shrugged off his coat and tossed it over the ledge of the window into the kitchen, then toed off his shoes, not once looking away.

His eyes were dark and intent, and when he walked towards Giles it was less like he was walking and more like stalking.

Then he went right past Giles, six inches away without stopping, and Giles let out a soft breath, held in anticipation of being touched. Ethan didn't touch him, he only felt the soft breeze of his passing. Ethan himself headed down the hall.

There was nothing for Giles to do but take off his shoes and coat, lock the door, and follow him.

When he reached the bedroom, Ethan was not, as he'd suspected he may be, already naked. He stood before the bed, with his back to the door, apparently lost in quiet contemplation. Though, when Giles walked into the room and shut the door behind him, Ethan looked back over his shoulder and smiled.

The unfamiliarity of the goatee struck Giles again, yet another change to the face he remembered from his youth.

Ethan turned then, with only a small hint of the smile remaining at the corner of his mouth. His eyes were still dark and intense. Serious. He flicked his gaze down and then up, taking in Giles, who hung back by the door. Giles wasn't afraid, of course, but Ethan was different now than he usually was. Not clowning or flirting or any of his usual activities.

When Ethan stepped up close and unbuttoned the top button of Giles' shirt, Giles flinched. But as Ethan's fingers continued down, opening each button with a flick of a finger, his gaze never releasing Giles' own, Giles couldn't deny the attraction. Couldn't deny that the single-minded determination in Ethan's eyes was fascinating, or that he liked the way Ethan roughly undid his trousers.

That he sodding loved the way Ethan's hand shoved into his open fly and gripped his cock, and those eyes narrowed, and that smile widened just a bit, and that grip very nearly hurt, but still made Giles' knees go a bit watery, his breath go fast and staggered.

Then Ethan jerked his hand away, and Giles' whole body seemed to groan in disappointment.

"But this isn't about you, is it?" Ethan said, then, not smirking, except perhaps in a small twinkle in his eye. Though that twinkle seemed too dark and too hard-edged for glee. It more closely resembled the diamond tip of a saw blade.

And yet, that was even more fascinating.

"No," Giles said. Another ping of guilt echoed through his gut.

And perhaps a little fear, because giving Ethan free reign was about the most idiotic thing anyone, particularly him, could do. Still, he mostly felt certain he could handle anything Ethan threw at him. It was only Ethan, after all.

Though, "only Ethan," at this point, didn't seem as comforting as it usually did.

"How do you want to do this, then?" Ethan said, "Mouth or arse? Really I'm happy either way."

Such crudeness should not turn him on this much. None of this should be turning him on. He pulled his thoughts back up to his brain and tried to consider the question. Much as

there was the instinctual first kick of "Like hell am I going to let you fuck me," he hadn't actually even touched another man's cock in decades, and it would be easier to just lie there and let Ethan do what he would...

It had nothing to do, of course, with the fact that some part of him had been aching for Ethan to fuck him since he'd first stalked towards Giles back at the front door. Nothing at all.

Giles didn't answer verbally. He shrugged off his shirt and went to the bed, pushed off his trousers, pants and socks and then lay down on his stomach. Trying not to think. Humiliation pulsing through him in time with the arousal. He shut his eyes, but he could still hear the rustle of Ethan's clothing being shed and hitting the floor, and then the bed sagged and the springs creaked, and a warm hand settled at the nape of his neck, then ran down his back.

One finger teased at the dimple just above his arse-crack, and his muscles tensed. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter and just breathed.

"Oh, Ripper, come now. It's not that bad."

Feather-light fingers traced downwards, not delving in yet. Giles grit his teeth, and his cock throbbed with want.

"Just bloody do it," he grated.

Then Ethan leaned in, his hand leaving Giles' arse to brace himself over Giles back. His lips brushed against Giles' ear.

"You know me better than that, love," he said, and then he kissed down Giles' jaw, down his throat, to where his neck join his shoulder. Then bit down there, hard enough to force a small cry out of Giles. Not enjoying this, he was bloody well not enjoying this.

And then Ethan nuzzled his shoulder, a wire-brush new sensation of beard against his skin. Giles' breath left him, abandoned him completely, and left his mind dizzy with want and desire. Excitement. Ethan.

Strong male hand ran roughly down his side, scrape of that goatee against his skin.

He wanted. Wanted Ethan, wanted this. Wanted Ethan's cock, Ethan's teeth.

His hand curled into a fist, and then Ethan reached his waist and climbed over his leg and settled on the bed. His lips grazed that same dimple he'd touched earlier. Giles knew suddenly what he was doing and, with that knowledge, felt a rush of hot precome, spread his legs and groaned. He turned his face into the pillow and crushed it there, breathing the heat of his own breath as Ethan spread his cheeks, and that smooth hot wet tongue slid down.

Lack of air and the probing touch of that tongue made him dizzy. He spread his legs wider, felt the ache in his groin muscles, turned his head to the side again and gasped for cool air.

Dizzy heat, sweat, his heart hammered tangibly, he could feel his pulse in his throat, in his gut, in his cock. Ethan's tongue circled and pressed inside, just enough to touch soft, supersensitive skin. Ethan's chin brushed against his balls, tickled, felt good. So good.

"I thought... this wasn't about me," Giles said.

Ethan kissed along the curve of one arse cheek and murmured, "So you are enjoying this, then?"

"No," Giles snapped, disregarding any evidence to the contrary.

Ethan just chuckled again, and then licked patterns up Giles' perineum. Matching patterns of heat etched themselves in Giles' brain.

The next time Ethan pulled away--god knew how much later--Giles couldn't stop a small whimper of protest, then a hot blush at the sound. Ethan was only gone for a moment, and then his fingers touched Giles again, slick and pressing. He couldn't find it in him to tense up, so his body allowed the intrusion without protest. He shifted his hips, and his cock dragged against the covers, and he groaned again.

Fingers pulled and stretched and then slipped away, then the bed moved as Ethan resettled himself.

Then he turned his face back into the pillow and groaned a different kind of groan. His body and mind finally caught onto the same wavelength and the tension he'd been unable to summon before reported in, full force.

"Oh, relax, Rupert," Ethan said, the patience and amusement gone from his voice, the tenor more of a growl than a purr now.

Ethan dropped down, heavy heat over his back, like a thick, living winter blanket. His breath ruffled the fringe of hair at the nape of Giles' neck, and his hand burrowed between them, down between their legs. Then, a moment later, the guardian ring of muscle in his arse burned at a pressing intrusion.

Contradictory impulses of *fuck, that hurts* and *relax and it won't, you idiot*, curled through his mind and a fresh sweat broke out across his forehead. He forced the air out of his lungs and tried to tell half-involuntary muscles to obey his will.

"Oh, gods, Rupert," Ethan gasped, a strangled choke.

He wanted to say 'slow down,' but couldn't find the words in the vertigo of the pain. Wave of nausea after Ethan pulled back for a moment and then pressed in again, harder, deeper, Giles' muscles still clenched far too tight, still fought for every centimeter.

Everything seemed sharper, more real in that moment, as though he could count the threads in the sheet, feel each drop of sweat roll down his flanks.

"Ethan," he managed to say, but Ethan either didn't hear, or was ignoring him, or didn't get the message.

At the very least, he could honestly say his own erection was as absent as he'd been wishing for it to be all night. Somehow, though, that was a very cold comfort now.

But then, Ethan nuzzled his ear, then caught the lobe gently between his teeth, teased at it with his tongue, and the pain was beginning to abate, and Ethan wasn't pushing him, was just barely penetrating him. Small shallow strokes pushed against reluctant muscles that were finally, blessedly, beginning to unlock.

Giles sighed in relief, and with that exhalation, Ethan pressed in a bit deeper, and there was only a small spike of pain to mark the transition.

In fact, a few moments later, it was beginning to feel good, and Ethan was beginning to move with a more regular rhythm.

"Oh, yes," Ethan sighed.

He'd forgotten how this felt. It overwhelmed him, and rushed through him, left no part of his body untouched. It made him feel filled and possessed. Wanted. So deep now, that rhythm so impossible to ignore. The thought of being fucked was almost as intense as the sensation itself.

He gasped and pushed back, and now welcomed the shock of pain and the sensation of being pressed and forced and reshaped. He panted through flared nostrils, his chin tucked to his chest, body braced and lifted up on his elbows and knees, pressed into Ethan, his nose filled with the scent of his own sweat and arousal.

An arm wrapped tight around his chest, another hand sunk into the mattress, just within his limited line of sight. Ethan was up on his knees and fucking him hard now, every thrust redefining the world, Giles could still hardly breathe, but now it was with pleasure, pain seemed to be a distant memory, something that happened to other people, something meaningless and theoretical and far away, and god, now he was hard again. Leaking, wanting. Wanted to reach beneath himself and take himself in hand, but couldn't change position under Ethan's relentless rhythm.

Above him, Ethan rambled something meaningless and then slammed into him, one hard lunge, that pushed Giles' shoulders down to the mattress, that sparked one more flare of pain, and then--

Ethan collapsed over him, on hands and knees, his chest a presence just above but not touching Giles' back. Still inside of Giles, for a moment, and then he pulled out, pulled away.

Giles dropped to the bed on his side, trembling all over, and looked down his body to see Ethan just as the other man stood up, calmly picked up his trousers and shirt and headed for the bathroom. Giles stared after him, his befuddled mind trying to process this sudden abandonment.

He'd just begun to figure it out when Ethan emerged from the bathroom, dressed as impeccably as if he hadn't just buggered Giles' brains out.

"Debt repaid, then?" Ethan said, with a self-satisfied smirk.

And then he left.

Giles flopped onto his back on the bed. A part of him actually admired the man's capacity for evil.

"You bloody bastard," he said to the ceiling, as he heard his front door shut.

Chapter Five

Where the Heart Is

His mother invited him to dinner a few days later, and he couldn't exactly say no, so he went. The meal itself went well, but afterwards, as they settled in the living room with brandy, his father casually inquired, "When are you returning?"

"I'm sorry?" Giles said.

"To Sunnydale? How long are you planning to stay away?"

He'd been hoping that wasn't what his father was talking about. "I'm... I'm here indefinitely. I'm not sure I will be going back."

His father's voice remained level and matter-of-fact as he said, "But you must. It's your calling. Your responsibility."

"She doesn't need me, now."

Giles looked down and swirled his brandy. This was the last thing he wanted to be discussing.

"All Slayers need Watchers."

"She didn't want me to be her Watcher," Giles said, trying to match his father's calm tone, "She wanted me to be her mother. I couldn't stay."

"So, you left because she needed you?"

"I left because she *didn't*," Giles said, losing the battle to remain cool and collected. "She believed she did, and it was destroying her, letting her believe that. She has never needed me, as anything more than, than a walking encyclopedia. She was ordering me around when she was barely sixteen."

"Then go back and be her bloody encyclopedia, Rupert."

"I can't. She wouldn't *let* me. Not the way she was."

"For God's sake, don't you see this is ridiculous? A Watcher simply abandoning his Slayer? Leaving her alone to face the Hellmouth? It's not done. It's completely irresponsible. It's not like you."

His father paused then, and it was all Giles could do not to cringe, knowing what his next words would be. "Or perhaps it is."

"This isn't the same," he said, softly.

Although he was apparently taking up with Ethan again.

No, he wasn't.
"You've abandoned your destiny before."
"I love her, Dad. She's the number one priority in my life. I would never-- I was bloody well sacked for it, and I didn't leave then."
"Well, perhaps you should have. Wyndam-Pryce would have--"
That was going too far.
"That berk would have got her killed," he snapped, standing up.
"Rupert!" his mother objected.
He walked to the window, but mostly only saw his own reflection frowning at him.
"Sorry, mother."
Then that silence fell over all of them again, and eventually, he said he should be getting home.

* * *

Halfway back to Bath, he pulled off on the side of the road and got out of the car. A shock of cold air and a sharp scent of cow manure did something at least to clear his head. Cattle stood a few yards off behind a wooden fence, large dark living masses in the almost equally dark field.

Giles tucked his hands in his pockets and walked down to the fence. Long grass brushed around his knees and rustled underfoot, the sound mingling with the distant sigh of the breeze. Somewhere, an owl called. It was cold and the world seemed empty of humanity.

He stopped at the fence and leaned his head back, looking up at the stars that peered through the dark rifts in cottony grey clouds. His breath rose in a white puff and dispersed away.

He had to wonder.

Was his father right? He'd felt so sure it had been a selfless act, leaving Sunnydale. He hadn't *wanted* to leave her. He'd wanted to help. Hell, he would have even been willing to play the role of mother. But it wouldn't have been good for her. She needed the independence, her own life, the way she'd always craved.

But then... it had been misery, being there. He'd been so sure he was quit of Sunnydale with its demons and death. And Buffy was suffering so much, it hurt him desperately to watch, and to feel so utterly helpless.

So perhaps there had been an element of selfishness to it. He had the ability to get out, and he had. None of the others had that option.

He hung his head and walked back to his car, with nothing at all worked out in his mind.

Chapter Six

Altered Perceptions

He awoke, once again, to a pounding headache and a disturbing lack of memory of the events of the night prior. Sick and dizzy, and yet, the first thing his hand encountered as he groped for his glasses was a plastic water bottle.

Mana from the gods.

Although, if he'd been as drunk last night as it felt like he had been, how had he had the foresight to put the water there? Not to mention how had he had the foresight to strip down to his boxers and to set his glasses safely aside?

He finished the water off quickly, feeling, if not better, then at least relieved to know that it was helping, and then he slipped on his glasses. Then he froze, a moment before looking at the mirror, suddenly quite sure he remembered that Ethan had played some role in the previous night's events.

Oh, god. He was a demon. Wasn't he?

He steeled himself, and looked.

No. Not a demon. Quite human, in fact, except for the bloodshot and shadowed eyes and the rampant five o' clock shadow. Then he noticed a slip of paper, tucked in the frame of the mirror. He heaved himself up and staggered over, and plucked it out to read it.

"I do hope you remember the part where you were staggering down the streets singing Baktar demon sea shanties. Truly a memory to be cherished for a lifetime.

"Be seeing you."

Oh, dear lord.

He all but prayed that this was merely a representation of Ethan's horrid sense of humor.

But he had a sneaking suspicion it was not.

He crumpled the note and tossed it in the rubbish bin, then headed to the bathroom.

It wasn't until the hot water of the shower began to clear his head that he felt the first real twinge of fear. It wasn't fear of Ethan or anything Ethan may have done. It was fear of himself.

This was the third time since he'd got back to England that he'd drunk enough to black out.

Not good. Also not wise and not safe, especially with Ethan hanging about like that stray cat you foolishly decided to feed once.

He told himself it wouldn't happen again.

Ethan leaned against the frame of his front door and smiled as he crested the stairs.

"Giles. Hope you've recovered."

"I'll live," Giles said, drily. "Why are you here?"

"Ah. I come bearing gifts," Ethan said. "Well, a gift, in any case."

He slipped his hand slightly out of his pocket to display a small ziplock bag half-filled with something shredded and plant-like. Giles raised one brow skeptically.

"Just how idiotic, exactly, do you think I am?"

"Oh, relax," Ethan said, standing up away from the wall, his 'gift' tucked away again, "It's not mystical in any way, I promise."

Giles stepped around him to unlock his door.

"And why should I trust you?"

"Well, I haven't lied to you lately. Or even tried to kill you."

"Ah, of course. How could I have even dreamed of doubting your intentions?"

Sarcasm still felt good. Ethan just huffed.

"Oh, come on. I'm just offering you a chance to relax for the night. Honestly."

He raised his hands as though to indicate he was unarmed, and, foolish though it was, Giles gave in as he pushed the door open and said, "Fine, fine. Come in."

"Wonderful," Ethan said, with cheer that sounded genuine.

A few hours later, Giles was sprawled on the floor of his living room, feeling the vibrations of The Who's greatest hits shivering through his floorboards. He tilted his head back and saw Ethan was still on the couch, arms stretched out, body melted over the back like one of Dali's watches. Upside-down to Giles' eyes, he looked rather amusing. Also, with the way his legs were spread, Giles had a perfect view of his crotch. Which was actually quite a good thing.

Giles smiled and took another drag. This was damn good stuff. Good enough that he actually didn't care if Ethan had enchanted it in some way. He felt good. Better than he had in ages.

"Y'know," he said, "This, this is real music. You heard the crap they call music these days? It's crap."

"I dunno," Ethan said. "Some of it's not bad."

Giles sat part way up and twisted around to look at Ethan right-side-up.

"Are you daft? That stuff isn't music. It's... it's a bunch of idiots banging on percussion instruments. Or occasionally some shallow git whining. This is real music, music that *means* something."

"I rather like modern dance music, actually," Ethan said, "Good beat."

Giles dropped painfully heavily down on his back again.

"Ow," he said, then giggled, then recaptured his train of thought and said, "Men do not dance, Ethan."

There was a thump and then Ethan crawled over and sat down by his shoulder.

"Are you implying I'm less than a man?" Ethan asked, looking down at him with an expression hard to decipher from the odd angle.

"Quite possibly," Giles said, forcing himself to sound serious.

Which didn't hold water for long, given that he couldn't help but giggle when Ethan said, "Would you like me to prove just how much a man I am?"

"No," he said.

But Ethan was already slithering down to the floor beside him, nuzzling at the open V of Giles' half-unbuttoned shirt. Then sliding down lower, 'til his face was buried in Giles' crotch, his mouth moving along Giles' cock through his slacks.

"Oh, fuck," Giles said, "Your mouth is bloody amazing."

"Well, your prick is inspiring," Ethan answered. This time, they both broke down in giggles. And Ethan's laughter against his cock was even better than his tongue had been, and somehow, now, acknowledging that with a hearty, appreciative groan really didn't seem so bad, after all.

Especially not since it seemed to inspire Ethan to go back to his ministrations.

Though now Giles wanted something a bit different.

"Get up here, you bastard," he growled, and Ethan looked up and then climbed up his body, dropping down over him when they were eye to eye. Eye to pretty eye. God, Ethan had gorgeous eyes. Dark and deep. Giles lifted one hand and buried it in Ethan's longish hair, flicked his gaze up and down, taking in the changes in his old lover's face.

Deeper lines around his mouth and eyes, and that goatee were the obvious differences. Still, the sameness now seemed more captivating. That same gleefully wicked sparkle in his eyes, those same smooth pink lips, those same high-cheekbones that had so captivated him when he was younger.

That still did captivate him now.

He didn't mind. Felt light and free and... happy.

"You *did* do something to this stuff," he said, then, gesturing with the joint.

"I most certainly did not," Ethan said, still weighing Giles down, still close enough that his breath caressed Giles' cheek. "It's nothing more magical than damn good hash."

"It's not like I don't have grounds for suspicion. Wouldn't be the first time you've put a spell on me."

And for some reason, that set Ethan off giggling again, which was actually quite a pleasant sensation on Giles' end, what with the nice warm body wriggling against his own. Ethan looked up again, still grinning, and sang, badly, "I put a spell on you."

"Oh, dear god," Giles gasped, "You can't sing. Please, stop."

Once that fit of amusement had finally managed to pass, the album had quit playing (possibly because even the recording was so horrified by Ethan's attempt at musicality that it simply gave up), and Giles said, "I'm hungry."

"Yes, well, that'd be the drugs," Ethan said, knowingly.

"Yes, I know, thank you, Ethan."

Then they were both quiet, lying there together in the middle of his living room floor, amongst the boxes shoved aside for the occasion.

After a moment, Ethan wet his lips and leaned down.

And kissed him.

Giles clenched his hand in Ethan's hair and pulled him closer.

Sometime later, Giles grimaced and shifted his hips, his bare arse catching tackily on the polished wood floor, his ankles tangled in his slacks, his shirt open, and his stomach sticky with semen.

"This is disgusting," he said.

Ethan just rolled his eyes and then rolled another joint.

"You're entirely too prim these days, Ripper."

"I'm going to have bruises all over the place tomorrow," he muttered. "And my back is probably ruined for life."

Ethan handed over the now-lit joint and Giles accepted it without protest, hoisting himself up on one elbow and taking a drag. He was far too sober at the moment. He handed it back.

Ethan had pulled his trousers up, but hadn't bothered to button or zip them, and his shirt was gone, shoved halfway under the couch, leaving him completely bare from the waist up. Somehow, this looked perfectly normal on him, as if being dressed was not his natural state of being. Looking

him over, Giles noticed for the first time the ugly scar above the crook of his elbow. Besides that, though, Ethan didn't just look natural as he leaned back against the coffee table, one arm bent up to hold the joint to his lips, the other braced on the floor, his legs loosely folded, he looked amazingly good, like some debauched creature from Greek mythology.

Suddenly their hurried frottage seemed deeply unsatisfying, and Giles found himself reaching out, touching the closest bit of flesh he could reach, the smooth skin of Ethan's flank.

Ethan looked down at Giles' fingers, took another drag, then set it aside and got down again, bracing himself over Giles on hands and knees. Giles leaned up and Ethan leaned down and their lips met in the middle, parted, and Ethan let the mouthful of sweet smoke trickle from him to Giles. Intimate... Giles shut his eyes and breathed it in and let his head drop back as Ethan kissed down his throat, his chest, then began to lick their come off Giles' stomach.

Giles moaned, and ached for a dizzying variety of things.

"Ethan..." he said, and the name tasted like fine wine as it rolled across his tongue.

Ethan just hummed distractedly and then, having finished with Giles' stomach, took Giles' cock in hand and began lapping at the head.

"Ethan," Giles gasped, "Bed. Bed now."

Chapter Seven

Storm Signals

"Tardy again, Giles?" Bernstein said.

He bit back the 'Piss off,' that was on the tip of his tongue and restrained himself to simply saying, "I'm sorry. I wasn't aware I *had* a supervisor. Nor set hours for that matter."

He skirted around Bernstein and ducked into his office before the other Watcher could get another word in edgewise. He didn't need that simpleton's attitude today. Or any day, for that matter. But particularly not today.

He sat down at his desk and rubbed his forehead, which wasn't hurting, but was threatening to hurt. Preemptively, he dug out two aspirin and swallowed them dry, then pulled out that days' files.

In the hopes of maintaining his sanity, he now balanced the translation work with monitoring world news for signs of paranormal events.

Usually, the Watcher's Council had enough operatives in place to catch most of the events first hand, but occasionally one or two would slip between the cracks, and only be reported by the non-paranormal press, or heard through demon channels. All in all, it was a much less tedious assignment than the translation, and between his demon contacts in Bristol and Ethan, who seemed to simply know everything that ever happened simply by osmosis, he was good at it.

Of course, he hadn't *seen* Ethan in nearly two weeks.

Which had nothing to do with why he was feeling off today. Nothing at all.

He rubbed his forehead again and flipped open the first paper, which covered local events throughout most of Montana.

Immediately, his blood ran cold.

"Five Infants Vanish From Hospital During Freak Storm"

"Five infants went missing from the neonate unit Tuesday after a powerful and highly localized storm sprang up and dumped several feet of snow and ice around the facility. Officials say the high winds and other weather conditions caused a panic and knocked out power lines to the hospital.

"We were all so caught up in the storm, security was compromised. This is truly a tragedy, and we will do whatever it takes to assist the police in locating these babies,' the hospital's chief of security said."

Giles' throat went dry, as he recalled Ethan saying, "They said they needed something big. People had to be out of it. So that later, they'd blame themselves."

Good god, it had been infants, then, too. And Ethan wasn't here, was he? He'd been gone. It seemed to fit. What could be more chaotic than a storm?

He flipped through the pages with numb fingers until he found a phone number for the editorial staff. His heart was pounding as he picked up the phone and dialed. He had no idea what he would do if it was Ethan.

He navigated the menus for a few minutes, and hung on hold for fifteen more minutes, while he stared across the room at the blank white wall. Even if Ethan hadn't done this, he had done this sort of this before. What the hell had Giles been *doing* these past few weeks?

Then the phone picked up, and the journalist answered.

"Uh, yes, hello," Giles said, "I'm with the USA Today and I was wondering if I could get some follow-up information on the infant kidnappings?"

"Oh, those. Hey, man, no story there, really."

"No?" He felt a glimmer of hope.

"Yeah. Turns out, some of the staff had the babies taken to another wing. Nursery had a big window, they thought it might break. Only problem was lack of communication."

Giles couldn't help a shaky sigh of relief.

"I'm... I'm glad to hear that," he said. "Thank you for your time."

"Sure thing, bud."

He hung up, shaking. Not Ethan. No infant sacrifices to demons. Nothing but a freak storm and a disorganized staff.

Which didn't make him any less of an idiot.

Chapter Eight

Sacrifice

He couldn't bear the thought of an entire afternoon cloistered away in that dreary office, so he gathered up his things and headed for the riverside park after lunch. It was a cool day, but sunny, with a hint of warm in the breeze. The park was fairly crowded, with mothers and small children, mostly, but just as Giles was heading for an empty table, a figure sitting off alone a few yards away caught his eye.

Ethan.

Sitting, leaning back on his elbows, in his sunglasses, his face tilted back as though to catch the sun like a flower might. The way his shirt hung over his torso he look almost frail. He seemed completely lost in the sunlight, a million miles away.

Giles stopped and was about to turn and walk away, but Ethan must have seen him. In a heartbeat he went from perfect stillness to his usual frenetic energy, rolling to his feet and ambling towards Giles with all the innocent goodwill of a puppy.

Giles tensed all over, felt the leather handle of his briefcase creak under the strain of his grip.

He took a small step back before Ethan reached him, and said, "Get away from me, Ethan."

Ethan just smiled and said, "Oh, hang on, I think I know this one."

Giles didn't change his expression, though inside, he was seething, remembering now everything Ethan had done. The chocolate, the Halloween costumes, the Fyarl... and throwing Buffy to Eyghon. And god knew what else he'd done in twenty years.

"I mean it. Stay away from me."

Looking almost bemused, Ethan cocked his head and furrowed his brow. Giles' heart pounded as he clamped down on the temper that was threatening to well up. There were too many people here for him to lose his cool now.

"You're a monster, Ethan. And I want nothing to do with you. I don't care what I may have said or done, I'm through with this."

He backed another step away, said, "Don't follow me, don't try to find me, don't come to my flat, this is over," then he turned heel and fled.

He got back to his flat and set his things out on the coffee table, and found himself trying not to think about the fact that three weeks ago he'd been companionably smoking with Ethan right where his feet were now.

He'd been better than this once. He knew he had. There had been a time, he was sure, not so long ago, when he'd been useful. He'd been, maybe, even happy. Or perhaps he was deluding himself.

But if he hadn't been happy, he'd at least been useful those first few years with Buffy. He'd been doing what he'd very nearly been born to do, what he'd been trained to do his entire life. Being assigned a Slayer was an opportunity he'd been despairing of ever being awarded, after the council had not given him a Potential Slayer after he finally graduated from Oxford.

Still, he'd had a life before Buffy. Had a job that he'd enjoyed, when he was a museum curator. He'd had friends at the Council. Somehow, now, all that seemed lost. He'd given it up, for her, because it was what he was meant for.

But one thing they rarely talked about was what happened to Watchers after their Slayers were gone.

* * *

They were in their old flat, where the windows rattled every time the trains passed, and they were moving together with the tidal rhythm of loving-making. Ethan was thin, not lean, all smooth skin and long hair, and Giles wondered why he'd ever thought that Ethan had aged. He was still young, still beautiful.

Still hot and slick and clenched around Giles' cock, his hand as solid and real as anything against Giles' side.

He looked up at Giles with eyes dark with sex, no, with magic, and spoke Latin words that Giles didn't know. All he knew was the sudden surge of magic sparking around them, and he buried his hands in long curls...

No, in straight, short hair. Willow, not Ethan at all, and they were in the Magic Box. Dressed, and standing across from each other.

Willow smiled and said, "It's just magic, Rupert. Nothing to be afraid of. Just a bit of fun. It's perfectly safe."

And then she laughed as horns and scales torn her skin to shreds and made her something else. Made her not-Willow, and he staggered backwards, away, saying, "She's lost control," but when he looked, Buffy was just standing by the ladder, looking lost and tired.

She said, "I can't. I can't do it, Giles." Then she wandered away.

Willow-Eyghon laughed again, deep and booming, and they were back in London, and Ethan, older now, was pressed back against the bricks of an alley with the demon bearing down on him.

It wasn't Willow anymore. She was gone, he'd let it take her. Ethan could be saved, someone had to be saved, he hated this, hated that he could grab her and slam her down and that suddenly they were on a flimsy tower shaking in the wind as he pressed his hand over her mouth and felt her teeth gnash against his palm until she died.

But when he looked up, Ethan was shaking his head.

"I never asked you to save me," he sneered, and then walked off the edge.

* * *

Giles jolted awake on the couch, covered in sweat.

Chapter Nine

Power

He'd spent the evening too unsettled to read, too depressed to compound it by watching TV, and constantly trying to talk himself out of a drink. On the bright side, he had ended up getting a bit more unpacking done, in the midst of his wandering about the apartment.

And then his door--which he had, in fact, locked--flew open and an incredibly irate Ethan stormed into his apartment, saying, "You righteous, hypocritical bastard."

Which was, at least, more entertaining than mindless television. Still, it was embarrassing the way it made him yelp and dive for a fireplace poker before he realized who it was. Then he just segued directly into annoyance and tossed the poker aside with a clatter loud enough to make him cringe.

"Get out," he snapped. "I told you to stay the hell away."

Ethan just kicked the door shut and stomped across the room.

"Fuck you, Rupert."

"Me? You--"

Before he could finish that sentence, though, Ethan threw his arms open wide, and Giles saw but couldn't react as a rippled wave of clear energy flashed through the air. He didn't even have time to cry out before he slammed into the wall beside the window and found himself pinned there. It took a moment for the pain of the impact to sink in, and when it did, it momentarily shocked tears into his eyes.

"Shut. Up," Ethan said. Then, "You. You always go on and on about what's good and what's right. Then you turn around and treat me like I'm some inferior form of demon or something. Not that I mind that so much, it's just the utter hypocrisy of it that kills me, you know?"

Giles breathed in sharply, tugged helplessly against the magical bonds, and wondered if Ethan had gone insane.

"You were honest when I knew you, Ripper. Honest and free."

"No, I wasn't. I was lying to everyone back then, damn it. Especially myself."

"No. You weren't. But you desperately wish you were, now, don't you? It's sad, really, how much you hate yourself."

Ethan flicked his hand and the bonds let Giles loose, and he barely managed to catch himself from falling flat on his face.

"You're a murderer, Ethan. How many people have died because of you? You would have killed Buffy more than once. Would have had me kill her. Why should I treat you like a human? You've never shown that you are one."

"Oh, please. Just because I don't snivel and whine at every opportunity, just because I don't break down and sob when someone gets hurt."

"You *cause* that hurt, Ethan. You're a sociopath, for god's sake."

Ethan rolled his eyes and stalked forward again, and Giles found himself glancing down to locate the poker he'd dropped.

"You've been spending too much time in California, Rupert, with their psycho-babble. I'm a sorcerer and a damn good one and I do what I have to to make a living."

"Bollocks, Ethan. There are plenty of things you could do that don't involve anyone dying."

"Magic is who I am, Giles, and quite frankly, you good guys just don't pay well enough for a man make a living. All about the charity work and the doing it for the good of humanity bit. The good of humanity really doesn't pay the rent, I'm afraid."

"Work in a bloody magic shop, then, Ethan," Giles growled.

"Oh, of course. And I suppose you'd have been content if you'd just been a grocer, then?"

They'd been slowly advancing on each other through this, and finally reached arm's length.

Giles threw the first punch, but to his surprise, Ethan blocked the blow rather handily, and returned it with one of his own that sent Giles reeling into the molding of the fireplace. The sharp edge of the mantel caught him in the side and made hot pain-sparks dance in his eyes, pain enough to make him snarl, and charge back at Ethan.

This time he landed a blow to Ethan's ribs, a knee to Ethan's hip, but Ethan grabbed him and threw them both to the side and down and they hit the floor in the hallway in a clatter of limbs and a pair of shouts, and then Giles surged up and rolled them over, pinning Ethan and managing to land another sound blow on his jaw.

Drew blood, and his heart was pounding, and his body didn't seem to care that this was a fight, not some other reason to be rolling on the floor, and when Ethan flipped them both over and drove his knee into Giles' stomach, that wasn't the only reason he was gasping for air. Hated that it wasn't the only reason, snarled dark imprecations and tried to catch his breath.

Then Ethan gestured again, and the binding magic kicked up and pinned him in place.

Ethan slipped down, straddled his knee and cupped his hand around Giles' erection. Giles' muscles twitched, but it was the only protest he could manage.

"And yet, you want me. You love this. You *lie*, Rupert."

"I can't control my bloody adrenal glands, you berk."

"Still lying," Ethan growled, as he unzipped Giles' trousers and pushed his hand inside and around Giles' cock. "You love this, Ripper."

Stroking him, now, and it was still good, in spite of everything. In spite of all of it. And Giles suddenly realized that there was nothing he could do to stop Ethan, not with the spell in place, and with the realization, relaxed completely. Almost completely. Muscles in his lower back still strained slightly to push up into the touch.

He swallowed hard, and felt his heart race.

"Good," Ethan murmured.

Then he pulled his hand away and released the spell.

The rush of disappointment shocked Giles. Why on earth would he be--

Then Ethan reached down and began stroking him again. Giles' breath slowed down, to a careful, slow beat, and he didn't want to pull away. God, he knew he should. But he could hardly stand the thought. Loved that touch, loved the way Ethan's eyes were glittering as they pinned his gaze in place as strongly as any binding spell.

It was so easy to lie there, and would be so hard to get up, fight Ethan off.

So hard to spend another night alone.

He didn't want to think. He was so bloody tired of thinking. He'd been thinking for the past six years, he just wanted to stop.

"Do you still have those handcuffs?" Ethan asked, as easily and naturally as though asking for a cup of sugar.

Giles said, softly, "I don't trust you."

Ethan leaned closer. "You don't have to. That's the thrill of it."

His hand had gone nearly still, was just moving slightly, listlessly against Giles cock. Giles breathed in, let it out, was trembling from the discomfort of being awkwardly splayed on the hard floor.

"Yes," he said. "Box, under the bed."

Standing up was sobering. Too much so, perhaps. It made him wonder why he was doing this, made him think again. It made the guilt and self-loathing spring back up, hot and searing as he stopped in the doorway of his bedroom and Ethan pulled the old pair of steel cuffs out of the junk box he kept under his bed. This was ridiculous, he hadn't even managed to go a day--

A battering, clumsy force of magic swept him onto the bed with all the grace of a child abandoning a rag doll. This meant Ethan's power was running low. It meant that if he fought back now, he'd win. He rolled over onto his back and Ethan straddled his hips.

All Giles did was put his arms over his head, and all he felt when the cuffs locked was relieved.

He barely had to move at all as Ethan unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it up around his wrists, then undid his trousers and pulled them and his pants off. He felt starkly naked next to Ethan, who hadn't even unbuttoned his shirt, but the feeling wasn't a bad one.

He closed his eyes as Ethan began to run his hands over his body. At first, they moved with surprising gentleness, touching each inch of skin, and seeking out Giles' hidden, private places. That spot just below his ear that never failed to make his breath quicken, that soft patch of skin just between his ribs and stomach, the pulse points in the crooks of his elbows and the hollow of his throat.

Then one of Ethan's thumbs found the bruise from the mantle, circled it once, and then homed in and jammed into the center. Radiating sparks of heat and pain, and Giles groaned and pushed his hips up. Pain, but good.

Ethan sought out each bruise and then, he leaned in and set his teeth against the softer parts of Giles' flesh, bit down, hard enough that Giles knew there would be bruises in the morning. Each bite a slow progression of pain, from nothing but a sensation of pressure to a blossoming awareness of too-much, to a squeezing ache that made him grunt and made his muscles contract in a subconscious desire to get away.

By the time Ethan shoved him over onto his stomach, he was sweating and hard.

Giles pushed his legs apart and groaned, "Fuck me. Please, Ethan--"

Needn't have asked. Ethan's fingers appeared moments later, slick and urgent, preparing him far too fast, there would be pain, he knew, but this time he didn't care.

He met Ethan's penetration with a string of obscenities and shoved his hips up, glorying in the stabbing pressure, the strain. Ethan still moved slower than he would have liked, but by the time they'd worked up to the real pace, by the time the bed was groaning under their fucking, he'd long forgotten that. Forgot everything, but the perfect burn of Ethan inside of him, and the flame of the cuffs around his wrists.

Ethan raked his nails around the curve of Giles' shoulder. The superficial pain was a stark, fascinating contrast to the deeper burn. It lit up nerves Giles seemed to have forgotten he had.

Giles had bent his elbows up under his chest for support, and the position pulled his wrists against the cuffs, reminded him constantly that they were there, that he was handicapped if he wanted--needed--to fight back. He had his forehead tucked against the sheets, his eyes shut, seeing nothing but the sparks in his mind.

"Ripper," Ethan breathed between his shoulder blades, and for once, it didn't sound like an insult.

Ethan had slowed his pace, and their movement together became more languid, more sensual. It was easier, in a way that let his mind wander just enough to notice smaller things, like the

heat of Ethan's body against his back, and the way their legs were pressed together, parallel, heat and sweat and friction where their skin met, where coils of their body hair caught together.

He could hear the harsh rhythm of Ethan's breath echoed in his own, feel it in tropical gusts against his spine, and then Ethan's lips, dry and chapped, touching each of his vertebra from the middle of his back to his neck, then mouthing just below the hair at the nape of his neck, finding skin not accustomed to handling, where just the faintest touch sent delicate shivers of sensation to his nipples and his balls and the head of his cock.

Then Ethan's hand reaching up under him to palm the base of his shaft, then to grip him and stroke him, slow but firm. He felt his balls draw up against his body, felt the dizzying shift of impending orgasm, felt Ethan inside him, pressure and pleasure. The cuffs still digging into his wrists. The darkness before his eyes hazed red and he surged forward as he came, distantly felt Ethan all but clinging to him, and then Giles was flat on his chest on the bed, panting, and Ethan had let his weight down over him, still inside him, still moving.

He expected Ethan to rush, then, to end it, but he didn't. He took his time and pulled them over onto their sides and moved slow, with a patience and an appreciation for savoring Giles hadn't thought Ethan could possess.

By the time Ethan did come, with an understated cry, the slow sensuality and the relaxation of his own climax had lulled Giles into a near-meditative state. He was quiescent and drowsy as Ethan pulled out and away, and before Ethan had even returned from the bathroom, Giles was asleep.

Chapter Ten

Family

He tugged the sleeves of his sweater down one more time before he opened the door and stepped out of the car. His body apparently deemed this one of those overly-athletic activities, and he hissed a breath at the sharp pains from... well, various places, the major one being somewhere he was trying not to acknowledge at the moment, just as he was hoping that his sleeves managed to stay low enough to hide the angry red marks from the handcuffs and his collar high enough to hide the dark, telltale horseshoe of pinpoint bruises at the base of his neck.

And today probably wasn't really the best day to be visiting his younger nephew and niece, really, but he hadn't seen them since the time he'd gone home to try to talk the Council into giving them information on Glory, which was nearly a year ago, and then only for a part of a day.

His sister and Robson hadn't invited him back since he'd been rehired by the Council, and he didn't think that was a coincidence, so this apparent olive branch was not something he wanted to turn down. Even if he really rather wanted to curl up in bed and mutter dark imprecations about Ethan.

Instead, though, he was walking up the stairs to the door of his sister's rowhouse in London.

He knocked on the door, and a moment later, it burst open and he found himself staggering under an armful of nine-year-old.

"Uncle Ru!"

He proudly managed not to scream in pain as Brianna's knee knocked firmly against the mantle bruise on his ribs.

"Ow," he said, instead of screaming, then covered for it with the expected, "My you're getting big."

He settled her a little less precariously in his arms and she said, "Will you play football with me?"

Inwardly, he cringed at the very notion in his condition, but what could he say, really, but, "Certainly. If there's time."

"Yes!" she said, and bounced a bit.

"Bri-ee," her older brother said, coming to the door, "Mum told you not to do that."

"Hello, Morgan," Giles said, smiling as he shifted Bri over a bit. He had to admit a certain extra fondness for the boy. Bri was wonderful, as well, of course, but she had boundless energy and

an apparently inability to sit still for more than a moment, and a deep fondness for all things sport-like. Morgan, on the other hand, was, well, bookish.

Morgan smiled for a moment, and pushed his glasses up his nose, then stepped back and held the door open.

He glanced up at the sky, then down at Giles, then nodded, and said, "Come in."

"Good show," Giles said, glad to see the children were well-conditioned to not give out invitations willy-nilly, even if it was perhaps a bit paranoid to worry about such things in broad daylight.

Better safe than sorry, of course.

He stepped into the darker front hall just as his sister, Maureen, stepped out of the kitchen.

"Rupert! Come in. I see my offspring have already attached themselves to you like the leeches they are."

"Hey!" Bri said. "I'm not a leech. I'm a remora."

"Nature programs," Maureen said, with a smile.

Giles returned the smile, trying to tell himself that pain was entirely in the eye of the beholder.

"Come on," Maureen continued, "Dinner's ready."

He followed her to the dining room, carrying Bri and trailed by Morgan, and gratefully let Bri down at the table. Bri scampered around the table, taking obvious pains to accidentally collide with her slower-moving brother along the way, and then took her seat with a clatter of barely-restrained momentum. Morgan just glared and rubbed his arm, then pointedly took his seat quietly and sedately.

"Children, really," Maureen said.

But before she could continue, a voice came from behind them, "Giles, old chap! Good to see you."

Giles turned and caught the offered hand in a firm handshake, smiling.

"Robson."

"So, still inciting discord and riots in the Council, then?"

"Ah, well, you know me," Giles said, though his smile slipped a bit at the hint of an edge in his old flatmate's inquiry.

"Right, of course. My doing, I suppose. Failed spectacularly at rehabilitating you."

A joke, but not a joke, really. Robson had been his flatmate during his last term at Oxford, the term after the London debacle. He'd been an upstanding student and promising rising Watcher, and there had been no doubt in either of their minds why the two of them had been put together.

Though the Council probably hadn't planned on them hitting it off.

"Oh, yes," Giles said, trying to pretend they were just joking, "I blame my surviving rebel spirit entirely on that time you coaxed me off to the campus pub during finals."

Robson chuckled, as they both turned to take their seats at the table. His voice stayed light as he said, "Little did I know I was creating a monster."

Fortunately, they spent the rest of the meal talking about much more neutral subjects, and then Giles took the children out to the zoo and then to a park. He kicked around a football with Bri while debating vampire lore with Morgan.

It was enjoyable. They were good kids, and he liked them. Wished he could have seen them more often. There was just one thing nagging on his mind that he didn't ask about until later, when Maureen was tucking the kids in bed, and he and Robson had settled in Robson's study.

"Where's Nora?" Robson's Potential Slayer.

"Ah, she's off for the week. Little training mission in the Alps."

Giles smile was tight as he said, "Ah, safely away from my dangerous influence, then, I see."

Robson laughed, but only for a moment, then he said, "Look, Giles, I like you, you know that. It's just your methods I disagree with."

"Right. Of course. My methods. My methods which are what, exactly? Treating the Slayer

like the human being she is? Keeping her alive? Letting her have loved ones and a life of her own?"

"Oh, well, it sounds so noble when you put it like that. But is it? Really, Rupert?"

"Of course it--"

"All I'm saying is... she's a Slayer. Her duty, her destiny, her life is all about the kill. About killing."

"Killing demons--"

"Yes, demons, but still, it's about the hunt and the slaughter. Just how human do you think one can be, and live that life? Day in, day out, every night?"

Giles had a flash of Buffy saying, 'I don't like what it's doing to me.'

"So, what are you saying?" he said, carefully, "That it's *right* to take a young girl who never asked for this life and to strip away all she is and all she could be? To forge a life into nothing but a weapon?"

"We're not in the business of being humane, Giles. You certainly used to know that."

Giles was quiet for a moment, then said, "It was what she wanted, Robson."

"But she was a child, Rupert. They don't know what they need."

"No. No, I was willing to believe that for awhile, but you weren't there. You didn't see her, before she faced the Master. She was a girl, a person, and I couldn't let her-- It wouldn't have been right. Maybe, *maybe* it would have hurt less, but it wouldn't have been right."

"A Slayer with a family, with friends, is nothing but a Slayer with a weakness. A massive weakness."

Giles stared.

"Listen to yourself, Jethro. Listen to yourself! How would you feel if, if Bri were called? If someone demanded that she give you up, your whole family, and become some automaton doomed to die?"

"That's why they don't live as long, Rupert, the ones who were called untrained. You know that."

Giles stood and walked away, fingered the spines of the books on Robson's shelves.

"You're wrong. Buffy drew her strength from her family, she fought harder for her friends. She's probably the greatest Slayer the world will ever know."

"Every Watcher--"

"She met every challenge she faced. She defeated a god."

"Did she? Or did she give up?"

Then Giles' own voice echoed in his head, 'No, she couldn't.'

He was tired by the time he got home to his flat, but he went straight to his boxes and began rooting through the Watcher's Dairies, pulling out a few volumes as he went, then he sat down on the couch and pulled the nearest he'd set aside into his lap.

It was Bernard Crowley's last Dairy, covering the six months up until his Slayer Nikki Wood's death. Wood, who was one of the few Slayers who rivaled Buffy for living the longest after being called. Wood, who was one of only two Slayers on record to have a child.

Giles opened to the first page, and the first line he saw was, "She has been melancholic, lately, and distressed. She confided to me that she feels overwhelmed. God knows she has a right to, between her boy and her Calling."

"It isn't right, a Slayer having this burden, but there is no one else to take the child, and she refuses to give him up. I don't blame her for that, either, I believe it's a strength, but still I worry. The weight of the world is a heavy enough burden for any one person to carry, regardless of strength or speed or skill. A Slayer should be free to focus her energies on that alone."

"This extra responsibility that she has to carry is a cruel twist of fate."

Giles gently closed the journal and set it aside again.

Then stood quietly, and went to the kitchen to make tea.

Crowley was wrong. Could have been wrong. He was toeing the Council line, at least. It didn't mean that all Slayers with families were under pressure, or even that Wood had been...

Although, from what he'd heard murmured half-audibly at Headquarters, Crowley was ranked right up there with he himself for unorthodoxy. Nikki Wood had been a Potential Slayer, raised by Crowley since she was thirteen. They had assumed after she turned eighteen that she wouldn't be called and Crowley had sent her off to college in New York, letting her live the rest of her life the way she wished to.

She'd been twenty-one when she had been called, the oldest any Slayer had ever been by over two years.

She had been involved with a college classmate, became pregnant two months after she was called, and the boy left her, unable to deal with her powers and her destiny. She'd refused to give the child up, in spite of the Council's vehement protests. Crowley had traveled back to England to plead her case, and there was still talk of that meeting, which had apparently ended in incredibly dramatic fireworks, the likes of which the hallowed halls of the Council had never seen before (though Giles suspected that was an exaggeration, really).

So, somehow, Wood had continued Slaying, survived pregnancy (it gave Giles a headache just contemplating what it might be like trying to protect a pregnant Slayer) and had a child.

The water boiled and he dealt with it distractedly, thinking about Buffy and Dawn and house payments and jobs. Then thinking about vampires and demons and Hellmouths and apocalypses. About how his father had simply left them for two years to Watch his Slayer. No phone calls, no letters. Any news of him they'd received had been through the Council, because even Watchers, supposedly, didn't need distractions.

What if they were right? What if it wasn't fair? What if he had been making things harder on her? How much easier could it be on her if he had simply taken that responsibility away?

Never mind the fact that doing so would have been incredibly difficult, would it have made a difference for the better?

He'd always assumed the answer was no, but in that past year, as she'd dealt with college and her mother's illness and tried to mother her sister and not lose her boyfriend, all the while fighting a *god*... how much better off would she have been without all of that on her mind? Even before she'd died, she'd been run down, she'd been so tired.

After she'd died, Dawn had told him something, that he hadn't understood before. Odd that it had taken him so long to think of it.

She'd said Buffy understood, before she died, what her vision quest had meant.

"Death is your gift."

He'd thought about that a great deal over that summer. He'd assumed, finally, that she meant her death was her gift, that she had given to save her sister and save the world.

But what if that hadn't been her meaning? What if death had been not a gift she'd given, but one she received? Rest. Heaven.

What if she meant that her life had become so hard she'd wanted out?

God, that would certainly fit with her behavior after being resurrected...

And was that his fault? He'd allowed her to overwhelm herself, left her in a position where everything was so difficult that death seemed the attractive alternative?

He forgot about his intent to avoid alcohol, and laced his tea liberally with scotch before heading back to the pile of diaries waiting for him in the living room.

Chapter Eleven

Chemistry

A few weeks later, Giles had scoured the phone book and finally found that Ethan had chosen Thomas's name as his alias. Giles had assumed it would be one of them, but he'd half-suspected Ethan would have chosen Randall simply out of impertinence. Thomas, however, was the least offensive of the lot, and thus, had been the last name Giles had checked.

Bad as it was, though, that during Ethan's last disappearing act--during which, Giles assumed, he was off wreaking relatively quiet havoc for pay--Giles had actually broken down and looked up his address, what was worse was that now, at ten-thirty on a week night, he was standing at the door to Ethan's building. Even worse than all that was when he walked inside, down the stairs, up the hall and knocked on the door of apartment five.

He could feel tingling wards nuzzle against his knuckles, and it made him tuck his hand away in his pocket as quickly as he could after knocking, though he wasn't sure whether that was a specific compulsion built into the ward, or simply his own distaste for the intimate tickle of the magic. He waited a few moments, his mind playing through various scenarios... Ethan could be out somewhere, or this may not actually be his flat at all, just some chap who happened to have the name Thomas Sutcliffe...

But then the locks rattled and the old door opened and it was definitely Ethan.

"Giles," he said, sounding surprised.

And then Giles wondered what the hell he was doing there, what had made him think this was ok. And he shook his head and started to walk back toward the the exit.

Ethan didn't say anything. Giles had expected him to argue, or cajole. He'd expected him to even run after and catch him, stop him. But he didn't.

Giles stopped at the exterior door.

He couldn't leave.

He could, actually. He didn't want to.

Every day seemed to be a long one, recently, today seemed especially so. His mind hadn't stopped chasing itself in circles since that morning. Xander and Anya were getting married today. He could have gone. He had been planning to go. But when it came time to book the plane tickets, he found he couldn't bear the thought of returning to Sunnydale. He didn't want to see Buffy in pain, or worry over Willow and her magic, or spend the day wondering if Xander was really ready

to be in a commitment like this.

No matter how often he told himself they were no longer his responsibility, he couldn't seem to believe it.

He turned and walked back up the hall. Ethan merely stepped back and let him in without a word.

The basement apartment was small, not much more than one room and a bathroom, but it was neatly kept, with fresh paint on the walls, and screens to partition off an area to serve as a bedroom, with a table boxing in the kitchen area. The most notable trait of the place was the small shrine against the back wall. Giles glanced at that briefly, then looked away.

"So," Ethan said, as he shut the door, "Why are you here?"

"Why do you think I'm here?" Giles said, looking around the apartment, still, but not at Ethan.

"You tell me," Ethan said, conversationally. Giles heard his footsteps approaching and tensed, but Ethan stopped and didn't touch him.

Why was he here? He was here because he was a fool and a weakling, that was why.

He knew why, in actuality, he was there. Putting it into words, however, was proving more difficult than he would have anticipated.

Finally, he shut his eyes and said, "Please, don't make me say it."

Then Ethan's hand cupped the back of his neck, shockingly warm after the chilled drizzle outside, and Ethan said, "That will do for now."

Giles pulled off his coat and let it fall to the floor, unheeded, and Ethan's hands were unbuttoning Giles shirt even as Giles was still turning around to face him. The shirt was gone a moment later in a rushed flurry of both of their hands, and then Giles reached for the button of his trousers.

"No," Ethan said. "Leave them for now."

Giles only reacted to this with a slight frowning of his brow, then he pulled his hands away. Ethan curled his hands around Giles' arms, just above his elbow, and walked him back across the room, to stand against the closed bathroom door. Lightly, Ethan pushed his arms up and spread them across the wall, drifting his fingers along the sensitive skin all the way out to Giles' wrists, then pulling his hands away. Giles felt a gentle force holding him in place, and sighed softly.

But then, Ethan laid one hand softly over the center of his chest, and he tensed again.

"Ethan--"

"Hush," Ethan said. "I won't hurt you."

Still, Giles tensed as the first probing tendrils of magic trickled through him.

This was too much. Going too far.

But as Ethan's magic swelled to a crest in him, and Ethan coaxed Giles' own neglected powers to the surface, it felt good, like it always had. Giles rolled his head back against the wall and took a deep breath, and felt it beginning to pull him in, pull him down. Or was it up? Didn't matter a moment later.

He didn't hear or see Ethan's reaction, but he could feel it, like an echo, feel the pleasure and the power.

He opened his eyes and the room looked different. Amazing. He could see the eddies of power moving in the air, the wards around the doors and the window, the electricity pulsing in its metal veins in the walls. It was a staggering wealth of information, too much for the human mind to process on its own, but between his magic and Ethan's it wasn't destroying him, it was lifting him out of the normal bounds of human existence.

He breathed out, and saw his breath in the air, saw the trace of life force in that breath, that would be absent from any air a vampire moved.

He turned his head to the side, slowly, and the shrine was a bright halo of magic, that his mind called red, though such distinctions truly didn't apply. He could feel everything. Molecules of air, the tremors of the rain drops hitting the windows and the walls. He could taste Ethan's scent in the air.

Could *definitely* feel as Ethan sent a frisson of power to him and his trousers fell apart at the seams and fell away along with his pants, socks, shoes, leaving him bare against the door. He pushed his feet further apart, and felt the force pull his legs against the wall as sure as gravity.

"Beautiful," Ethan purred, the vibrations of his voice sending a disrupted scurry through the energies of the air.

Giles rolled his head around to face front again, feeling lethargic and heavy.

Ethan was the most amazing thing in the room. Blazing with life, with power. Blood moving through veins, heart pulsing in his chest, lungs pulling air in and pressing it out. The electrical impulses of his nerves chasing up and down his body, hot yellow energy that concentrated in his spine and in his skull. A glow in his eyes was his soul.

As he stalked forward, he grew hotter, brighter with each step. Desire, too hot to name a color for, was amazing to see, even if it had been there when they'd done this when they were younger, even if Ethan's desire for him was plainly obvious given all they'd done...

"Oh, my Ripper," Ethan said, as he touched Giles again.

He slid his hands, palms flat, a little ways up Giles' stomach, so that they lay on either side of his sternum at the base of his ribs, then Ethan said, "You may not control your bloody adrenal glands... but I can."

And immediately Giles felt the push of magic, then the rush of adrenaline, kicking up his heart rate, sending trembles through his muscles. Ethan slid on hand around and then between Giles' lower back and the wall, tendrils of magic reaching in for a cluster of nerves there in his spine. A jolt of pure pleasure, and then Giles' cock swelled harder, enough to ache in that good, desperate way.

"Oh, god," he breathed, as Ethan moved his fingers in a small circular massage over that spot on his spine and smiled dark and dangerous.

After he pulled his hand out from behind Giles, he flicked it quickly between Giles' legs, a momentary contact with Giles' balls, a tickle of magic and a rush of desire. Giles closed his eyes and leaned his head back, groaning. His body burned as it might after hours of teasing foreplay.

Then both of Ethan's hands cupped around his skull, one on either side. Warm, strong fingers under his hair. Another push of magic, directed, Giles could only muzzily guess, towards his hypothalamus or something of that nature, and the rush only strengthened.

Giles lips felt dry and parted, and he licked at them, then turned his head to the side, ducked down, until he could nuzzle at Ethan's wrist, and could just barely reach it with the tip of his tongue, get a hint of the taste of Ethan's skin. He strained to get more, until Ethan obliged and moved one hand around, let Giles catch the tips of his fingers between his lips and suck and lick.

"Oh, yes," Ethan murmured, and even his voice felt good, vibrating against Giles' skin. Ethan rubbed Giles' chest slowly with his free hand.

"What do you want?" Ethan said.

There were a lot of answers to that question. He wanted peace of mind, he wanted Buffy to be happy, he wanted Ethan to touch his cock already, but for some reason the most pressing desire of all at that moment was...

"Kiss me."

He saw and felt the shimmer of magic as his bonds released him at the same moment Ethan slipped his arms around his back and complied with his request, kissed him deeply, his bread tickling Giles' face. Giles kissed him back, hungrier for him than he'd been in as long as he could remember clearly. He raked his hands up Ethan's back, desperate to pull that clothed, lean body against his own.

"Good, good, good," Ethan rambled, heated praise as Giles propelled them both across the room, hand still moving almost frantically over Ethan's body, reveling in the smooth planes and hard angles. Still kissing, loving the taste of Ethan's tongue and lips.

He pushed Ethan down to sit on the edge of his bed, and went to his knees, nuzzling swiftly down his body as he went. His hands fumbled, shaking too badly for skill, as he opened Ethan's trousers, but Ethan certainly didn't seem to mind.

He only hesitated a moment, once he had the hard heat of Ethan's cock in his hand. Then he leaned in and took it in his mouth, moved his tongue gently against the head. Ethan grunted and shifted, and Giles realized he wasn't entirely sure if that was a good sound or a bad sound, and now he was beginning to remember that this was actually a rather complex operation, and he was currently nearly out of his mind on hormones and having trouble remembering to keep his teeth out of the way and remembering whether or not the slit at the head of Ethan's penis was or was not too sensitive to be touched...

Fellatio was clearly *not* like riding a bicycle.

Still, Ethan buried his hand in Giles' hair, and groaned a 'yes,' so he must have been doing something right.

Besides, another thing he'd forgotten was how much he actually *liked* doing this.

He allowed Ethan to slip in a bit deeper, holding off enough to stay well away from any danger of inciting his own gag reflex, because god knew that wasn't sexy, and worked his tongue against the smooth, loose foreskin.

Swallowed and took a shaky breath through his nose, and loved Ethan's soft babble of pleasure.

Sense memory and old habits slowly coming back to him as he went, he drew it out, made it take as long as he could, pulling away whenever Ethan neared orgasm, letting him cool down and ignoring his curses, until finally Ethan said, "Dammit, Giles, get me off. Now."

Then Giles smiled and let him come.

"You bastard," Ethan said, after he'd caught his breath. There was a gruff affection in his voice. Giles sat back on his heels and smiled up at him, and then Ethan gestured and was naked. A moment later, he slid down off the bed to kneel in front of Giles, then reached down and began to stroke Giles' cock with a somehow slick hand.

Giles realized then that his ability to see the power in the room had faded a great deal during his ministrations, but Ethan still seemed to be commanding it. Giles didn't care, though, really. He just shut his eyes and enjoyed Ethan's hand on him, coaxing him back to full hardness where his erection had flagged a bit.

Then Ethan pushed him backwards down on the floor, straddled him, gripped his cock, and sank down onto him with a soft cry.

Giles whimpered and pushed up, sinking deep, so good. Ethan's hands slid up his arms, grabbed his wrists and pulled Giles' hands up over his head, pinning them to the floor at the wrists. He looked down as he began to move. Move slowly. So slowly. Undulating gently, moving only small centimeters at a time on Giles' cock. Payback, no doubt, for Giles' teasing.

Giles loved it.

His heart raced as he looked up into Ethan's eyes, kept his hips firmly down against the floor, resisting the urge to thrust, letting Ethan run this.

His gaze wandered, taking in the sheen of sweat that highlighted the geography of Ethan. The smooth hollow at the base of his throat, the lump of his Adam's apple that moved as he swallowed hard. His pecs, better developed than they had been that last time they'd seen each other in Sunnydale, still covered in a thin coat of shiny, curled hairs, which looked fascinating, catching the half-light in the flat.

Ethan's stomach, moving with his breath and with his slow rhythm. His muscles were tensed, and caught the light and threw shadows, not at all unnaturally body-builder-like, in fact, showing the signs of middle-age, but still sharply defined in that light. Fascinating and alive and male. Just like Ethan's quiescent cock, down in the shadow of their bodies. And behind that, Giles' own cock, stiff and shining with lubricant, and disappearing into Ethan's body.

Giles' breath left him in a hard rush, and he couldn't look away.

Then Ethan rocked back, hard, abruptly taking him in all the way, and he dropped his head back and they both cried out at the feeling, and after that, there seemed no more reason for restraint, and he shoved up each time Ethan dropped down. Fast and hard and good.

A few minutes later, he came, and a few moments after that, he gasped, "God. Love you."

Then Ethan dropped down beside him on the floor, and they were both quiet for awhile.

Every moment after that, a bit more of the magic ebbed away, until the world had gone back to its normal state of being, dark and dull and quiet, and the flat was once again nothing but a run-down one-room. The hormones, too, cleared from his bloodstream gradually, and as they did, something became more and more apparent.

His mind slowly worked over the feeling of something's-wrong, until it all made sense and he brought his knee up, kicked Ethan off him and lunged to his feet.

"You fucking-- You-- Dammit, Ethan. You can't--"

"Can't what?" Ethan inquired, casually propping himself up on his elbow. "Mess with your mind a bit? So sorry. Wasn't aware there were limits." He smirked and shook his head. "The tragedy of bad communication skills. Besides, all I did was tweak a few neurochemicals. Nothing all that major."

"You made me-- You-- Stay the hell away from me."

Made me think I loved you.

Giles shuddered and stalked away, remembering only at the last moment that Ethan had destroyed his trousers. Angrily, without a word, he raided Ethan's dresser for a pair of sweatpants, then threw on his own shirt and stormed towards the door.

Ethan stopped him, saying, "Rupert."

He glared over his shoulder. Ethan was leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, smirk still firmly in place, and apparently unconcerned with his nudity.

"Love you, too, dear," Ethan said.

Giles slammed the door hard enough to rattle the frame on the way out.

Chapter Twelve

Worst Case Scenario

Ethan caught the door before he could close it in his face.

"No, wait."

In the past few weeks, avoiding Ethan had been a great deal easier than it had before. He'd suspected Ethan would eventually get tired of waiting and track him down again.

"Why should I? I've told you a thousand times to stay away from me."

"This isn't about that."

"No? Strangely, I find that hard to believe."

"Don't you feel that?"

Giles frowned.

"Feel what?"

Then he noticed that Ethan looked genuinely concerned. He let go of the door.

"It's like all the birds the world have gone quiet all at once. A storm is coming. The Hellmouth. Something... Someone. Powerful. Very, very powerful." Ethan paused, then said, "And incredibly angry."

Giles froze inside. Oh, no.

"It isn't the Slayer."

"No, I didn't think it was."

"Then who?"

"No one." Willow.

He never should have left. Oh, god, he never should have left. He'd known, Tara had known, he just hadn't wanted to believe it and now...

"Well?" Ethan said, impatiently shifting about at the threshold like an uninvited vampire, "What are you going to do about it?"

Giles grabbed his coat and his address book as he called back to the door, "Nothing that concerns you."

"The continued existence of the world does, in fact, concern me," Ethan said, falling into step with Giles after he locked the door and began heading downstairs.

"No one's ending the world," Giles snapped.

"Perhaps not *yet*," Ethan said as they stepped out into the dreary grey rain.

"Go away, Ethan."

Giles unlocked his car and got in, but Ethan dashed around the hood and got into the passenger's side before he could drive away.

"No."

He had no time to argue.

"Fine. Then shut up."

Of course, that didn't last even until they reached the city limits. Ethan twitched and fidgeted for about three minutes, then finally said, "So, where are we going?"

Giles just sighed.

The rain was coming down in serious sheets by the time they reached the gates of the Devon coven. Giles wasn't entirely surprised to find a small contingent of three waiting at the gates when he pulled up. He and Ethan jumped out of the car and ran up to join the three women, one of whom immediately split from the group and held up her hand in a restraining gesture aimed in Ethan's direction.

"You. You cannot cross our threshold."

Giles glanced over at Ethan who opened his mouth, then shut it, then said, "Fine."

Giles was surprised by the lack of a fight, but shrugged it off as Ethan headed back to the car.

"He's the one who told me something was wrong," he said.

"Be that as it may, his kind is not welcome here," Marianne said, then said, "Come to the house, we need to talk."

They stopped on the covered porch, no time to worry over trivialities such as keeping the carpets dry, and the youngest girl in the group, whom Giles didn't recognize, looked up at him, and said, "I had a vision."

"Tell me," Giles said. He could feel fear, cold as the rain water trickling down his back, but what was worse was the aching, useless hope that perhaps he was wrong. He knew he wasn't.

"I-- I woke up, and I saw this girl, standing in front of me. And then... then she was just shot. Just like that... I looked down and there was blood on my shirt--"

Dear god.

"Describe her," Giles said, urgently, disregarding her distress, though later he would regret it, and Maryanne's eyes widen in surprise.

"Um, she, she was blond. Pretty? I-- I don't know how tall, I was seeing her as someone else?"

Buffy?

"What-- what was she wearing?"

"Um. Long skirt? Her hair was long and straight, past her shoulders. She, uh, she had a nice figure, not too skinny."

Then it clicked.

"Tara," he said.

The hope vanished in a small, painful implosion. So it was Willow. No doubt about that, now.

Yet another person he loved whom he had failed.

It only took him an hour to decide what he had to do.

"You think you can stop her?" Ethan shouted above the wind, incredulously, as Giles slogged back to the car.

They both got in, and the windshield fogged up immediately from the rainwater they brought with them.

"No."

"Then what the hell are you doing?"

"I don't have to fight her. Or at least, I don't have to win."

"That's the insanity talking, Giles. Take me with you. I could help."

"No!"

"Why the hell not? For god's sake Giles, she's dangerous, I felt her thousands of miles away. You can't take her on alone... at least together we'd have the advantage of numbers."

"I said no. In fact," Giles said, leaning forward and squinting through the deluge on his windshield, "If you come anywhere within a hundred miles of Sunnydale, I'll kill you."

"Dammit, Giles, someone has to do something. Together we could, we could bind her, send her to another dimension, something!"

"No one will beat her in a fight."

"Then why'd you go to the trouble of getting loaded down with magic?"

Giles didn't answer. A few miles passed in silence, then Ethan suddenly said, "You're insane."

Giles still did not reply. Instead, he pulled over and got out, deeming himself far enough away from the coven to do what he had to. He got out and Ethan did too, following him to the edge of the rain-soaked field.

"Dammit, Giles, it'll kill you."

"She's worth it," Giles said, closing his eyes and summoning the forces.

"No. Wait," Ethan said, and Giles stopped and opened his eyes. Ethan's tone had changed from angry to something quieter.

"What?"

"Let me help. I don't care what any stuck-up Wiccans say, my power is as pure as anyone's."

Ethan held up his hand. The rain poured down around them.

"Come on," he said, after Giles stood for a moment, silent and indecisive. "You need all the bloody help you can get, Giles. Do you want to save her, or not?"

His personal feelings on the matter aside, Ethan was right, though Giles wasn't entirely sure what was provoking this act of generosity. But the situation was severe, and there was no time, and he *did* need all the help he could get.

He crossed the space between them in two paces and clasped hands with Ethan and the power flashed between them, hot enough to evaporate the rain around them for a split second.

Giles gasped at the rush as Ethan's magic joined with the rest he had been loaned.

Ethan fell to one knee and curled in on himself. "Shit, that hurts."

"You'll be fine in a day or so," Giles said.

By then, it would be over. One way or another.

Chances were good he wouldn't be around to care either way.

He swept his arms up and felt the roar of teleportation, and an eye-blink later, he was standing in the warm, dry air of Sunnydale.

Part Two

Chapter One

Conversations With...

The girl was gone. Ethan had seen her leave in a cab earlier in the day, and now, as he'd suspected, Giles was pulling up to his building in Bath for what was nearly the first time all summer. He waited for a few more minutes, watching as Giles' light went on, then finally walked into the building and up the stairs and tapped on Giles' door.

Giles answered it after a moment, and didn't seem surprised to see him.

"Ethan," he said, tiredly, then stepped back to let him in.

Ethan had suspected he would at least put up a bit more of a fight than this, but he shrugged off the odd behavior and simply walked in without a comment. Giles shut the door and headed for the kitchen.

"Tea?"

Ah, Ripper. Always unpredictable at the most unexpected moments.

Ethan decided to play along and see where this show of civility might lead. He hung up his coat and accepted the offer of tea and went to sit in the living room at Giles' invitation.

Though, granted, this was all raising his internal alarms. Which was mostly all right, given that he spent most of his life intentionally getting himself into situations which provoked that reaction, and actually rather enjoyed it.

Giles stayed in the kitchen until the tea was actually finished, leaving Ethan to fester in his mild nerves, and finally emerged with two mugs and set one of them before Ethan on the coffee table before taking a seat on the other couch and saying, "What do you know?"

And then it all made sense. This was Giles in information-gathering mode, not wanting to potentially damage a source of exciting news of the bad side of the world. Unfortunately, Ethan hadn't a clue what, in particular, Giles might be referring to.

"Well," he said, "I know a great deal of things. But I somehow doubt you currently have a pressing interest in any of them."

"Ah," Giles said, and sipped his tea.

Any kind of exciting adrenal rush that may have been building fizzled out, and suddenly they were quite disconcertingly merely two middle-aged men drinking tea.

"What exactly are you looking to find out?" Ethan asked, in a rather desperate bid to drag them back to something at least resembling, well... anything but that last thing.

"Willow had to return to Sunnydale. She sensed something rising. Something powerful and

evil."

"Ah," Ethan said, "Well, contrary to whatever you may believe, I am not actually the first person in Evil's little black book, so apparently I haven't yet got the memo."

Giles gave him one of those dour looks that made him look exactly like, well, an aging librarian, and Ethan merely smiled in response, while attempting to tell himself that he most certainly did not find this milder side of his sometime lover at all enticing. He was in it for the occasional flashes of his interesting side.

Then they were both quiet for a bit, and Ethan found himself wishing for something more exciting than tea, and pondering the continuing strangeness of this peaceable, apparently sparks-free encounter. It just wasn't *right*.

So, he said, "So, I see your plan to off yourself heroically failed. Sorry about that."

"I'm sorry?" Giles said, in his would-you-like-to-please-revise-what-you-just-said? voice.

"Oh, come on, Rupert. I saw that look in your eye before you teleported to Sunnydale. You wanted to die. You wanted to go out in a blaze of glorious martyrdom."

"I did what was necessary," Giles lied, evenly.

"There were other options."

"No, there weren't. Nothing acceptable."

"Fine. Delude yourself if you like."

"Why are you here?" he asked, then, glaring at me.

"You invited me in," Ethan pointed out.

"Damn it," he said.

That man certainly knew how to make someone feel welcome.

"I was merely coming by to welcome you back to Bath," Ethan said, simply to be obnoxious.

"Then go away," Giles muttered, without even a hint of tact.

"Really, Rupert, you're usually much more civil--"

"Get the hell out of my flat." His intonation remained monotone, he didn't look up from his tea, but the threat in that simple sentence weighed more than any balled fist or glare.

Ethan abandoned his tea and left.

Apparently, that last spell had pissed Giles off more than he'd anticipated. Most likely because what Giles failed to realize was that all he'd done was mess with his hormones enough to make him feel so good he would have cheerfully confessed his love to a turnip. Still, his sensitivity on the issue was intriguing, and possibly promising, if Ethan actually cared whether or not old Ripper still had "feelings" for him...

And good lord, he was turning into a teenaged girl even as he had that thought...

But then a voice brought him up short.

"Of course you care."

He turned and found himself confronted with a very odd thing. Himself.

"This is not normal," he said, to the apparition. It smiled and sauntered a few steps closer.

"Of course you care how he feels."

"Oh, please," Ethan said to it, and turned to continue walking. Whatever illusion it was wasn't very convincing nor interesting.

"You shouldn't, of course," it added, falling into step behind him.

"Well, that's lovely, seeing as I don't," Ethan snapped. "Go away."

"There's so much more in the world, after all. Other men. Women. And power. Endless amounts of power."

"I have power. And all those other things for that matter. And I'm not really interested in your paranormal telemarketer spiel, thank you."

"I'm not selling anything. Merely... talking."

"Rupert's right. I am obnoxious."

Ethan kept walking, trying to figure out which of his enemies he'd particularly annoyed lately, Rupert not included, since this was far too creative for him.

"I think you're forgetting who you are," it said. "What you're capable of. What you're meant for."

"Oh, and what's that?"

"Great things, Ethan Rayne. Great, and terrible, and powerful."

Ethan had to stop then, not because he was intrigued, but because he just couldn't properly argue while walking.

"So very specific," he said, drolly.

His doppelganger smirked.

"You're meant for much more than moping around after some lifeless Watcher for the rest of your life."

"I do not *mope around*."

The other him merely arched his brow.

"And yet, you always seem to end up where he is." It paused, then added, "And don't try to say it's him ending up where you are, we both know that's completely untrue."

Ethan scowled, and said, "Given how often I seem to be able to end up fucking him, I wouldn't call me all that pathetic."

"You wanted more from your life, once," it continued, blithely. "What would you have thought of yourself? Selling your magic and serving idiotic demons? You are better than that."

"Where, exactly, are you going with this?"

"Nowhere, it seems," it said, and then, most annoying of all, chose that moment to simply vanish entirely.

Chapter Two

The Cheesy Catchphrase of Evil

It started out so small. First, Willow and her vision, which applied to the Hellmouth, and so, while it was cause for concern, was nothing new. Then Bernstein was mugged one night by an unknown demon with a knife, though he'd managed to fight it off, and it had been alone. Then the normal reports of attacks on Watchers and Potential Slayers had climbed quietly, subtly, but unavoidably higher.

Today, Bernstein and O'Malley hadn't shown up for work.

Now, Giles and Haight were standing in Bernstein's flat. According to police, he'd been stabbed, brutally, very nearly eviscerated. There was blood everywhere. The door of his flat had obviously been broken down, and given the mess there had been more than one assailant, and none of them had been at all concerned with subtlety.

The scene was almost identical to what they'd found at O'Malley's house.

Haight had already lost his breakfast in the bushes back there, and now looked as though he was searching his stomach for something else to expel. He was as pale as a vampire, staring at the chalk outline on the floor.

"Good lord," he said, for about the thirtieth time since they'd left that morning to go check on their coworkers. "Who would do such a thing?"

Giles attempted to make his sigh of exasperation sound more like sympathy but ended up blowing it and saying, "Demons, Haight. You know, those forces of evil of which we are the sworn enemy?"

"Oh. Right. I mean, of course, but, but... all this blood. Is it truly... well, necessary?"

"Of course it's not necessary. They simply take pleasure in their work."

"That's, that's... that's a horrible thing to say!"

"Sorry. Gallows humor," Giles said, as he stepped carefully over a particularly vivid gout of blood on the floor, eyeing the felled bookcase nearby.

Nothing seemed to be missing, since there were plenty of obscure, valuable and dangerous texts still present and still more or less in alphabetical order where they'd fallen, though hopefully Bernstein had kept an inventory so that they could check and make sure.

"We need to contact the Council," Giles said. "This wasn't random. Also, it may be wise for us to find alternative living arrangement for a time. It may not throw them off forever, but it's better

than being exactly where they think we'll be."

Haight made a small, undignified sound, "You... you think they're going to... come after us?"

"Well, as far as I know, we're no different in rank or assignment than Bernstein and O'Malley, so I'd say there's enough of a risk we should take precautions, yes."

"Good lord," Haight said, again.

"From beneath us, it devours!" The demon standing on the table crowed triumphantly, as though this phrase was at all sensical.

"What does that *mean* anyway?" Ethan heard one of the Parvo demons at the table next to his booth ask his companion.

"Dunno," the other replied, cheerily. "Catchy, though, ain't it?"

"The one, the original, the most dark and powerful of all!" said the demon on the table.

There always seemed to be a demon preaching about something in here. Usually they were promoting their own plans for the end of the world, supporting themselves with bits of out-of-context prophecy and a lot of hot air. This demon, though, had the attention of most of the patrons, in spite of his cheesy carnival crier style.

"It *will* rise again, and it *will* reclaim this Earth! And we *shall* rule again, as was always meant to be!"

The bar patrons raised their glasses and roared in assent. Ethan got the uncomfortable feeling that perhaps now was not the best time to be a human in a demon bar. Not that there was ever truly a "good" time to be a human in such a bar.

He was about to get up and leave when a lithe young woman slid into the booth and blocked his exit.

"Hey, handsome," she purred. "Leaving so soon?"

Vampires and their pick-up lines. Honestly, some of them hadn't changed their style in a century. He smiled, only a little uneasily, and said, "Sorry, love. I'm not on the menu."

"Pity," she purred. "I could make it good for you, you know."

You? Not hardly, my dear. Amateur. "I'm sure you could. But I'm afraid I'm just not interested."

She sighed and pouted, and ran her long nails lightly over his jugular, and he shivered in a way that was not at all sexual.

"Aw, come on. Don't you hear this?" she gestured with her other hand at the preaching demon. "Now just isn't the time to be mortal."

"Clever. Ranks right up there with 'the world's ending, and you wouldn't want to die a virgin.' Good show. But I'm leaving."

Of course, he wasn't leaving, as long as she blocked his exit.

She leaned in and licked from collarbone to jaw with her cold tongue, then nipped his ear and whispered, "Too bad, sweets. You'll be sorry when it rises."

Then she stalked off as swift as she'd appeared.

Ethan let out the shaky breath he'd been holding, got himself centered, and then hurried out through the night to his car. Tonight was definitely not the night to be human in a demon bar.

And he needed to talk to Giles.

Giles paused in his packing at the sound of a knock on his door. For a moment, his insides froze with horror and an all-too-vivid mental image of his own blood all over his flat like Bernstein's. But then it occurred to him that, generally, rampaging murdering demons with large, sharp objects did not actually knock first.

So he answered the door.
Unfortunately, rather than murdering demons, it was Ethan.
Who quickly raised his hands and said, "I'm here on business, I promise."
Damn. He'd have to hear him out. He leaned out the door a bit, checked the hall for demons, then gestured for Ethan to come in. He locked and bolted the door, again.
"Make it quick."
"Going somewhere?" Ethan asked, in a decidedly non-businesslike way.
"I fail to see how that's your concern."
"Fine, fine. I'm here because I've been hearing things."
"Watchers have been dying at a disturbing pace for the last week at least. I think you're going to be a bit more specific in order to tell me anything I don't already know."
"Something's got the demons all riled up. Something rising. I don't know much, but they keep saying 'from beneath you, it devours,' and talking about the greatest evil of all time returning to the Earth."
Giles reeled back a bit as though from a blow. No. It couldn't be... they'd driven that off once before--
"The First?" he asked.
Ethan nodded. "Does that mean anything to you?"
God, did it ever. If the First Evil was responsible for all of this, if it was rising... they could be in a great deal of trouble.
No, they were just plain fucked, actually.
"The First is supposedly the force that actually created evil. It was banished along with the demons millennia ago, but... if it's coming back..." Giles stopped. There were things he needed to do. Immediately. "I-- I need to go. Now."
Ethan looked concerned.
"What are you going to do?"
"Get the hell out of here, for a start. Call my sister's family. Alert the Council."
"Ah," Ethan said, and looked, for a moment, almost as if he was about to ask what *he* should do. But then he just said, "Have fun with that," and left.
At least he was out of the way.

Chapter Three

Into The Breach

His sister had said that she and the children were safely tucked away in a hotel room. Robson and Nora had stayed behind just long enough to get the rest of their things together and close up the house. But by the time he reached London and called them again, Robson and Nora were still gone.

The slightly ajar front door was more damning evidence than a pool of blood, and Giles felt, for a moment, just tired. He felt as though he had a quota of bloody bodies and that he'd reached it already that morning. But there was nothing to do but climb the steps and push the door open and call, "Robson?"

He found them in Robson's office. First Nora, clearly dead, and then Robson. He knelt, his mind racing with denial, with shock, with the horrible questions of what would he tell Maureen, of how Bri and Morgan were going to grow up without their father.

"God, not you too," he whispered. So many dead. So many, so quickly.

Then Robson gasped and grabbed his arm, and said, "It's started. Gather them."

"I know. I under--" and then, mid-word, he heard a small sound, and something--instinct, panic, paranoia--made him turn, and suddenly the hilt of an ax hit his hand with bruising force, and he grabbed it, yanked it from his unsuspecting foe's hands and swung it, and his mind finally caught up to his body's conditioned reaction about the time the Bringer's head hit the floor instead of his own.

More blood.

He was shaking all over as he sank to his knees beside his brother-in-law again. Robson's eyes were open and staring, and Giles' heart sank. He passed his hand gently over Robson's eyes, shutting them, and then sat back on his heels.

He should go. There would be more of them, no doubt, and they'd be happy to add another Watcher to their list. This numbness he was feeling would only get him killed. But it was hard to shake, as the implications began to sink in. This was happening. What they'd feared for so long, an attack on the Watchers and the Slayer line. What was worse was it was already in motion, and they'd never seen it coming. The First had caught them all off-guard, and it would take Giles days if not weeks to convince the Council of the true nature of the threat and get them to do what was necessary. He'd have to start working alone, but even that would take far too long.

It was paralyzing. There were hundreds of Potential Slayers around the world, and that was when one only counted those who had been recognized and had been assigned Watchers. There were no doubt many, many more who were hidden, and he had no way of knowing whether the First would be more adept at finding them than he was.

He shut his eyes and bowed his head, taking a moment of silence, then he squeezed Robson's shoulder and said, "I'm so sorry, old chap. I'll keep an eye on them for you."

He stood, stiffly, feeling every ache in his bones, feeling old. Even the old, healed breaks in his fingers seemed to throb as he picked up Robson's desk phone and called for an ambulance, then he slipped out before they could arrive, leaving them to make their own assumptions about the dead Bringer. It wasn't ideal, but it was all he could do on short notice.

He had a feeling he would be settling for things not ideal for quite a long time to come.

"You know," Ethan said, "Seeing as you're trying to avoid a force of darkness who wants to kill you, you may want to look into setting up some wards to prevent a simple locator spell from finding you."

He leaned against the doorframe of Giles' hotel room in London and prepared to smile in the face of Giles' glower.

But the glare never came. Giles just looked tired.

"Come in," he said.

Ethan followed him in and found maps and books spread out over one of the beds, with places marked in red.

"What's all this?"

Giles didn't answer, but he turned to him, and said, "I need your help. If you're willing to give it."

Things must have been as bad as they seemed, then, if Giles was asking him for help.

"Tell me what's going on, first," Ethan said. That was why he was there, after all. He had a bad feeling about this one.

Giles sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, pulled his glasses off and rubbed his forehead, then looked up. Ethan noticed for the first time how red his eyes were.

"From what I know, I can conjecture that the First is trying to rise. And to facilitate that, it's trying to destroy the entire Slayer line, as well as the Watcher's Council. And it has, unfortunately, already begun making impressive strides towards accomplishing that."

"Ah. And why, exactly, should I help you save the Watcher's Council?"

"This isn't about the Watcher's Council, Ethan. This is about the world. We protect the world. The Slayer protects the world. Without us, without her, the world is all but defenseless. Evil can come in and... god know what it will do."

Ethan sat down on the other bed, visions of apocalypses dancing in his head. "Hell on earth, then?"

Giles nodded. "And torture and death for every human left alive after the war."

"Not really a pleasant thought," Ethan said, "I can see why I may want to prevent that."

"You're seeing reason? I'll have to mark this occasion in my day planner."

"Nice to see your sense of sarcasm is still firmly in place."

Although, actually, Giles was not up to his usual razor-edged-wit standards.

"What happened today?" Ethan asked.

"Nothing you need concern yourself with," Giles said, standing, and slipping his glasses back on. "So, will you help me, or not?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Find a girl, and bring her back to me, alive."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Yes, well, the eyeless men with knives may present a slight complication."

Ethan raised his brow.

Chapter Four

Duality

As it turned out, the eyeless men with knives did, in fact, prove to be a problem, though, fortunately or unfortunately, the problem was over and done with by the time Ethan arrived. As he let himself into his hotel room after leaving the house, the smell of blood and viscera still seemed to coat his nostrils. They hadn't just been dead, they'd been torn apart. It seemed to be a message, though whether that message was aimed at Ethan himself, or at Giles, or at the Watchers or the world as a whole, Ethan wasn't sure.

In any case, he had to admit to being a bit shaken. He lay down on the bed, and stared up at the ceiling, still seeing swirls of hot red.

"So, you failed, then."

He sat up, and found himself facing his doppelganger again, sitting on the bed beside his.

"Ah. The First Evil, I presume?" Ethan said. "Should I be honored?"

"That depends," it said, "On whose side you plan to be on."

"Never been one for picking sides, really," Ethan said, blithely, though his heart was beginning to pound. He glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see tall shadowy figures outside the window. All he saw was darkness.

"That was before. Things are different now. There are two sides, there is no grey. You're with me, or you're against me."

"Honestly, I can't see the benefit for me if I were, in fact, with you. Given that you represent pure evil and no doubt plan to maim, torture, and kill every human on the planet."

It smiled.

"You've been listening to Rupert too much, my dear. You see, if you join with me, I wouldn't dream of harming you. Quite the contrary. I would give you power beyond your wildest imaginings. You could rule at my side."

It stood then, and walked around Ethan's bed to the window, apparently looking out into the night.

"On the other hand, if you are against me..."

It turned abruptly and spread its arms, and it was no longer his duplicate. It was him, but it was rent open from stomach to throat, purplish guts hanging out in ropes, red, thick heart throbbing

under white ribs.

"Gods!" Ethan scrambled backwards off the bed, scrambled to his feet, felt the other bed pressed against his calves, his own heart echoing that horrible pulse.

"My boys can make it take days," it said, dead eyes glittering.

It walked closer, wading straight through the bed between them until it was mere inches away from him. Ethan couldn't move, all he could feel was the steady throb of panic.

"So you see," it said, voice low and intimate, pink lungs moving with the words, "it's really hardly a choice at all."

Then it was gone, leaving him alone, panting, in a plain hotel room. His knees were shaking, so he let himself collapse onto the bed behind him, sitting and feeling the world spin around him.

Chapter Five

Onwards

Giles hadn't bothered to turn the lights on. He liked the dark better. It was soothing, something like numbness. Something like the way the scotch burned on his tongue, warmed his throat, and made his mind hazy. Made the edges of the hard world seem soft as artistic photography.

The Council was gone. A heap of rubble and smoke stood in its place, and in that rubble, the bodies of most of the men he had worked with and worked for. And his father. Just a year from retiring, and now this.

The files Giles had snuck out of the place the day before lay on top of the dark television, and he eyed them. They were just a small handful of papers, a stack not more than an inch and a half high. That was all that was left of the Council's massive central library. Centuries of knowledge lost. Prophecies and histories and biographies and texts on weapons and strategy and magic, all lost forever, all nothing but a fine, soft ash that had settled for blocks around the building.

He rubbed his hand over his eyes, which burned, but seemed dried up. No tears. His mother was with his sister, now. Two grieving widows. He should have been with them, but he couldn't be. He felt safer not knowing where they were. They weren't Watchers, so they would be safe, so long as he didn't lead the monsters to them.

Then the door rattled and the lock clicked. Giles didn't even bother to reach for a weapon. At that moment, he felt like even standing up would be a challenge. If the Bringers had a damn keycard they could bloody well kill him.

But it wasn't Bringers, it was Ethan.

Ethan, who was, apparently alone.

So he hadn't brought back the girl then.

"Maggie?" Giles asked.

Ethan shook his head.

"She was dead when I got there."

Of course.

Giles took another drink of scotch and stared at the files again.

"They blew up the Council," he said.

"What?"

"The Bringers. They blew up the Council. It's gone."

Silence from Ethan's direction, and then, "Oh. Dear. That's... well, that's not... good."

"No, really not," Giles said, then finished off the scotch and dropped backwards onto the bed. Tired didn't even begin to sum up how he was feeling. 'Drained completely' came closer, but still didn't capture it.

"So... what next?" Ethan said. "I mean, what do we do next?"

That was always the question, wasn't it? And it was always directed at him. As though he knew any better than anyone what was going on.

Well. Perhaps he did, in fact, know better than most what was going on. But still, he knew very little. And a lot of good he was doing. It wasn't as if he'd been able to save... anyone at all yet. He only ever found puddles of blood and dead girls who had been insufficiently guarded by dead friends.

"We have to do *something*," Ethan said.

Ironic, that it was Ethan encouraging Giles to do his duty. But these were ironic times, Giles supposed.

"Yes," he said. "Something."

They were both silent for a bit. Giles stared at the ceiling, watching patterns and constellations form in the rough, textured paint, lit by only a hint of light from outside, creeping around the curtains.

Eventually, Ethan said, "The lights are off."

"Yes," Giles said, with less sarcasm than the statement of the obvious warranted, but he couldn't seem to find the energy to be scathing.

"Why are the lights off?"

"It's peaceful," Giles said.

"Ah," Ethan said. "Ok, then."

Then Ethan granted him a few more precious moments of silence before he said, "So, what do we do now?"

Giles sighed, gave up on wallowing in the dark, and sat up, then carefully stood, only wobbling slightly as he did so. He went over to the desk and turned on the small lamp there. He cringed at the light, and groped blindly for his maps.

"There's another Potential in Glasgow," he said. "And one in Bristol. Take your pick."

Too easy. Too easy for Ethan to walk up to the door of this small house in Glasgow, and have this terrified Watcher hand over a defenseless girl. It was ridiculous. The address was written out on a scrap of paper in his hand, in the handwriting of one of the most white-hatted white hats Ethan knew. It was disappointing, almost. Giles hadn't even thought to doubt him.

Why hadn't he? Hadn't they tried to kill each other often enough to warrant some distrust? Hadn't Giles himself pointed out Ethan's desire for power often enough himself that he should have thought that maybe...

Ethan shook his head, and stopped thinking about Giles.

"So, where's the car, again?" the girl said.

"Not far," Ethan said.

Gullible girl. Though that wasn't as odd as gullible Giles.

"Ok. 'Cause, this whole warehouse thing is kinda creepy, you know? I'm, like, expecting, like, an ambush or something."

My, my, Ethan thought, *Whatever would make you think that?*

Maybe the fact that this was the spot-on perfect cliched setting for an ambush... Honestly, if this was a normal sort of plot for this First Evil thing, then perhaps it was strongly overrated. After all, Ethan himself had some prior experience with working dirty deeds himself, and this ambush-in-an-alley setup was downright trite and completely lacking in any sort of elegance. Very much not

Ethan's style.

"Kind of exciting, though," she was rambling, "Like a spy movie! And you've even got that whole, you know, dashing mysterious stranger in a trench coat thing going."

"Dashing, eh?" Ethan said.

"Oh, yeah. Well, you know, in a old-guy sort of way."

"Thanks ever so, my dear," Ethan said.

Old guy?

They reached the alley and he stared to turn down it. "This way. Nearly there."

She balked.

"*That way?* I dunno. That's... that's all creepy and dark and stuff. Are you sure about this?"

"It's perfectly safe," he lied.

"I dunno," she said again, looking deeply dubious. "Isn't there some other way?"

"It's much longer. I thought your feet were tired," he said.

She looked very young and small, there, standing at the mouth of that alley, all wide eyes and small white teeth nibbling at her lower lip in a gesture that made him think of grammar school children. He didn't speak for a moment, and felt another rush of distaste, and had a flash of memory of the first Potential he'd been sent to retrieve, the one he'd found torn apart. She'd hardly been human anymore, she'd been an object by the time he found her, nothing but meat and bone and blood.

This girl was moving, blinking, something entirely else than just the flesh that she was made of. She was something animate, and alive, and somehow more than the sum of her parts.

Then she took a few steps into the alley, then a few more, growing more confident with each. He didn't move, couldn't move, as she approached him and reached his side, and stopped there. She laughed nervously and said, "Sorry, I'm acting like a little kid afraid of the dark. Silly."

Of course she wasn't silly. She was exactly right, and her instincts were impressive. And now, right on schedule, dark cloaked figures were stirring themselves from the shadows. Three of them, one at the mouth of the alley, the other two from the far end. Ethan saw them first, but she saw them a moment later.

She grabbed his sleeve and said, "Or maybe not silly. Are those--"

Bringers, yes.

Scarce light flashed on a wicked curved blade.

"What d'we do, Ethan?" she asked, hanging close to him, a warm presence against his side.

Nothing, he thought, *we do nothing. I do nothing. Then you die, and I don't. That's the deal.*

The deal hadn't sounded so bad in theory. It had sounded bad, of course, but it had sounded doable. Now, though...

"Damn it," he muttered, as his damned conscious roared at him, then he strode forward and threw his arms open and yelled, "Offenso!"

The power felt as though he'd yanked it out by the roots. It spread in sharp concentric circles, and it knocked the Bringers back. They only had a few moments, but it was enough for him to grab her hand and enough for them to run.

It wasn't long, though, before he heard footsteps behind them.

"They're chasing us!" she yelled, breathless and obvious.

"Yes, I know," he snapped, "Run faster."

"What if they--"

"Hush!"

They just ran. The footsteps getting closer. Closer. He waited, giving his magic as much time as possible to regenerate and then, as he felt a hand swipe between them, and the girl shrieked, he shouted, "Occultare!"

He hauled them both over against the rough brick wall, and the three Bringers ran right past.

"Whoa," she whispered. "How'd you--"

"No time," he hissed. The ache of using too much energy at once building in his chest.

"Come on."

He pulled her back the way they came, then through a different alleyway to his car.

All the while, one thought kept buzzing through his mind. He'd just betrayed the original

Evil.

He was going to die.

Chapter Six

Too Much

"I'm not angry. I'm disappointed," it said, lurking, as it seemed wont to, in the shadows. "But not surprised. You're human."

Ethan had slipped out as soon as he could, the girl's enthusiastic retelling of his supposedly heroic efforts to rescue him had been giving him a headache. And the impressed and surprised look Giles had shot him, over the girl's shoulder, had simply been annoying. As though Ethan were five, and looking for praise. Ridiculous.

He leaned against the alley wall outside of the hotel.

"Yes. Human. So sorry," he said, drolly, to the apparition.

"Well, I'm sure we can do something about that in time. For now, perhaps we should start small. I should have known better than to expect you to simply stand by for all that. I know how messy it can be. How about next time, you just give the address to me? It'll all be said and done by the time you arrive. No harm, no foul."

Ethan didn't say anything. He waited until it had vanished, then headed back inside.

Ethan's next mission was a long one, all the way to a small town in China. He didn't give the address to the First. He did, however, hint that he would be willing to hand her over, at some point, which was enough to keep it off his back.

As it turned out, it was all a moot point, however, since the First's minions had already gotten to the girl by the time he arrived.

Jet-lagged and tired, he settled into a hotel room. He'd never been a big fan of blood. It was chaos and disorder that he was fond of. He'd never aimed for death or even pain. He liked to shake things up, to remind people they were alive.

He'd never wanted to see this much death.

Giles made it back to London before Ethan, apparently, since the hotel room they had

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booked together was empty when he arrived. This was slightly odd, but not too much. Getting in and out of China would undoubtedly prove complicated, although he trusted Ethan to be up to it. That kind of wheeling and dealing had always been one of the man's fortes.

So, he settled in to wait, and decided, idly, to watch the news as he did.

Which turned out to not be the best idea.

The first thing he saw was bright orange flames, glowing against the dark of night, and a news announcer saying, "There are no reports of survivors, and the compound appears to have been brunt completely to the ground. Again, we're reporting live from Nairobi, where an apparent terrorist attack has completely destroyed the compound of a UK-based organization called the Council of Watchers. There was another attack on the CoW in London--"

Giles missed the rest of whatever he said.

He stared at the flames long after the show had switched over to commercials, and then back to a different report.

The African compound of the Watcher's Council. His older brother and his family were there. He'd just talked to Edwin last week. They'd argued about whether or not the Potentials would be safer with Buffy all in one group, or spread around the world. They'd hung up in a useless rage, with nothing agreed upon. And now... now there were no survivors. His brother, and his two nephews, and his sister-in-law...

He wondered if it were truly possible to get used to this. At that moment, all he could feel was nothingness. Numb. Reeling.

It didn't seem like it could possibly be real. A part of his mind simply shut down and refused to believe it.

He stood and went to the small honor bar, and selected a bottle of Jack Daniels. Not his drink of choice, but it would do. He set it atop the fridge and walked over to the sink. His own reflection in the mirror looked haggard and strange. He ran the water and splashed a bit on his face, dried off with a towel that seemed to match his pale skin.

The world had threatened to end before. Now it simply seemed to be doing it. Ending. Inevitable.

He walked back and picked up the bottle, sat at the table. These everyday things seemed strange, somehow. As though he were merely watching himself from far away.

Then Ethan's voice spoke.

"Dead. The lot of them. They'll all be dead soon enough," he said.

Only, it wasn't Ethan, of course, because Ethan had never come in. Giles didn't bother to look at it. He shut his eyes.

"Dead, just like me," it said.

Chapter Seven

Relief

Ethan had been trapped in China for nearly a week before he decided the power drain of teleportation was better than wrangling with the customs officials another day. The First had offered to give him the power to teleport out, but making deals with it at this point seemed unwise, and allowing it free reign to fill him with its own power seemed even more of a bad idea.

So, he'd teleported with his own power, which of course meant that he landed in an alley somewhere in the middle of London, and now he had a hell of a headache, a nosebleed, and was staggering around like a drunk, or possibly a diabetic having an attack of low blood sugar. In any case, he was glad he had not encountered any police between his alley and the hotel.

The strange look that the desk clerk gave him, he could handle.

He was used to getting odd looks from desk clerks.

Once he reached the room, he found it dark and quiet. Rupert was on the bed furthest from the door, fully clothed on top of the covers, but curled up with his back to the door and apparently asleep, lit only by the flicker of the TV that murmured quietly, urgently, about things the reporters desperately wanted you to care about.

Ethan switched the TV off, and frowned at the collection of liquor bottles gathered on top of the minibar. It was not comforting to know that all that stood between the world and the invading forces of evil was a passed-out drunk. Although, given that he still hadn't entirely made up his mind which side of this nonsense he intended to be on, perhaps this was a good thing.

He sat down on the bed beside Giles' and toed off his shoes, watching the other man breathe.

A year ago, he would have scoffed if someone suggested he would be here, now. The thought that he could be sitting peaceably with Ripper, halfway to fighting evil by his side, would have seemed ludicrous.

It would have seemed too good to be true if he were being honest, and sitting here in the dark, alone but for his sleeping companion, there seemed no reason to be dishonest. He'd missed Ripper. Ever since the man had left, more than twenty damn years ago, there had been a part of him that had never quite felt whole again. In his cynical moments, he liked to blame that on some of the more intense magics they'd worked together, but it was much less supernatural than that. He'd lost his best friend. In truth, he'd lost nearly his only friend, when Ripper became Giles again and left

Ethan behind, like a child abandons his toys for other things, for grownup things.

And yet, here they were. Together again, in a very different way, but together. No longer Ethan and Ripper, now Ethan and Giles. He was useful to Giles, at the moment, anyway. Whether there was anything more to it, he wasn't at all sure. He didn't want it to matter, it seemed a weakness, caring.

Especially since a part of him, a less optimistic part, knew perfectly well that Giles didn't care. This was business, nothing more.

The First was right. Ethan was a pathetic fool. He was no better than a teenaged girl with a crush, hanging about the one he idolized. His animus, his ideal mate. But all he was to Giles was his shadow, his dark half. Perhaps, as Giles had often said, Ethan was merely a narcissist, in love with the reflection of himself he occasionally glimpsed in the old violence in Ripper's eyes.

But could that really explain why his heart beat faster just watching the man sleep? Or why, sometimes, he missed their younger days with a pang as sharp as a stitch in his side?

When they'd been young, they'd bandied about words like 'forever.' For Ethan, it had been the simple faith of youthful naivety. He hadn't seen beyond the next day, much less on to eternity. He'd never expected anything in the world to change. For Ripper, Ethan understood now, it had been semantics, it had been what one said to one's lovers. Once, Ethan had once found a spell that would bind them together and link their souls and their minds. Ripper had looked at him as though he were nuts and had laughed. Ripper hadn't meant to be cruel, Ethan knew, even at the time, he'd just never expected it to last.

Ironic now, to remember that Ethan had always believed that he himself was the worldly one.

Suddenly, he decided that he'd had quite enough quiet alone time to think.

"Giles," he said, raising his voice, but not moving from the bed.

Giles didn't respond, so he said his name again, louder.

This time, Giles shifted and mumbled.

"Get up, you lazy git," Ethan said, "We need to eat something, other than alcoholic beverages. And you owe me dinner."

"Piss off," Giles grumbled.

Nasty bastard. Ethan frowned, and wondered why, exactly, he actually did put up with this man. "Seeing as I'm paying for half of this room, no."

"You're not Ethan. Shut up."

Not--?

"I certainly am, and I'll shut up when and if I happen to feel like it."

Giles rolled over with apparent great effort and glared at him blearily. "You bloody well *killed* Ethan, and you have no right to, to--" Then he seemed to run out of energy, curled back up and muttered, again, "piss off."

Ah. It all made sense. Which was nice. Ethan liked it when things made sense. So much easier than the alternative. "Ah. So you've been talking to the Big Bad, too, then? I'm not it, actually." He kicked Giles' bed to prove his corporeality. "It said it killed me?"

That was quite possibly a very bad omen for his continued existence.

This time Giles rolled over quickly, and stared at him.

"You're alive?"

"For the moment," Ethan said, wondering how long that was going to last.

"But how-- I saw it. As you."

"So have I. What's your point?"

Giles sat up, slowly, still looking at him oddly. "I didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"The First... it can only take on the appearance of those who have died."

"Ah," Ethan said, as his mind flashed off briefly in shock. So, then, he really had-- Well, he'd suspected, but it was unsettling to have confirmation. He heard the hiss of Giles' jeans sliding across the hotel comforter, and the creak as Giles stood, but he didn't pay attention until he snapped

out of his brief reverie and realized Giles was just standing, silently, in front of him.

Ethan looked up, intending to question him, but the odd, indecipherable look on Giles' face stopped him, and for a moment, they regarded each other wordlessly.

Then Giles lifted his hand and reached out, stopping about three inches from Ethan's cheek. For some reason, Ethan found he couldn't breathe as he waited the seemingly endless interval of time before Giles finally completed that gesture and cupped his hand lightly around Ethan's cheek.

Then Ethan let his breath out in a soft gust and found he still couldn't quite move as Giles' thumb swept gently across his cheekbone. The oddness of this struck him before the tenderness. Both mixed together and clenched his gut in a sensation both pleasurable and uncomfortable and he reached up, not quite sure what he was doing. His fingers ended up loosely looped around Giles' wrist and then stayed there, as he was torn by indecision over what he wanted to do with them. Hold him closer? Pull him away? Ethan honestly had no idea.

"I thought--" Giles said, and his voice was rough and broken. Then, with surprising grace, he folded down to his knees between Ethan's, his hand still pressed to Ethan's cheek. His hand slipped away, his arms resting now on Ethan's thighs. "It's destroying everything, Ethan."

Ethan was still trying to work out the significance of that statement as it might apply to him, when Giles turned his head and nuzzled his lips against the inseam of Ethan's jeans, at the knee. All thoughts of anything but that left on a rush of breath and Giles steadily worked inwards.

"Fuck," Ethan said, as Giles' lips outlined his hardening cock.

They hadn't touched each other since that last time, with the spell.

"Giles--"

Then Giles surged up, gripped his hair with both hands and hauled him down. Kissed him like a mountain lion mauling unsuspecting prey. Hard, painful pleasure that shocked Ethan's nervous system as strongly as the realization that he had died. But in a much, much better way. Though in some ways, no less unsettling.

It would have been better, no doubt, for them to both end up on the bed, but one of them overbalanced somewhere, and instead, they tumbled to the floor. If he'd hurt Giles in the fall, Giles certainly didn't show it. It didn't matter anyway, they were clawing at each other, kissing like they were trying to kill each other. Nothing mattered but the hot wet of Giles' mouth, the heavy, solid body beneath him.

Nothing mattered but the way Giles gasped Ethan's name when the kiss broke, and then they stared at each other, wide eyed and panting and this was the moment when Giles would curse and hit him and pretend it never happened.

But Ethan kept waiting and it didn't happen. Their breathing slowed and Giles' eyes went from wild to calm. Ethan's heart was hammering again. Something hurt, something not physical. He waited.

Giles hands moved. They began wandering up and down Ethan's back. Slow and calm as that quiet look in Giles' eyes. Gentle.

Ethan couldn't bring himself to ask what this was.

Then both hands were in his hair again, pulling his head down into a kiss far less violent. Light touches of lips along his own, gentle grip holding him in place, stopping him when he tried to deepen it, turning his face to the side just enough to let Giles' lips trace along the trimmed line of his goatee, tongue flicking out for just a moment to define a line.

It's sex, said a familiar voice in the back of Ethan's mind. *Relax and enjoy it.*

He tried to obey it. That voice had rarely steered him wrong, after all.

But sex, all of his proclivities aside, was not usually this painful.

He pulled away and sat up beside Giles. Giles blinked at him and his hand, as though a magnet to metal, found its way to Ethan's knee and rested there as though it belonged. To Ethan's discomfort, after a moment, Giles' fingers twitched in a small caress. This wasn't their usual style. Ethan liked their usual style. Rough and fast, or at least drugged and silly. This all seemed... unsettling.

* * *

It had been a long while since Giles had seen Ethan look genuinely unsettled. Long enough that seeing that look on him now made him look incredibly young, simply because the last time he'd seen the look, Ethan *had* been incredibly young.

And he wasn't dead. Giles was still marveling over Ethan not being dead. How the First had pulled that off was something he was obviously going to have to look into, but at the moment, all he wanted was to keep touching Ethan. With all the people he'd lost today, this year, he'd never expected to get one back. Still, he wouldn't have expected to feel like this. Grateful and relieved. Ethan had never looked quite so good.

And he was alive, which was what Giles kept coming back to.

He wanted to kiss him again. He wanted to feel those warm, familiar lips under his own, feel Ethan's clever tongue in his mouth and his long fingers on his back. That wasn't going to happen, though, as long as Ethan continued to hang back and look at him as though he'd finally completely lost his mind.

"I thought I'd lost you," he said, finally.

Ethan shifted a bit, notable, just enough for Giles' hand to lose contact with his knee, and he said, "Generally, I would have thought your reaction to that would be 'good riddance.'"

"You would have been wrong," Giles said. "I would have been wrong."

Ethan's brow tensed, but he said nothing. Giles let his hand down to the carpet beside Ethan's knee, not touching him. After a moment, he spoke again.

"When did you die?"

Ethan looked away as he said, "The Initiative, I suppose. I remember waking up at some point to someone saying they had a heartbeat. Very medical-drama."

Giles felt suddenly cold. He'd always, always assumed Ethan had escaped, most likely before he even hit the Nevada border. That had been the only reason he hadn't gone looking for him, after realizing what they'd done to Oz. No one human deserved their depravities.

His throat was dry as he said, "My god. I never thought--"

Ethan's face was now twisted in a familiar sneer. "Oh, relax. I was only at their tender mercies for three days. Managed to slip away when they were transferring me to somewhere in Texas."

Three days? Three days and he'd bloody well *died* at their hands? Giles sat up, an old anger stirred up again, that had been somewhere inside him ever since they'd rescued Oz... or possibly even since he'd seen what they'd done to Spike.

"What the hell did they--"

"Do you really care, Giles? You obviously didn't at the time."

He hadn't. But then, he hadn't known. He'd foolishly assumed that they'd make a distinction between human prisoners and demons. He should have known better.

"I didn't know," he said. "If I had--"

"You what? Would have mounted a dramatic rescue? Don't make me laugh, Giles. I know you. You would have called it justice and done nothing."

"That's not fair." Though it was, possibly, true.

Ethan stood and paced to the other end of the room, standing near the sinks outside the bathroom.

Giles stood and walked halfway to him, then stopped. Ethan, with his back turned, watched him in the mirror.

"I'm glad you're alive, Ethan," Giles said, because it seemed the only thing that could fix this was honesty. "And I'm grateful that you're here."

Ethan turned back towards him.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Just that."

Ethan was silent for a moment, standing in three-quarters profile against the mirror, his eyes

distant, and pinched slightly. He looked good, although maybe that was still a result of lingering relief that he was alive, clouding Giles' judgment.

Finally, he said, "You still owe me dinner, you know."

And the ice, for the moment at least, seemed to be broken.

Chapter Eight

Touch

They'd been separated for a few weeks, Giles in Sunnydale, and Ethan finally managing to successfully snag another Potential from the shadow of doom. In the nick of time, too. Hadn't been able to save her Watcher, though, but she was alive, and he was actually rather proud of himself. He'd seen her off to Sunnydale, since they figured Bringers would never manage to make it onto a plane, and Giles had picked her up unharmed at the other end.

The first Potential he'd saved, though, had apparently already died, just a short while after arriving in Sunnydale.

However, he and Giles had mutually, silently seemed to have agreed not to discuss such things tonight, and so, as they sat across from each other at a small hotel table finishing off a room service meal, they were instead discussing... sex.

"Actually," Ethan said, "the best sex I ever had was not with you."

Giles sipped his water bottle. He looked skeptical which, for some reason, kind of turned Ethan on.

"Oh no?" Giles said.

"No. In fact, it was with a Decepted demon."

Giles choked on his water. "*What?* That's... that's practically bestiality."

Ethan smiled placidly. "Not at all, actually. It's only bestiality if any of the participants aren't sentient and able to consent."

Giles reached for a napkin as he said, "Oh, well, thank you for making me aware of that lexical quirk. It's still just... disturbing."

"Don't knock it 'til you've tried it, mate. Their tentacles are incredibly mobile and strong and... flexible..."

Ethan trailed off, momentarily lost in the memory. Oh, yes. That had been a good night.

Giles, meanwhile, was trying to kill his buzz. "Well, yes, that would be because they're designed to be inserted in your ears and nostrils, punch through your skull and secrete chemicals which digest your brain to facilitate the Decepted then sucking it out of your head."

"Actually, they were hunted to near extinction during the industrial revolution and now they mostly suck cow's brains these days, to keep a low profile. It's considered extremely taboo to suck a human's."

"Ah. Nice to know you got to know each other, first."

"Well, it was hardly idle chatter. Whether your partner is going to literally suck your brains out is rather a vital thing to know before engaging in sexual relations."

There was a silence then. Ethan continued to smile, watching Giles toy with his crumpled napkin and look perturbed. He was... cute, for lack of a better word. Especially when, after obviously struggling to let the subject die, he finally gave in and said, "Do Dectpeds even *have* genders?"

Happy to continue the conversation, both to see Giles squirm, and because it was continuing to remind him of the soft, tongue-like tentacle tips, Ethan said, "Three of them, actually. Mine was an egg-layer."

"Ah."

Giles went back to willing the subject away. Ethan waited.

Sure enough, a moment later: "How the hell does one get a Dectped off, anyway?"

"I knew you were going to ask that."

Giles tossed the napkin at him. "Oh, shut up. I'm bored."

Ethan leaned back and resettled his trousers into a slightly more comfortable arrangement.

"Well, if you really want to know..."

"As if I could stop you now?"

"Most likely not."

Giles looked on in horrified fascination.

"Well," Ethan began, leaning in, resting his elbows on that table, "First of all, the tips of their tentacles are incredibly sensitive. And they just love to have them touched, or better yet, to have them inside you. Anywhere. Inside you."

The "horrified" part of the fascination was beginning to wane slightly.

"They love to have them licked, though, more than anything. I think you'd enjoy it, actually. They're into intense physical contact, as well. Gripping you, holding you close. It feels amazing, like being held all over, all warmth and skin... It's like being fucked by five people at once... she was fucking me, stroking me, letting me suck her... all at once. Touching me all over with those tentacles, damp and warm and slick as a human tongue. God, she was amazing..."

He was aching hard by that point, and Giles was holding perfectly still, his eyes growing dark, his hand frozen, holding his water bottle partway off of the table. Only now, when Ethan paused for breath, their gazes locked, did Giles slowly set the bottle down and rest his hand on the edge of the table.

"Then," Ethan said, smiling slow and dark, "She let me fuck her."

Knowing he had Giles then, by the catch in his breath. Ethan edged just a bit closer, dropped his voice lower.

"You see, the human penis is very similar to the Dectped ovipositor, except that relatively speaking, we humans are quite well-endowed. Some more than others, of course. I had to go slow. It was killing me, the state I was in, with her still fucking me, still clutching me with all those limbs, holding me like she'd die if she let go..."

"She was shivering, but begging me not to stop. I have never in my life fucked someone so tight. Felt like at any moment she might just break, but I knew she was stronger than that. Stronger than I could even imagine, gripped around me so hard I was seeing stars.

"And they don't mate that often, you know, with those three genders, it's ever so complicated, and she wanted this to last. Made me hang on as long as I could. Longer. She wrapped one tentacle around my cock and wouldn't let me come. I fucked her for hours. Gods, when she finally let me to come, I swear I nearly passed out. I've never felt like that, not before, not since. Probably never again."

Then he stopped, and the silence fell around them as abruptly as a dropped stone, and for a moment, they simply stared at each other.

Then Giles grated, "Only one way to find out," and they both lunged away from the table fast enough to nearly knock over their chairs and then hit the bed in a squeal of springs, Giles

driving down on top of him, hands already fumbling at his shirt, working the buttons with desperate speed that only slowed things down. Ethan gripped Giles hair, didn't let him break their frantic, deep kiss. God, Giles was hot already, thrusting against Ethan with heated desperation--

"Just rip it already," Ethan snapped, shirt be damned, and Giles did, buttons skittering across the sheets and then finally a rough hand on Ethan's chest, rubbing him, pinching his nipples, still too frantic for finesse but that just made it better.

Ethan groaned desperately into Giles' mouth and rammed his hips up against Giles' driving down. Felt teeth catching on lips, tasting the metal of blood, salt and red, and it only drove them higher. Ripper growled, hand shoved into Ethan's pants, rough and with no preamble, gripped his cock and worked him roughly in the confines. Ethan just wailed, rolled his head back, gloried in Ripper's teeth digging into the flesh of his throat, there'd be bruises in the morning and it was perfect, brilliant, dear god, he was going to come, right the fuck now.

"Yes, yes, come for me, want to feel you in my hand, on my hand, come for me," Ripper all but sang against his skin, before sinking his teeth in again, deep, a fire-flash of pain and joy, and Ethan's hips snapped up, that hand still gripping, pumping. Ethan's own hand fluttered uselessly across Ripper's back.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, Giles, GODS, yes," he rambled.

So close, so close, Ripper's teeth still clamped on his shoulder in a bulldog grip, and then Ethan saw white and came hard, wet messy good.

Collapsed, exhausted, to the mattress, distantly feeling Giles nuzzling down his bare chest, his bare abdomen, nipping and licking as he went. The ceiling was white and blank, and did nothing to distract from the sensations. Ripper undoing his trousers and yanking them down around his knees, a rough hand cleaning the come off his cock, his stomach. Almost too much stimulation after that orgasm, but even that excess felt good.

"Let me fuck you," Giles said, looking up his body with blazing eyes.

"Yes," Ethan said, and Giles pushed his hip, rolled him over, fingers pushed in, slick with Ethan's own come.

Yes. This was what he'd wanted, this was what he'd missed. Then Ripper's cock, pressing against him, breaching him, and he gasped and shoved back, loving the burn of penetration, the sound of Rupert's deep, male groan.

"Make it hard, Giles, fuck me bloody," he gasped.

The first thrust drove him down flat against the bed, the second seemed to bury him in the mattress, he couldn't stop the cry. Lips nibbled at his shoulder, the spot Ripper had mauled earlier, teasing aching flesh, finding the small hot spot where the skin was broken and worrying at it, sending tiny sparks of pain rushing through him.

Sweating, tangled in too much clothing, his shirt twisted around his elbows like a restraint, his trousers clutching his knees. His face was pressed into the comforter, and his own breath was hot and wet against his cheek. Percussive explosive pressure inside him, every thrust a bomb going off in his brain, driving away everything but *Ripper, Ripper Ripper ripper*

Ripper came too soon, any time would have been too soon, and then they were overheated and panting and curled together on the damp comforter, searching for air and coherence.

"Bloody... hell..." Ethan said.

"Shit," Giles said. Ethan winced as he slid out. "*Shit.*"

He pulled Ethan tight against him, Ethan's back to his chest, and nuzzled his warm, stubbled cheek against Ethan's jaw.

"That was--"

"Incredible. Though still not better than the Dectped," Ethan said. Giles' hand wandered about his bare chest.

"Mmmm," Giles said, turned and mouthed Ethan's jaw for a moment before murmuring, "Good enough."

"Indeed."

Giles' lips moved up to his ear, licking, sucking at the lobe and the ring that pierced it. Ethan

shivered, and felt his cock twitch. The night was young.

"My god, you feel good," Giles whispered over the dampness he'd painted across Ethan's skin. Ethan pushed himself back, like a cat into a caress, finding the cradling, solid curve of Giles' body there to meet him, to hold him. Bare, soft cock against the cheek of Ethan's arse.

Ethan could only hum in appreciation as Giles' hand continued to wander.

They lay together, twined, touching slowly. Ethan's eyes were closed, too focused on touch and scent and taste to care about seeing. Giles' lips continued to trace damp patterns on his throat, his cheek, his ear, his temple, anywhere Giles could reach. His hand moved in soothing slowness, calming the aftershock shivers. Ethan's heart beat slowly.

When Giles tugged at him, gently, he rolled over onto his back obligingly, watching, feeling, as Giles propped himself up on his elbow and leaned over him. They were tucked together from head to toe, like a single warm organism. Ethan let his eyes shut again as Giles leaned in and kissed him, deeply, slowly.

He toyed with the buttons at the cuff of Giles' shirt, slid his hand up the length of Giles' strong arm. Let his hand come to rest on biceps still nearly as strong as they had been in their youth. Ripper's strength never failed--still didn't fail--to send a flutter of pleasure through his stomach. Loved having a strong man at his mercy, in his arms, against his body. Kissing him, still, their tongues seeming to reacquaint themselves after a much longer absence than was technically accurate.

He opened his eyes for a moment, just to see Ripper's eyes closed, see Ripper's face as he lost himself in their kiss.

Hours. Kissing. Touching. First Giles laying heavily atop him, then him over Giles, sometimes them just lying side by side. Gradually nudging aside and wriggling out of shirts and trousers and pants and socks. Giles tossed his watch towards the side of the bed after it caught and scratched Ethan's side.

Naked skin, two cocks, heavy and hot lying side by side, all but ignored in favor of slow touch. Lips and whispers. Green eyes that he'd seen in his dreams for twenty years, looking into his just like this, dark and liquid and drowsed with sensuality.

Until their hands clasped between them, the cocks they gripped almost an afterthought, and they stroked together as slow and easy as the rest of the night, lips, swollen from kissing, still seeking each other out in the dark, bodies clutched together as close as the lobes of a single mind. The soft grunt and the slick wet of Giles' orgasm swiftly abetting his own, and afterwards, for an untold time, they continued to touch as though it hadn't even happened.

Giles lay spread across the bed, his sweat-damp sides still begging to be touched, tasted.

He was beautiful and he was here, with Ethan. By choice, touching him, holding him. Still, under the sleepy pleasure, there was sadness in Giles, as deep and indelible as a wine stain.

"Giles..." Ethan said, melted against his side, heavy head resting on a sticky-warm shoulder, lips moving against salty skin, "How are you doing?"

A quiet pause, and then, "I don't know."

They made a small concession to hygiene, swiped themselves as clean as possible with one of their shirts, and then got under the covers, lying back to back. Giles switched off the light, and exhaustion pulled Ethan quickly down.

* * *

He woke again later, the grey light of early dawn faintly touching the wall.

Behind him, he heard a sharp, wet breath. He held still. The mattress carried the small shudders of Giles' sobs.

Ethan shut his eyes, feigned sleep and let Giles have what privacy he could.

Chapter Nine

End of Days

After that, there were months of not seeing each other. Giles was needed in Sunnydale, or at least, felt he should be there. He settled into a hotel there. He called Ethan occasionally, and knew for sure he was alive every time he sent a new Potential their way.

He found himself, oddly, worrying about him. Ethan had, after a certain point, become extremely paranoid about being on the First's hit list, and Ethan was not usually given to undue paranoia. He also found himself missing Ethan, their conversations and even simply his presence. Somewhere in the past year, he'd begun to remember why he was fond of the man. His sardonic, witty humor, with that small twist of a smile, his relative calm in a crisis.

The physicality between them was only a small part of it, though he found himself missing that too, especially at night, alone in his room with nothing but the TV and its dire imprecations for company. He still loved the Sunnydalers, but in the past two years, they had become different people, older, adult people, and he felt he'd lost his reference points for relating to them, except possibly Anya, who was, and ever would be... well, Anya.

During those brief phone calls, over an international line to England, he'd find himself closing his eyes and just feeling the low tenor of Ethan's voice. It didn't matter what they said. They rarely discussed the apocalypse, or even the Potentials, beyond a few necessary words at the beginning.

And then it all ended, spectacularly, suddenly. He called Ethan again, when everyone was in the midst of the scurry that came after the last-minute preparations. There was a line at the bathroom, Dawn couldn't find her lip balm...

He tucked himself away in a quiet corner with the cordless phone.

"Hello?"

He ducked his head and smiled and moved a bit closer to the wall, less to hide and more to create a private space away from the hubbub of the house.

"Hello, Ethan."

"Giles. This is an unusual time to call."

"I just wanted to let you know... we're going in now."

"Going in?"

"A preemptive assault on the Hellmouth."

"Sounds like insanity to me."
"Possibly," Giles said, without heat.
"Don't die," Ethan said.
"I'll do my best," Giles answered, smiling again.
Then Buffy leaned in the front door and shouted, like a deranged, angry camp counselor,
"Five fifty-seven, people! Let's go!"
"Got to go," Giles said.
"Right..." Ethan said, and Giles hit the button, hung up, and headed out.

* * *

He could have sworn that, a week later, he still had the dust of Sunnydale clinging to him. He and Andrew had finally arrived in Heathrow several hours ago, and now the boy (God knew why they'd foisted him on Giles) was finally settled in a hotel room until Giles could find something more permanent, because Ethan had already apparently taken over half of his own flat, and first of all, he wasn't quite sure how he'd explain Ethan to Andrew, second of all, he wasn't sure he wanted Andrew exposed to Ethan at all, or vice-versa, and third, there simply was not enough room in that tiny flat for three people.

He climbed the old stairway, tired down to his bone marrow. He reached his door, and felt the tingle of the wards, then felt them part as he slid his key into the lock, a sensation not unlike seeing something dart away in one's peripheral vision. The door unlocked and the wards let him step into the flat, but they'd obviously alerted Ethan to someone's presence, as he was waiting when Giles entered.

"Not to sound like an overbearing mother, but you could have called."

"Sorry. There wasn't time."

"Oh. Because it takes so much time to say, 'Hello Ethan, the world is not ending, and oh by the way, I'm not dead.'"

Giles set aside his bag. "Sorry."

Then, suddenly, dizzyingly, he realized that he hadn't seen Ethan touch anything, and no matter how unlikely it was that the First was still around, it sent a bolt of panic through him that wasn't assuaged until he crossed the space between them in two strides, grabbed Ethan by the shirt front and kissed him soundly, solidly, erasing any doubt that he was anything but human and alive.

Ethan blinked at him.

Then smiled slowly and yanked him closer. Giles grinned.

Part Three

Chapter One

The End Of The World As We Know It

"You are aware downtown LA is being devoured by demons, yes?" Ethan said, as he walked into the flat, casual as if commenting on the weather.

Giles looked up from the splay of maps and texts on the coffee table, as did Buffy beside him.

"Yes, thank you, we had noticed," he said, dryly.

"What is *he* doing here?" Buffy said, going instantly on guard.

"What are *you* doing here?" Ethan countered, as he hung up his coat and walked over to the table.

"Trying to save the world," Buffy sniped back.

Giles sighed and rubbed his neck. Not wanting to deal with this right now. There were demons and destruction and apocalypses out there, and he didn't need--

"Are you going to tell her, Rupert? Or shall I be your dirty little secret?"

Giles looked between Buffy and Ethan, two expectant faces, one set hard and filled with the threat of violence, the other seemingly amused--but only if you didn't know it well enough to see beneath that veneer.

"Ethan lives here, Buffy," he said, wishing that she would just accept that and move on. But, of course, she wouldn't.

"What? Hello? Giles? Evil chaos sorcerer?"

He sighed, and shut his eyes, trying to center himself.

"He's my lover, Buffy. And he isn't evil. Could we please focus?"

But of course, they couldn't focus. No. Demons eating LA was in no way as pressing an issue as his love life. He opened his eyes to find Buffy and Ethan facing off across the coffee table, fighting a quite spectacular battle with nothing but the power of their glares. Buffy, however, was tensed and clearly about to elevate the battle to a more physical level.

"Buffy--"

She ignored him.

"What did you do?" she growled at Ethan.

In a way, it was almost touching. She was no doubt trying to protect him.

"What did I do?" Ethan said, "Well, let's see, I believe it had something to do with me actually being there when none of you lot cared enough to so much as offer him a shoulder when

everyone else he knew was murdered?"

That was quite a speech for Ethan, and Giles was nearly as taken aback by it as Buffy.

"What?" Buffy said, again, but some of the violence had slipped out of her frame.

"Ethan and I have been seeing each other again since you... since I returned to England, after Willow brought you back."

"God. Giles, that was--"

"Years ago, yes. I know."

"And you never--"

"He's been living here since last May."

Actually, Ethan wasn't even there all the time. He spent most of his time god knows where. He hadn't been home in two weeks. And, in point of fact, Giles would have really liked to give him a proper greeting, but now Ethan was looking far too withdrawn for such things.

"Could we please get back to the issue at hand?" Giles said, again.

"You're under a spell," Buffy declared, firmly. She was glaring at Ethan again.

Giles' temper slipped, suddenly.

"I am *not*," he said, sharply.

Buffy jumped.

"He's not," Ethan put in. "That I know of, anyway."

Buffy opened her mouth, then snapped it shut.

"Why?"

And Giles really wasn't sure what to say to that, because how could he tell his Slayer that in part, it was because he simply no longer cared? That he'd reached a point where Ethan's business was Ethan's business and the nature of that business no longer seemed enough of a stumbling block next to--

Everything.

Needing someone. Being not lonely.

"I've known Ethan for a very long time," he said, finally, quietly, not meeting any of their eyes.

There was a silence at that, and Giles had just long enough to hope that this would be accepted before Buffy snapped, "And what the hell is up with you being gay?"

He yanked his glasses off with enough force to cause a twinge of pain as one arm caught on his ear, and he stood up and said, "This is my home, Buffy, and Ethan's. Please, show a little respect, or I will ask you to leave."

"Whoa," she said, stepping a bit closer, threatening, "I am all about the respect, Giles, but this is *weird*. You never said *anything*."

"You've made it perfectly clear in the past that my love life is not of interest to you, Buffy."

Which was the moment Ethan chose to slip out the door.

Buffy would just have to wait.

Giles headed out after him, caught him before he could reach his car.

"Ethan. Please, wait."

"Really, Rupert," Ethan said, tugging away from the grip Giles had on his arm, "Much as I'd love to stay and watch you and your darling Slayer snipe at each other--"

He wanted to hug him, kiss him, but Ethan was still on guard, as untouchable as a riled porcupine, eyeing him like he didn't know him, didn't want to.

"Don't. Please. Don't leave here angry. Not again."

"Never told her?" Ethan said, "Interesting, that."

"Oh, come on. What was I supposed to say? You saw how well that went in there. Besides which, it's none of her bloody business, and she'd only make things difficult. Besides, what do you care?"

Ethan didn't seem to have an answer to that, and Giles was guiltily aware the question had been something of a low blow, given that forcing Ethan into a corner where he had to acknowledge actually giving a damn what other people--especially one of Giles' fellow do-gooders--thought was

the equivalent of the metaphorical unstoppable force and immobile object.

"Why is LA overrun with demons?" Ethan said, changing the subject, to both of their relief.

"Um. That would be... Angel's fault, I believe."

"Ah."

"Come back inside? Please? I'll... hold off the attack Slayer."

"See that you do."

* * *

She tried to turn back to the maps after Giles dashed out the door, but she couldn't. It was just all too weird, almost even to contemplate. She sank down onto one of the sofas and looked around the apartment in bewilderment. The place was very Giles-y, really. The ambiance and furniture and even the scent of it reminded her of his apartment in Sunnydale. The walls were more of a cream color, though, not green, but even the layout was somewhat similar, with the window to the kitchen next to the door, and this living room with the couches and coffee table and arm chair all arranged more or less exactly as they had been in Sunnydale. Those same brass deer-things adorned the hearth, and the room was surrounded with bookshelves all but groaning under the weight of all the ancient-looking arcane texts.

Although, now, looking closer, it was becoming more obvious that this apartment was shared. She shook her head and then stared at the small bust of Janus that shared mantel space with the weird deer-things. She should have noticed that. Should have seen it right away. She was a Slayer, she was supposed to be attuned to mystical weird things like that.

Aside from just that, though, there were more subtle things. A black leather jacket hung on the coat rack that just wasn't Giles' style, for one thing. Then there were the books on the lower shelves that looked far darker than anything Giles would have kept in his possession. And then just various unfamiliar things, little knickknacks she didn't remember from Sunnydale that were scattered around.

All of which told her she should have suspected something was up, but none of which told her why, or what the hell was really going on.

Ethan was a bad guy. Ethan was a *guy*, hello? Was *everyone* she knew gay? And when had this happened? Giles hadn't exactly run around hitting on men back in Sunnydale. There was Jenny! And Olivia and the Hugh Hefner robe. And... ok, much as she still shuddered at the mental image, there was her mom. So this was weird.

Especially since he'd said nothing about it. Nothing at all. And Ethan had been *living* here all that time? It didn't make sense.

Then the door opened, and Giles returned, with the evil chaos sorcerer in tow. Ethan, coward that he was, didn't meet Buffy's eyes, he just ducked down the hallway that led, she could only guess, to the bedroom or something. And that, of course, immediately brought up in full color an extremely disturbing mental image of Giles and Ethan in bed together.

It had to be a spell...

"Giles--"

He'd sat down on the other couch silently, slipping his glasses back on and picking up a map, and not speaking to her. He didn't reply to her, either.

"Giles, come on, just... what is going on?"

And then she had a thought even more disturbing than the previous one with the bed (and the slight nudity). Maybe this was like what she'd done, with Spike. Some kind of self-punishment deal... Although Giles really *hadn't* seemed depressed lately. In fact, ever since they destroyed the Hellmouth, he'd really started to cheer up. Recently, he'd been damn near chipper.

So, a spell, then?

He tossed the map onto the coffee table and pulled his glasses back off.

"Buffy, I don't know how many times and different ways I can tell you. I am not under a spell."

"But you know you wouldn't know."

"Yes, granted. But this feels perfectly natural. Believe me, were we under a love spell of some kind... well..."

He paused and looked down at his glasses.

"Things would be different. This is normal."

"Giles, it's not. This guy he's--"

"Are you really telling me that it's wrong to care for someone who's morally ambiguous? Really? Because I'm not sure I can quite see you capable of quite that level of hypocrisy, given some of the choices you yourself have made. And are making now."

"Hey, come on. You want to talk about hypocrisy, you and Andrew were leading the charge back when everyone was accusing *me* of being under the Immortal's spell."

He paused, then said, "Granted. Yes. But if you must know, have Willow check. You'll find there's nothing mystical about this."

Which lead to the question: "Then, why?"

Giles continued to fiddle with his glasses as the shower began to run in the other room.

"I- I... It's hard to explain. But he... we were best friends, when we were younger. More than just... lovers. We, we were in love. And... we understand each other, even if we don't always... even if we often disagree. And I like having that. I'm tired of, of being alone, frankly."

That hurt, a little. And she understood it all too well.

"Yeah, but... why him?"

Giles' brow took on a sardonic tilt and he quipped, drily, "Shall I count the ways?"

She wasn't quite sure how to react to that, but it took a moment to work out why. Then she figured it out. 'How do I love thee...'

"You *love* him? Now?"

He took a careful breath, put his glasses on and stood. Wandered to the windows before turning back to her.

"I'm not sure. Yes? It's... it's complicated. And really, this is all rather an uncomfortable subject for me to be discussing at all. I know you... you and Willow and... I know you feel that talking about these things is beneficial, but honestly, I'd really rather not. What's between me and Ethan is private and personal."

"Yeah, but... friends are generally in on the private and personal stuff."

He tilted his head slightly.

"Are we? Friends?"

"I- I dunno. I thought so. Maybe. Maybe we used to be?"

Then there was a deeply uncomfortable silence, before Giles finally said, "We should get back to work."

Ethan emerged from the bedroom cautiously, hoping desperately that the Slayer hadn't worked herself up into too deadly a state of paranoia. He knew Rupert wouldn't *let* her do anything to him, of course, but really there wouldn't be much the man could do to stop her if she got the idea into her head to... kill him or maim him or whatever she saw fit to do.

Fortunately, though, she and Giles were settled down again in the living room when he emerged. Once again, they were debating battle strategies and sketching things on the maps and reading things out of the books and generally doing that whole save-the-world bit.

Giles was all intense and focused and well into that state where he was clearly too far gone to remember little things like eating, so Ethan slipped through the living room to the kitchen, trying to be subtle and hopefully unnoticeable, just in case his mere existence managed to arouse that Slayer fury. He really wasn't in the mood to be beat up and cast out of his own home...

So, instead, he cooked.

The rather large spiteful part of him considered making just enough for himself and Giles,

but... knowing Giles, he'd just give up his own portion to the Slayer, anyway, thus rendering it all a complete waste of effort.

He joined them in the living room afterwards, and sat down beside Giles, listening in on their conversation and ignoring the Slayer's blazing, pointed glares. It sounded like they were planning an all-out assault on the force in LA.

Sounded like fun.

Chapter Two

Weird Love Is Better Than No Love

Buffy left late that night, and Giles tiredly went through his nightly routine after putting away the maps and books. They would be heading in, hopefully, within the next week with a force of Slayers, to face an army of demons in the evacuated ruins of LA. It sounded, more than anything, like the plot of a ridiculously bad movie.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair and then headed out into the bedroom. It was dim, lit only by the bedside lamp on Ethan's side.

Ethan was already in bed, paging through one of Giles' paranormal studies journals. He didn't look up from it until after Giles had climbed in under the covers, when he tossed it aside and reached for the light. Giles rolled onto his side towards him and said his name, stopping his hand before it could reach the switch.

"Yes?" Ethan said.

Giles reached for him, but hesitated before touching him. He wasn't sure quite how his touch would be received.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course," Ethan said.

Of course not, was more the truth.

"I'm sorry. Buffy can be... oddly possessive at times."

"Ah," Ethan said, "Yes, I'd noticed."

"And her... views tend to be a bit... black and white."

Except where her own lovers were concerned... but no, he wasn't going to get into thinking like that. And perhaps she wasn't entirely wrong. Only a few months back, a Slayer had been killed under a set of very odd circumstances in Egypt. Giles had confronted Ethan about the incident, with his own interpretation of the events already firmly entrenched in his mind.

Ethan had simply walked out. For almost a month.

It was, as it turned out, unlikely that Ethan had been involved, but he'd never gotten a definitive truth out of anyone.

Still, there were times when Giles wondered what the hell he was doing.

Now was not one of those times. Now, Ethan looked too good, backlit by the lamp, shirtless, possibly naked under the covers. Gone for two weeks and finally back. Two weeks during which

the bed had been cold, the flat had been too empty, there'd been no one to talk to, cook with, to complain about work to, to insult idiotic television shows with.

No one to make love to.

He let his hand slide across the last few inches of cool sheets to touch Ethan's warm arm.

Buffy had asked if he loved Ethan, and he'd said he wasn't sure. That wasn't true. He knew. In moments like this one, his hand settled in the crook of Ethan's elbow, Ethan's blazing gaze on him, he knew perfectly well that he was in love. And though there were times during the day when he could be all but paralyzed with the doubt and the problems and all the reasons why he shouldn't, in moments like this, it only felt good and right and simple.

He hadn't said the words, yet, and neither had Ethan. He wasn't even entirely sure *what* Ethan's position on this was, though he suspected it was the same as his own--love but with logical reservations. This was all right. He could wait, Ethan could wait. For now, they were here, together, and that was all that really mattered.

"So," Ethan said, as he rolled up to his side. "We're going to LA, then?"

"We?" Giles said, though this wasn't completely a surprise. He shifted and curled his arm around Ethan's back.

"Well, if you go alone, you might die. Can't have that."

Facetiously phrased though this was, it still warmed Giles a bit. He smiled and said, "Oh no?"

"All the trouble I went to to seduce you would be wasted if you died now."

"Ah, if that what all that was?"

"All part of the plan."

This, for some unfathomable reason, inspired one of those little, ridiculous, absolutely wonderful surges of "god, I'm in love," and Giles grinned and leaned up to kiss Ethan, a quick tangle of lips, and then they parted.

"Besides," Ethan said, "I want to see the look on your Slayer's face when you tell her I'm coming along."

"Ah. Yes, that... should be interesting."

Chapter Three

Lively Debate And The Lack Of 'I' Statements

"Tell me you did not just say what it sounded like you said."
Willow winced a little as Buffy glared at Giles across the conference room table.
"He wants to come, Buffy, and he has enough power to be a large asset. Why on earth would we turn him down?"
Buffy threw her hands up.
"Hello? Evil??"
"Uh--" Willow tried to cut in, but neither Buffy nor Giles seemed to even remember she was actually present.
"He IS NOT EVIL," Giles shouted.
"Whatever! Formerly evil, bad magic, troublemaker, turned-my-Watcher-into-a-demon, or did we forget about that??"
"He's changed, Buffy."
"Uh huh."
"Spike--"
"Ok, once again, this is not about me, and Spike was totally different. And you can't bring a date to the apocalypse!"
"Dammit, Buffy, this is not *about* that."
A date? Willow rewound the conversation in her head, but couldn't quite figure out where Buffy had gotten that from Giles' simple, quiet statement that Ethan Rayne would be willing to help them rid LA of the demonic legions.
"Date?" Willow said.
They both finally looked at her.
Giles stepped back from the table and folded his arms and said, "Ethan and I are involved." Whoa. Oh.
"Ok, then. Um." She thought for a moment about what would be the appropriate response to this, and finally came up with, "Why?"
Giles sighed heavily. "Could we please get back to the topic of *actual* evil and how to defeat it?"
They didn't, though, they were all silent and glare-y. Willow had to point out, "Well,

technically, Ethan's not evil. He's just... unpredictable. Kind of by definition."

"I trust him," Giles said.

"You're an idiot, then!" Buffy jumped back in, helpfully.

'I statements, Willow thought, helplessly, her head ringing. "Ok, Buffy, calling people idiots? Really not helping."

"He's given us no reason to trust him. And plenty not to."

"He has given us reason," Giles said. "You think I was completely alone when we were fighting the First? Ethan saved more Potentials than I ever did. He had every opportunity to turn on me then, but he didn't, and he didn't at considerable risk to his own life. I trust him."

Buffy looked shocked. Willow was just kind of relieved that one of them had actually managed to make a logical point. "Guys? Can we please get back to trying to figure out how to get three hundred teenaged girls into the US?"

"Three hundred teenaged girls and a wanted felon," Buffy muttered.

"He can bloody teleport," Giles snapped.

Willow sighed again. This was going to be a long apocalypse.

Chapter Four

Marching Into The Valley Of Death, Otherwise Known As Los Angeles

"Wow," Xander said. "You know those ads, that say 'See beautiful Los Angeles, California?' I'm foreseeing some serious need for a new advertising slogan."

"Yeah," Andrew said, "Like... see smoldering wreckage. Uh, but you know, I can think of some people who would so go for that."

"Like us," Willow said, "Apparently."

"Always up for a bit of smoldering wreckage, huh, babe?" Kennedy said.

"Oh, yeah. Definitely one of my more attractive qualities."

"Hey, I think it's kinda sexy," Kennedy said.

Giles decided that was his cue to get as far away from that conversation as possible

They'd stopped here in the mountains on the outskirts of the city, in their fleet of busses, to give the Slayers and Watchers and various support staff one more chance to rest before entering the city and, thus, the fray.

It was a stunning sight. The city was nearly in ruins. The suburbs were mostly untouched, yet, though, still a strange sprawl of green across the tan of the desert. The heart of the city though... it was a war zone. Many of the skyscrapers still stood, but there were plumes of smoke everywhere, like small tufts of weeds. Parts of the city had been razed nearly to the ground, frightening patches of flat amongst the vertical architecture elsewhere. All around, the girls were in groups, staring out at the destruction and exclaiming at it.

They all seemed so young. The average age was around fourteen, actually. They'd divided them up and assigned Watchers and older Slayers to each platoon, but still... this was a war that would be fought, and hopefully won, by adolescents.

Many of the Slayers were hardly battle-tested at all.

They had no choice, he told himself again. The force amassed in LA was growing by the day. They'd have to defeat the forces already there and find some way to close the portal that had somehow opened, and if they failed... if they failed, once again, the stake was the world, and the lives of every human everywhere.

Giles walked to the edge of the bluff, and wondered if maybe he was getting too old for all

of this.

Just then, there was a crackle of magic behind him, and he turned just in time to catch Ethan as he stumbled.

"Er. Hello," he said.

Ethan answered with a grimace, then stepped back and touched just beneath his nose, then glanced at his finger.

"Splendid. No nose bleed. So..." he stopped, staring over Giles' shoulder. "Oh my."

Giles turned back to the horrible view.

"I know. Fortunately, most of the population's evacuated."

He glanced back after a moment to find Ethan looking around at their... army, he supposed was the correct term.

"Awfully young, aren't they? Do they know anything?"

"They are. But they're Slayers. They have better instincts in a fight than the best-trained soldier."

"Not really designed for this kind of fight, though, are they?"

"No," Giles admitted. "But they're the best hope we have."

"Lucky us."

They gave the girls two hours, and then they headed in. The eerily quiet, abandoned streets had quieted the chatter, and now the girls just stared out the windows, quiet, pale, tense. Some seemed afraid. Many, though, scanned the empty suburban houses and lawns like hawks seeking prey. They were tensed, not with fear, but anticipation. Ready to fight.

Giles had seated the youngest Slayer, Katie, beside himself. Back when they'd assigned seats, he'd worried that she'd be afraid. She wasn't, though. She had the same watchful predator's pose as the older girls. One small hand curled tight around a stake, the other splayed against the window.

He'd only brought her because she was one of the best. She'd thrown herself into the training with enthusiasm and now she could bring down even the oldest girls with ease. Even Buffy had to struggle to best her in a fight.

Still, the girl was barely ten, and his heart was pounding now with the wrongness of it. Wondering if he'd learned nothing. Now he was head of this damned Council, and the first thing he was doing was bringing a ten-year-old to a war zone.

She looked back at him.

"How long 'til we can get out?" she asked.

He leaned out into the aisle a bit to see through the windshield. Ahead of them, the city and the smoke loomed.

"Soon as we find somewhere we can set up a defensive position," he said.

Perhaps another child would have asked 'when's that?' but Katie just nodded tightly and turned back to the window.

Ethan, sitting in the aisle leaning against the seat in front of Giles, raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment.

By the time they left the suburbs and the city rose above them, everyone was silent.

Just inside the city, they found their defensive position. A stretch of raised freeway, with the city burned to rubble for a patch of blocks around it, had been broken off at either side, creating a raised island accessible by only one entrance ramp. The destruction of the city gave a clear view in all directions.

Along the way, the Slayers had spotted groups of demons, increasing as they went.

They parked the busses below the freeway and climbed the ramp.
They found a massacre.

The evacuating residents had been trapped here, by the fallen segments of the highway, and there was bumper to bumper traffic. No one alive, though. Bodies. Everywhere.

* * *

It took hours, even with all the strength their army commanded, to clear the bodies, but afterwards, the Slayers' spirits were still high. Giles remembered this youthful resilience, from back in the Sunnydale library that seemed so far away now.

They had sorted out guard duty, parked one of the busses crossways to block the entrance ramp as much as possible, and now the girls were staking out their own, more personal territory. There were fierce battles erupting over who got to claim the luxury cars as bunks... Andrew and Xander had had to intervene over the Ferrari before any blood actually ended up being spilled... somehow that had ended with Andrew claiming it for himself, in fact...

Giles picked for himself a small, rusted pick-up truck right at the end of their stretch of freeway, only feet from where the asphalt ended in midair. There was a gap of twenty meters or so to where the broken section ended and the freeway picked up again, empty of cars. From the back of the truck, he could see for miles. Burnt, fallen buildings, singed palm trees, and beyond all that the buildings rose up again, huge abandoned hulks that, in the dark, somehow resembled the prows of sunken ships, down in the constant twilight of the deep.

Now and then, he could see movement there, and he knew that was the enemy.

He felt safer, here, though, where he could see them.

He heard a small scuff and turned to look, expecting it to be Ethan.

It wasn't.

Katie climbed up into the back of the truck, silently, and crawled over beside him, sat down and leaned against him. For a moment, he battled the instinct to put a comforting arm around her. He'd told himself, constantly, that he should treat her like an adult, because she was a Slayer. He gave up the fight quickly, though, and held her.

"Are you all right?" he asked, though he could see no reason why she should be.

"Yeah," she said, then, after a moment of quiet, she said, "I can see them."

"Yes," he said.

He wondered, for a moment, if she was afraid, but when she spoke again, it was to say, "When can we fight?"

A Slayer. Always.

"Tomorrow," he said. "At daybreak. We need rest, and they'll be weaker by day."

She nodded, and remained leaning against him.

"Do you have a place to sleep?" he asked.

"Yeah. With Lisa and Emma," she said.

Lisa was sixteen, and had taken the younger Slayer under her wing. She'd had a younger sister back home.

"Good," he said.

She remained at his side for a while, silently, then, just as silently slipped out from under his arm and walked away into the dark.

Ethan chose that moment to appear, himself.

"She's a little one," he said.

Giles nodded.

Oddly, it hadn't occur to him until then, but she reminded him of Brianna.

As he and Ethan rolled out their sleeping gear in the truck bed, he remembered shouting at Robson, about what he'd do if Bri were called. What was *he* doing? Now? The only answer he could come up with, though, as he stared up at the stars, was he had no idea.

Chapter Five

Patience And Maturity... And The Lack Thereof

The sun shimmered through the haze of smoke and lingering smog, rising over the sliver of ocean visible through the buildings like doomsday ascending. Giles sat, again, at the edge of the truck bed, staring out at the red sunrise and bathed in turn by the light. Ethan sat beside him and watched him.

His Slayer had taken charge early that morning, rallying and organizing the troops into scouting parties. She'd left the majority of the girls and almost all of the Watchers and other non-Slayers behind, and so here they were, with nothing to do but wait. Ethan hated waiting. It was dull.

"Isn't there *something* we could be doing?" Ethan asked again, though he knew that the answer would be the same as it had been all the other times.

"Ethan..." Giles said, not moving much or looking away from the red gleam on the distant water, "The ten-year-old is more patient than you."

Ethan glanced over to where Giles' new pet Slayer sat on the asphalt, cross-legged, quietly reading a colorfully-covered paperback.

"Yes, well, I was under the impression I would be able to *do* something once we got here."

"So was she," Giles said.

His latest round of melodramatics with Buffy had been on the topic of the girl, and whether she should be included in the scouting parties, with Buffy against and Giles for. Clearly, Ethan's perception of their relationship as idyllic was rather flawed. As was their relationship, in point of fact.

"I thought *you* were in charge, anyway."

"Nominally," Giles said. "But only nominally. And that's as it should be. Things... things needed to change for a long time. The Slayers need someone in charge who truly understands them."

That, in Ethan's opinion, sounded like a load of new age bull.

"Oh, of course. So, they get a girl who never even graduated from college rather than an adult who spent god knows how many years in schooling and actually has been trained in tactics and history and demonic studies and thus has a clue what he's doing."

Giles still didn't meet his eyes.

"Buffy knows what she's doing, Ethan. Believe me, she does. Leading an army... it's not..."

it's an art, not a science. No matter how much someone may know, there's a degree to which it can't be taught, there's instinct."

"Ah. And it's 'instinct' that's telling her that because she doesn't like me, and because little Katie looks cute and innocent, we're of no use in this combat?"

Giles sighed. "Just because she didn't see fit to put either of you on a scouting party doesn't mean you've been excluded from the entire war. I'm sure you'll see plenty of blood and gore before this is all through."

Annoyed by the implication that Giles still believed him to be a sadist, Ethan said, "Panic and disorder, love. I'm in it for the panic and disorder."

"Ah, of course," Giles said. He didn't look any more cheerful than Ethan felt.

The truth, though, was after a year of the First Evil, Ethan had lost a bit of his taste even for the panic and disorder. That was why he was here, in a way, though that seemed ironic, given that they were about to face massive amounts of chaos. Still, he was growing tired of the life he'd led. Tired of dodging demons, of tying himself in knots to please them, just to live another day, just to make a handful of money. Maybe he was finally growing up. Maybe he was just getting old. Whatever it was, dancing along the fine line between good and evil had lately seemed more effort than it was worth, and the side of good, dull though it may be, was, in the end, the safer, easier side to settle down on. At the very least, the good guys were far more willing than the bad to fling themselves in front of a bullet for you.

And, of course, the good side had Rupert, who was, himself, not just a small incentive.

Giles' hand rested on his own thigh. Ethan eyed it for a moment, then reached across the gap between them and laid his hand over Giles'. Giles' eyes darted down to focus on their now-joined hands, but he didn't object or pull away. In fact, after a moment, Giles turned his hand over and laced his fingers between Ethan's.

They glanced at each other at the same moment, and Giles smiled, then they both looked away again.

After a while, sitting silently, holding hands, Giles said, "I know this sounds... ridiculously unequal to the situation, but... thank you. For coming."

"I'm just saying I don't trust him, is all," Buffy said.

Willow, along with Kennedy and Jenn, was patrolling with her to the south of their freeway base of operations.

"I know, you've said that a hundred times, already," Willow replied. Goddess, this place was creepy. If she wasn't a super-powered witch surrounded by superhumanly strong warrior people, she'd be seriously creeped out.

Actually, she was seriously creeped out.

"But," Willow continued, "The point *I* am trying to make is maybe the reason you don't want him here isn't that you don't trust him, but that you don't like him. Or that you don't like that Giles likes him."

"And *I* am saying that that's beside the point, ok? Because it is! He's dangerous! I don't need to spend the whole time here wondering if one of the guys who's supposedly on my side is going to turn on me!"

"Or maybe," Willow said, not for the first time, "It's really Giles you don't trust."

Buffy made a sound of deep annoyance.

"Willow, for the last time, I trust Giles."

"Buffy! Look around!" Willow waved around at the empty skyscrapers, the dark stoplights, the abandoned street that they walked down the center of. "This is Armageddon! If someone wants to help us, I think we should at least give them a chance!"

"We've got a lot of people on our side already, Will. One more? Probably not going to make a difference. Unless he decides to betray us all just to watch the amusing antics ensue!"

Fortunately, the demons chose that moment to ambush them, sparing Willow a painful death by exasperation.

Chapter Six

The Calm Before...

Buffy's party was the last to return, not shuffling past the guards and up the entrance ramp until the sun was nearly down, but they did return, and with all members alive, so their first day in LA was casualty-less if not bloodless. Giles went off to join her and the other official-types and well into the night they huddled around in the light of a truck's headlamps discussing strategy, sketching maps and arguing.

Ethan wandered aimlessly, tried to read, watched the stars, and found that it was true that war did indeed seem to be 90% boredom. So far, the punctuation with sheer terror hadn't happened yet...

At night, the city seemed even more foreboding, especially the red glow of fires off to the east.

When the meeting finally broke up, Giles gathered his team together, which included Ethan, Katie, Lisa and a handful of about seven other girls. In essence, the plan was to push into the city at dawn the next day. They would go on foot. Their goal was an old hotel somewhere downtown, which was apparently where the portal was. Once there, they'd have to determine what the portal was and hopefully how to seal it.

It sounded so simple.

Two days later, they'd hardly made any progress at all. They'd hit resistance after half a day's walk and like holiday traffic, it hadn't let up since. It wasn't anything the Slayers couldn't handle, but it was slow and tiring and that day they'd had their first death. The rest of the Slayers were quite and pale, which was appropriate, Ethan thought, given that they'd holed up for the night in a huge corporate building, in a large room filled with cubicles.

Giles hadn't bothered to try and secure them an office for the night, something about some of the others needing the quiet more than they did, so Ethan and he were settled now in a tiny room made of padded walls (another thing Ethan felt was very poetically apt, given he was beginning to suspect they were all crazy people), with the photos of someone else's smiling, not-too-attractive family pinned to the wall, and one of those sets of supposedly perpetual motion balls, that you set in

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motion by raising one and letting it swing into the others, thus knocking the last ball on the other side up, then down, to start the whole process over again.

It lost its novelty almost instantaneously.

Ethan leaned back in the office chair and turned his attention to the computer. The screen was dark, so Ethan reached for the power button. Yes, he knew it was futile, but this level of boredom called for desperate means. Sure enough, though, the computer failed to turn on. No power. The only light came from the flickering, dying emergency lights, and the glow of Giles' flashlight, coming from behind Ethan where Giles sat on the floor paging through one of his far-too-heavy, highly-annoying-to-lug-about books. Around the room, the girls chatted softly amongst themselves, but otherwise, it was very quiet. A building like this ought to hum with electricity, with computers and climate control. The deep purr of modern day was missing.

He turned the chair around and tried to ignore the deep unease this quiet provoked.

For a while, he watched Giles work, sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding the flashlight over the book tucked in his lap. The light caught on his glasses and he looked like a small boy, secretly reading after bedtime, except for the graveness of his expression.

"Discovering the secrets of the universe?" Ethan said, once the lack of attention focused on him became too much to bear.

"Hmm?" Giles said, not quite looking up from the book.

Ethan slid out of the chair to the floor and tugged the volume out of Giles' lap and out of the way. Giles gave him one of those looks over his glasses.

"You know," Ethan said, "This *is* actually a semiprivate--"

"Ethan."

"Oh, come on."

"We are in a cubicle, Ethan. Not a-- no."

"Well, I *did* try to talk you into an office..."

Giles reached for his book again. Ethan leaned forward and caught his arm, stopping him in mid-motion, and conveniently bringing most of their upper bodies in contact. Giles said his name again, but didn't move. Actually, he held carefully still. Ethan waited just long enough to be sure Giles wasn't going to suddenly pull away, then gripped Giles' captive wrist a little tighter and leaned in to nuzzle his neck, get a breath of his scent.

It hit him harder than he'd expected it would. The hint of smoke and sweat and Ripper sparked something old and primal, an array of half-remembrances of youth and freedom and love and sex. Giles breathed softly against his cheek and his hand slid up Ethan's back. Ethan smiled victory and burrowed in closer to get more of that enticing scent. Released his death grip on Rupert's wrist and ran his fingers up to Rupert's shoulder.

But he reveled in his own pleasure only a moment. Had Rupert's interest, but only precariously. Had to keep it. Kissed up Rupert's throat, teasing tongue over his veins, a pleasure point for him, maybe because of the taboo of it. Giles had well-established stubble, after a few days of not shaving. Felt good under Ethan's lips, against his cheek as Giles turned his face towards Ethan's, brushed their cheeks close together, breathed in soft puffs against Ethan's throat, moved his hand in a small circle against Ethan's back.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Giles murmured.

Which would have been more convincing if Giles wasn't pushing into his touch, and making that soft hum that meant he was enjoying himself.

"That's the fun of it," Ethan whispered.

Giles pulled back then, and Ethan worried for a moment that he'd driven him away. But he didn't go far. Only far enough to look into Ethan's eyes, actually. The flashlight had fallen between them, lighting them with a soft, ambient glow that caught on the edges of Giles dark, deep eyes. Ethan's heart fluttered, and there was still a part of him that wanted to pull away from this.

He shut his eyes instead, as Giles' hand touched his cheek.

"God, what you do to me," Giles whispered.

Warmth, and a hint of pain, pulsed through him, and his grip tightened on Giles' shoulder.

Still, when he tried to slide his hand up Giles' thigh, Giles caught it. Ethan opened his eyes to Giles' now wryly amused eyes.

"No," he said, good-naturedly, but sadly much more convincingly.

"Can't blame me for trying," Ethan said, lightly.

"No more than one could blame the wind for blowing," Giles agreed drily, then kissed him. The next day, however, things got bad.

Chapter Seven

The Battle of the Intersection With Four Gas Stations

"Buffy... It's not that I'm doubting your methods. I'm not. I trust you, I do--"

"Giles, I don't want to talk about this, ok?"

Giles sighed, heavily and pointedly. "Buffy, there are a great deal of things you don't want to talk about, but that doesn't make the issues themselves any less pressing."

"You're not going to change my mind. So drop it."

"She's a good Slayer, Buffy. Better than most. She deserves--"

"She *deserves* to live be eleven, Giles, you used to understand that. What *happened* to you?"

"This is what she *wants*. You're denying her the chance to do what she was born to do, what she excels at."

"Maybe she wasn't born to die at ten, Giles, did that occur to you? Maybe she was born to grow up and have a family and, and... write novels!"

Before he could respond, though, one of the vanguard girls shouted, and a moment later, there was no doubt as to why.

The sound came first, a heavy rumble of feet on pavement. It seemed to come from all sides, reverberating through the air like a heavy bass beat. The front of the army of Slayers shambled to a halt, and a titter of conversation, excited or nervous, ran through the ranks. Giles and Buffy and their units were bringing up the rear, so they learned of the arrival of the enemy through the shouts of those towards the front.

Faith's voice came through clearest, "Oh, yeah, baby! That's what I'm talking about! Bring it on!"

One of the girls in the back, about twenty feet ahead of Giles, let out an echoing whoop of agreement, and then the voices of all the girls rose, and the nervousness gave way to anticipation.

Ethan pulled up alongside Giles, even as Buffy darted up towards the front, weaving through the excited Slayers.

"So, what's this?"

"I'm not sure," Giles said, trying to see what was ahead. "The enemy, I presume."

"Wonderful."

"Yes, well. That's what we're here for."

He could make out a large intersection up ahead. A stoplight, marking two thick streets crossing. There was a Texaco on one side of the street, an Exxon on the other, a Shell on the third side and a Sheetz to complete the quartet. That meant they'd have a relatively large battlefield, with the wide open plazas of the gas stations combined with the intersection.

That was the moment the attack began in earnest. The tone of the shouts changed, and the enemy thundered down upon the front of the ranks, pouring in from ahead of them, and from either side. Giles spun around, but behind them seemed clear. Still, it was no doubt only a matter of time 'til the enemy found its way around and struck from there. They'd be surrounded.

Katie appeared at his other side.

"What do we do?" she asked, looking ahead with the same twitchy excitement of a thoroughbred at a race course.

"Charge?" he suggested, still finding himself trying to keep his tone light.

She grinned up at him, a surprising moment of brightness on her normally calm face.

The other girls around them took this at face value, and then they were all running towards the fray.

Things got confusing after that.

Giles saw Ethan run out of the corner of his eye as the army of slayers collided with the army of demons like the meeting of two tides. He trusted Ethan not to flee, and poured his attention into the battle.

The armies were already thoroughly mixed, and sure enough, some of the demons quickly moved around to the back, cutting off their escape route. Giles readied his sword and a moment later, a demon was at him, charging, with a large blade raised high. The adrenaline rush hit and Giles met the challenge with a roar.

The fight became Giles' world. He didn't look for Ethan or Buffy or even Katie. He simply fought, and knew that he was born for it, as sure as any Slayer. The burn in his muscles, the jolt of his sword hitting another sword, it all felt so primal and so right.

It took him a moment to realize that something odd was happening.

In fact, he didn't realize anything odd was happening until one of the other demon warriors roared up to him and his opponent. It heaved its huge ax just as Giles' sword locked with his original opponent's sword, and for a horrifying moment, he was sure he was about to be cleaved in two.

But instead, the new demon swung his ax, and neatly beheaded his compatriot.

Then it roared in triumph and ran off.

Only then did Giles look around and realize that this was happening all around him, and spreading all across the battlefield. There was confusion and infighting in the enemy's ranks. After he saw that, it only took a moment to realize it was Ethan's doing, of course.

He took advantage of the confusion to search for Ethan.

He turned out to be up on the roof of the office/garage of the gas station to Giles' right, supposedly up and out of the combat. In typical Ethan fashion, he was standing at the edge of the roof and grinning at the chaos he'd caused, and for once, Giles was ok with that, given that the chaos was clearly working to their advantage. But then Giles' blood ran cold. Ethan was not out of the combat. About seven demons had caught sight of him, and were bearing down with intent on the office.

Giles saw the moment Ethan saw them coming and startled, then backed away from the edge, looking around for an escape route. The battle roared around Giles as they moved quickly to surround the office, cutting Ethan off. Giles ran. Flat out, pulse pounding, lungs burning, had to reach them. Reach Ethan.

For a moment, he lost sight of the station, surrounded by panicking demons and shouting Slayers.

Then he burst out of the worst of the fighting and into the open parking lot of the Sheetz.

The demons were there already, three of them climbing the tires up to the roof. He couldn't see Ethan for a moment, and then suddenly, he appeared at the edge of the roof again, looking down

at the demons. One of them shouted at him, but Ethan shouted something too and, like toy soldiers, the demons all fell back.

But so did Ethan, collapsing down out of sight on the roof.

Giles ran again, reached the tires just as the demons were beginning to recover from the magical blast. Giles swung his sword, hard but with no precision, and managed to catch one full in the chest, and send it reeling into one of its companions. He scrambled up to the roof. Ethan was down and looked unconscious. Giles didn't have time to check for a pulse, he just stationed himself over Ethan with his sword ready.

From here, he could see most of the battlefield, and he could watch as the effect of Ethan's spell, whatever it had been, infected more and more of the demons. They panicked and became confused, fighting both friend and foe with no apparent discrimination.

Then one of the other demons crested the roof, and Giles had no attention to spare to the rest of the battle. All he could think of was not letting them touch Ethan.

Thus, when he looked up, he didn't know how much later, five demons dead around him, he only caught the tail end of the demon forces' rout. The Slayers shouted in triumph, in an intersection littered with the bodies of their foes.

Giles tossed his sword aside and knelt besides Ethan, reaching out to feel the wonderful throb of his pulse. Then Ethan's eyes opened a crack.

"Did we win?"

Giles smiled. "For the moment."

"Go team go," Ethan said.

Chapter Eight

Love and War

He'd been convinced he was dead, but he'd still thrown the last of his energy into knocking back the demons, just once, even though it knocked him out. His reasoning, such as it was in that moment of panic, was at least he'd be unconscious. He'd collapsed and not even felt himself hit the roof.

And yet, the next time he'd opened his eyes, he was not dead. The smell of tar, from the roof sealant, filled his nose, and the world was blurry but still present around him and he wasn't even in very much pain. Well, he was in no more pain than he'd expect to be after draining himself so spectacularly.

He'd raised his head slightly, trying to figure out why he wasn't dead, and the first thing he'd been able to focus on was the dingy hem of Giles' jeans. Ripper. Ripper was there. Standing over him. Cursing, actually. Ethan had squinted and peered up just in time to see Giles drive his sword through a demon's gut. Ripper. Saving his life.

He'd passed out again, and the next time he'd awoken, Giles had been kneeling over him, feeling for his pulse.

He passed out again after a weak quip or two, and then woke up a third time, rudely and abruptly, to the shock of smelling salts. He coughed and batted the acrid scent away.

"What--" he choked, wondering why anyone would be so cruel.

"Can you walk?" Giles asked.

"No, go away," Ethan snapped. The ground was comfy, and the demons were gone for the moment. Why should he move?

"Get up, Ethan," Giles said, the same way he used to sometimes when he was feeling restless at ridiculous hours of the morning. Like eleven.

"No."

But Ripper just grabbed his arm and hooked it around his shoulder and manhandled him to his feet anyway, with the assistance of someone smallish and all-too-strong. Ethan glanced over to find Lisa helping to prop him up. Katie hovered a few feet away, looking concerned and bloody. Fortunately, it seemed to be demon blood.

"I've got him," Giles said, tugging Ethan's weight over onto him as though Ethan wasn't actually present to have a say in the situation. At which point Ethan noticed for the first time that he

was no longer actually on the roof, but on the ground, next to the office. His head ached and his feet didn't seem to want to cooperate with him.

"Come on," Giles said, somewhat gentler. "We're setting up just across the street. It's not far."

It seemed far, though. It was a big street, after all. Giles let him stop now and then to catch his breath. Ethan tried to ignore the concern in his eyes. Also tried to ignore the way Lisa and Katie were scanning the streets with that predatory alertness that suggested the demons may not be as gone as he'd believed and that perhaps they were still in danger of being eaten at any moment.

They reached the building, finally. A bank. The girls were camped out on the floor already, some with wounds wrapped in gauze, others just dusty and bloody and tired. Ethan would have been happy just to collapse inside the door and take a nice nap on the shiny blue marble. Giles didn't seem to like that plan though, and hauled him through the crowd of Slayers back to a hallway lined with glass-fronted offices.

"Oh, so we... rate an office... tonight, eh?" Ethan asked, using up, by his own estimate, all the breath he'd have to spare for the rest of the week.

"Special privilege for the wounded hero," Giles said, with his usual dryness, as he let Ethan sit down, finally, on the sleeping bags someone had already laid out.

"You're wounded?" Ethan said, looking at him but not seeing any human blood.

Giles frowned a bit, and said, "Was that a joke, or an actual question?"

"I have no idea," Ethan said, then collapsed happily on the semi-softness of the sleeping bags.

"That's all right," Giles said, and Ethan, snuggling down into the warm blankets, couldn't find it in him to be annoyed by the patronizing tone. Especially not after Giles laid down next to him and pulled him into his arms. Yes, this was a vast improvement over unconsciousness on the cold pavement. Perhaps it had been worth the effort of walking across the street, after all.

Then he more or less pleasantly drifted in a doze for some time.

Until Giles murmured "You drained your power, yes?"

"Mmm," Ethan said, in an agreeable tone.

"What do you need?"

"Time. Rest."

"How much time?"

"Don't know. Never quite did myself this badly before, actually," Ethan said, waking up slightly, and feeling for the first time a small flicker of panic at just how exhausted he was.

He shut his eyes again. Giles moved under him, then gripped his arm and tugged Ethan over top him a bit more, as though he were a human blanket. Ethan settled against him, trying not to wonder how the hell he was going to be able to keep up with the troops the next day, but then, Giles took his hand, and pulled it between them. Then he spread Ethan's hand flat over the center of his own chest, and held it there, in the warm pressure between their bodies.

Ethan's eyes snapped open.

"Giles--"

"Do it. Slowly, and it won't hurt me."

He knew what Giles was offering, to allow him to drain his magic to replenish his own. Done wrong, done fast, it could easily be fatal. Giles had, in fact, carried the scars from Willow's attack for months afterward. Done slowly, though, it would still hurt, but it wouldn't harm him, any more than mild bloodloss might.

"It's all right," Giles said. He reached up and stroked his fingers lightly through Ethan's hair. Ethan didn't move, for as long as he could hold himself up, which wasn't long. Then he tucked his face against Giles' shoulder.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Giles said, and Ethan felt him relax, all but for his hand, that pressed Ethan's own a little more firmly to his chest.

Willow trailed Buffy down the hall from the office they'd claimed for the night.

"I screwed up," Buffy said, "I screwed up bad, Willow."

"Buffy--"

"I should have--we were totally unprepared for that--"

"We won, Buffy."

"By luck!"

"No, we won because we had the right people. That's called good planning, ok?"

"We were lucky."

Willow sighed. "Fine. Fine, just--ok."

They were walking down the hall from the office they'd claimed, back towards the bank floor where most of the Slayers had gathered. Willow glanced over at the last office as they passed, just to see how Giles and Ethan were doing. And for a moment, she stopped dead in her tracks.

She tried to keep going after that, as quickly as possible, but Buffy had seen her step falter, and looked where she'd looked.

Buffy just stopped and flat-out stared through the glass front of the office, looking grossed-out. "Ok. Hello? Exhibitionist much?"

"Buffy, they're not--"

"Wait a minute," Buffy said, peering closer, as though Willow hadn't spoken, "What the hell is he doing to Giles?"

Willow caught her arm before she could storm indignantly into the office.

"He's... borrowing his power."

"What? Whoa, wait a minute. That looks like... like... isn't that what you did? He's going to--"

"Buff, relax. It doesn't have to hurt him. If you're careful, it's not dangerous. I just..."

I wasn't, she added, silently, and the memory still hurt. Which was as it should be.

"How do you know he even asked first?" Buffy said, still looking like she was plotting homicide, "How do you know he's being careful?"

"Giles told me he was going to offer. So *I* wouldn't freak out, actually. Come on, Buffy, leave them alone."

"He offered?"

"Yeah. Ethan drained his power pretty bad. It's... it's not a good thing to do."

Buffy didn't seem to be planning on going anywhere, however, and, as eight years of hanging with Buffy and a year of living with Kennedy had taught Willow, a stubborn Slayer is the proverbial immobile object and Willow knew she was no unstoppable force... unless she resorted to witchy mojo, which would definitely have been a bit of overkill in this case.

"Just... don't kill him, ok?" Willow said. "I'm going."

As far as she was concerned, it was a private moment, and she was going to be elsewhere.

Willow walked away, and Buffy was left standing alone in the hall staring through the glass at this nearly-inexplicable spectacle. Giles, with Ethan sprawled on top of him, like they were in a far more intimate situation... or maybe like this was, in fact, an intimate situation. Both of their hands together, resting over Giles' heart, a faint yellow glow where Ethan's palm met Giles' chest. Ethan had his head ducked down against Giles' shoulder, blocking most of her view of Giles' face, but from what she could see--eyes squeezed shut, brow deeply furrowed--he did seem to be in pain... but belying that pain was his free hand which gently ruffled through Ethan's hair. Ethan too, seemed to be stressed. Teeth gritted, eyes shut.

Drink me, she remembered, suddenly, sharply, with the intensity of a flashback. Angel's teeth sinking into her throat. She could remember it all. The pain, the cold stone floor beneath her

back, the deep ache of bloodloss. But more... the passion. The needy sounds Angel made, that had sent a shudder of desire through her that matched or even exceeded the feeling of making love to him. Above all, her desire to save him. To give whatever she needed to save him. The fierce, angry, painful joy of giving herself so he would live.

Love. Sacrifice.

Giles' hand flinched, and clenched, and she saw his body go tense for a moment, saw Ethan's lips move, a whisper, and then Giles slowly relax again, his hand motionless--no, shaking--and half-curved for a moment before going back to running through Ethan's hair.

Her lips parted slightly, suddenly dry, and she swallowed hard.

She was intruding on a moment she shouldn't be seeing. Quietly, all the rage drained away and left her strangely empty and shaky and different. She turned her eyes away and continued on out into the body of the bank. There were other people who needed her.

* * *

It hurt. No two ways around that. It was not, in and of itself, even by any means the good kind of hurt. Giles breathed slowly through the pain, concentrated on the soft strands of cool hair around his fingertips, Ethan's occasional whispered apology, the feeling of both of their bodies shaking, his own from the ache, Ethan's from the effort of restraint. It was intimate, the way his magic slipped into Ethan. He could sense him, his pleasure, his concern, everything. Half-read his thoughts, though not as strongly as he'd read Willow's, that time.

"Gods," Ethan gasped, coinciding with a small, sharp, painful jerk, "Great gods. Rupert."

Pain, but Giles was hard. Ethan was hard. Was moving against him now, small restless hitches of his hips, his breath hot and fast through Giles' shirt at his shoulder. Giles moaned softly. A moment later, the pain began to ease, Ethan let the flow slacken.

His hand drifted down, through Ethan's hair--loving the length it was at now, just long enough to catch in coils around the first knuckles of his fingers--to the warm nape of Ethan's neck, and curled there. Warm skin. He felt the echo of Ethan's pleasure at his touch through the faint link between them, feeding into his own, a feedback loop. It was good, very good, and almost subconsciously, he held Ethan a little tighter. Pushed his hips up against Ethan's as Ethan continued to fidget.

He wasn't quite sure if it was really him or if it was Ethan who didn't seem to care that they were in full view of anyone who happened to walk down that hall. Touching him now seemed more vital than breathing. He wrapped an arm around Ethan, held him close and tight as Ethan raised his head, nuzzled up Giles' neck and then they sank into a deep kiss. Giles just let his body do what it wanted, let himself press up into Ethan's solidness and weight.

Ethan's movements picked up in intensity and in intent. They rolled against each other, gasping against their kiss, the pain fading away to nothing as the sex hormones flooded his bloodstream.

It was good, and quick. Ethan's hand pushed between them to stroke him through his trousers, and Giles quickly moved to return the favor. Ethan came first and Giles followed him shortly.

Giles panted as he collapsed bonelessly across the sleeping bags. He grinned as Ethan began to chuckle.

"Blood hell, we need to get cleaned up. I only have one other pair of trousers," Ethan said.

"Right. We do," Giles said. But after a moment of neither of them moving except to snuggle closer and shift their hips uncomfortably, he added, "But I don't want to get up."

Ethan hummed in an agreeable tone and snuggled a little closer. It would have been odd if it hadn't been so nice, actually. Giles just went with it, sighing contentedly and holding his lover close. Which lasted about all of ten seconds before they both scrambled to their feet with a cursory, mutual, "Clean up. Yes. Now."

Fortunately, there was a restroom down the hall, saving them from the dangerous trek

through the bank floor full of Slayers with their... enhanced senses or whatever it was they actually had. Even Giles wasn't entirely sure if that was part of the Slayer's abilities. In any case, it wasn't an issue. Also fortunate was the fact that, though this part of the city lacked power, it still had running water.

And a final fortunate fact was that they were, naturally, using the men's room which was, given the ratio of males to females, deserted. Through the wall they could hear a faint cacophony of voices debating something in the neighboring women's restroom. They both broke down into highly unmanly giggles as they undid their trousers almost in sync. Giles chuckled again and shook his head.

"I used to have dignity, you know," he said.

"Really?" Ethan said, taking the paper towel Giles offered. "When was this?"

Giles swiped his paper towel under the running faucet, not really looking at what he was doing, because Ethan, grinning, was much more interesting.

"I'm fairly certain I had it for a few years in my thirties."

"I'm sure you did," Ethan said, with all the patronization he could manage... which was a great deal. However, any air of superiority he may have mustered was nullified a moment later when he stuck his hand down his pants and then yelped, "Shit, that's fucking cold."

Giles tried to fight it, but lost the battle and broke down in laughter again.

"Oh, dear lord," he gasped as he got a hold of himself. "Three days into this damn war and I'm already sleep-deprived and inappropriately giddy. This doesn't bode well."

"Well, fortunately, you're charming when you're giddy. Or at least amusing. For the moment."

"Trust me, it will get old fast," Giles said. Then giggled a little more. Then said, "Oh, god. Kill me now."

But when he looked up, he found Ethan suddenly grave. Ethan looked away, tossed his paper towel in the trash, turned to lean back against the sink, and zipped up his trousers.

"Ethan?"

Giles zipped his own trousers, sensing this shift in mood called for being fully clothed. Ethan's lips had slimmed down to a thin, pale line, and his eyes narrowed.

"Rupert..." he said, but didn't go on for quite a while. Giles waited. Let him work through whatever it was that was running through his mind, enough turmoil that Giles could sense it even though the link had already faded to almost nothing.

"Thank you," Ethan finally said. "For saving my life."

There was nothing to say to that but, "You're welcome."

"Giles... I--" Ethan didn't manage to finish that sentence. Eventually, with his arms crossed tightly across his chest and his eyes fixed on a point on the floor, he simply started over with, "Just for the record, how naive am I? If I think this could last?"

Some part of Giles seemed as though it had been waiting for almost a year now for a question like this, and the answer came easily, with a small surge of joy, mixed with relief and a little fear.

"No more naive than I am," he said.

Ethan's small smile looked like it hurt. "Oh, good. At least we're both fools, then."

"Well, that is what makes us so good together," Giles cracked, lightly.

"Ever so true," Ethan said. Giles saw him swallow hard, and understood the feeling, the thin veneer of humor that he was clinging to. When Giles stepped close and kissed him, he tasted like tears, but his eyes were dry when they parted.

"I love you, Ethan."

Ethan huffed a small, sad laugh. "You know I've been waiting thirty years to hear you say that again."

"I wasn't... sure, how you..." Giles said, suddenly scared that perhaps Ethan didn't... that it was too late.

"I've always loved you, Giles. Even when I hated you. Even before I knew you. It was

always you."

"Ah. Well, then. That's. Good."

"Such enthusiasm," Ethan said, smirking a bit.

Giles narrowed his eyes. "You want enthusiasm? I'll give you enthusiasm."

Ethan grinned into the kiss.

Chapter Nine

Old Friends

They settled for the night on top of the sleeping bags, under a sheet, curled closer together that night than they had in a while. Ethan stretched out along Giles' side, one arm around him, and drifted off to sleep quickly. Giles lay awake for awhile, looking up through the dark at the ceiling and counting Ethan's quiet breaths.

He'd never expected this, it had just happened, subtly, slowly, until one day he'd looked around and found himself in love. In love... and happy. Content.

He rubbed Ethan's back gently as the man slept. Strong, lean muscle, hard shoulder blades, Ethan felt so good under his hands. He loved Giles. Finally they'd managed to say it.

Giles found himself grinning in the dark. He was a lucky man.

Just then, the door to the office opened, and soft footsteps approached.

"Katie?" Giles said, looking up at the shape of her in the dark.

Ethan moved and muttered, but didn't really wake up.

Giles opened his free arm and, once again betraying his determination to treat her like an adult, said, "Come here."

She crept around quietly and scooted against his other side, two fingers tucked into her mouth like a much younger child.

He didn't ask if she was all right. It would be a stupid question. She spoke on her own a moment later.

"I miss my mom," she said. "And my kitty. And my house." She paused, sniffled, and said, "I'm being a big baby."

"Not at all," he quickly countered. "I miss home, as well. It's perfectly normal. It's even normal to be scared."

"I am. A little," she said, but then she added, with more enthusiasm, "But I liked fighting the demons."

He smiled, remembering the savage thrill of combat. "Yes, that can be fun, I suppose." He paused, then said, "Tell me about your cat."

She sniffled again, her fingers drifting back into her mouth and slurring her words. "His name is Todd. He's grey. I got him when I was five."

He kept her talking about home until she finally drifted off to sleep.

* * *

The next morning they woke up to the sound of one of the girls running down their hall, yelling for Buffy. Ethan groaned and muttered, "Oh, shut up, it's not the end of the world." Then he sat up a slightly and said, "Is it?"

"I don't know," Giles said, looking out into the hall. A moment later, two people, lead by a two very familiar figures, walked into the hall from the bank. Angel. Angel and his people. And-- Spike? It couldn't be--

Giles stood quickly and headed out into the hall, following Angel and his people until Buffy followed the girl out of her office and everyone stopped dead. It *was* Spike.

"Angel," Buffy said. Then her eyes widened more. "Spike?"

"Yeah, it's Spike," Angel said, quickly. "We heard the battle. Took us awhile to find you guys, though."

"But you're-- you're dead," Buffy said, still staring at Spike.

"Yeah, well, aren't we all?" Spike tossed out, offhandedly. He was staring at Buffy as though she, too, had just recently come back from the dead. Er, again.

"Uh, guys?" Angel said, "Shouldn't we be, like, plotting strategy?"

Giles, suspecting Buffy wouldn't be quite up to her usual standards of coherence, said, "And why should we trust you? Given that it was you who got us into this, in spite of our repeated warnings that you were on a very dangerous path."

The man in the back of the group, a young black man, spun around and narrowed his eyes.

"Who's this guy?"

"That's Giles," Angel said. "Giles, Gunn. Gunn, Giles, and can we please move on and start trying to fix this?"

"Oh," Gunn said, his body posture going on guard. Giles tensed at the display of hostility. "So," Gunn continued, taking a step closer, "You're the guy who wouldn't help when Fred was dying, huh? Nice. Been wanting to have a talk with you."

"Hey," Buffy said, before Gunn could get any closer, "It was my decision."

Giles met her eyes over the shoulders of Angel's team, then looked back to Gunn, who was looking between them, still angry.

"A decision which I supported," Giles said. "We made our position on your decision to work for Wolfram and Hart clear. That doing so meant you would forfeit our alliance."

"She was *dying*, you bastard. A girl, dying. And you were thinking of, of... affiliations?"

"We were right, weren't we?" Buffy said. "You caused this. All of this."

"We were at least *trying* to do the right thing, not sitting around on our asses--"

"Stop!" Buffy shouted. "This isn't helping."

"She's right," Angel said. "We need to... Look, I messed up, ok? I see that now. Can we start trying to save the world, yet?"

They lapsed into uncomfortable silence until Buffy finally said, "What do you know?"

* * *

As the higher-ups debated and glared at each other, Ethan wandered around the bank, and eventually back to their office. He found Katie still there, sitting at the desk in the big chair, her feet just barely touching the floor, drawing something on printer paper, with the heavy, ornate pen the banker had had on display on his desk. She had a flashlight aimed across the page. Bored, Ethan went over and sat in the chair on the opposite side of the desk and leaned in to see.

It was a horse, apparently. Or something like one. Maybe a dog.

"What's that?"

"Unicorn," she said, not looking up from her work.

"Ah."

She drew for a while longer, then, without looking up, said, "Hey, Ethan?"

"Hmm?"

"Are unicorns real?"

"They used to be. They were hunted to extinction in the Middle Ages, though."

She set the pen aside and frowned. "Stupid hunters."

He shrugged.

"Were they really magical?"

"Apparently," he said. "They still sell powdered unicorn horn on the black market. It's incredibly expensive, of course, and nine times out of ten it's fake. Usually narwhale tusk."

Her frown deepened and she looked down at her drawing, and for a moment, Ethan actually felt bad.

"Well, there's rumors there's still a few around somewhere," he said. "In Russia, and someone said they saw one in England a decade or so ago."

"Really?" she said.

"Well, it was only one witness. No one else ever confirmed it."

"How about dragons?"

"Dragons are all too real. Giles fought one once. And apparently there's one around here, somewhere."

"Really?" she sat up straighter. "Can we see it?"

"Can we? I'm not sure that's how I would have phrased that question. Given that if we do see it, it will probably eat us."

"But I'm a Slayer," she said, matter-of-factly, "I won't let it eat us."

"Oh, good. That's comforting to know."

"We'll need the army to create a diversion. But then we'll need a team to go in and close the portal," Angel said

"Ok, and how do we do that?" Buffy countered.

"Well, I don't *know* given that... look, we don't... we don't know, ok? That's... that would have been Wesley's thing." Angel continued on with obviously deliberate haste. "And frankly, we haven't exactly had time to sit down and crack the books, but you guys have Willow, so I figure you'll probably be better off in that department than we are."

"All right. Fine," Buffy said.

"Wait a minute," Willow said, "I don't know how to--"

"We'll figure something out," Buffy said.

"It shouldn't be too hard," Giles jumped in. "A standard banishment spell should do it. It would just have to be a... very large banishment spell."

"All right. So. We need a team to close the portal," Buffy said.

"Yeah," Angel said, "And to... um... slay the dragon. That's guarding the portal."

"Oh. Dragon. Great. That's great."

"Hey, we've slain a dragon," Xander spoke up. "We have experience with the dragon slayage."

"Oh, yeah," Willow said, "That was pretty cool."

"Yeah. Practically our finest hour," Spike said, "And everyone made it out free of third-degree burns."

Buffy looked at them in confusion. "When did you--"

"Uh," Willow said, "You kinda... weren't around."

"Oh. Yeah."

Giles spoke after a moment, to break the awkward silence.

"It... um... might be best to use a tri-point banishment spell."

Willow nodded. "I was thinking that, too."

"So... Willow, myself, and Ethan," he continued, carefully.
Buffy's gaze locked with his. Then she quickly looked away. But she said, "Yeah. Ok. If that's what you think's best."
This surprised him. He'd expected resistance.
"Good," Willow said.
"So, we'll go in, then," Buffy said. "My team and Giles' team. Will you be with us, Angel?"
"Yeah."
She nodded.
"All right, then. That's the plan. The army distracts them, we slip in, slay the dragon, close the portal, then we can all go home."
With that, the meeting broke up, and they all left to prepare their teams.

Chapter Ten

A Big Dragon

"So, let me get this straight," Ethan said, as they tromped along the streets of LA, "You *volunteered* us to fight the damn dragon?"

"Er. Well, I volunteered us to help cast the spell. The dragon was simply... part of the package deal."

"I see."

Katie was practically bouncing along beside them, excited at the prospect of seeing a real, live dragon. Ethan was convinced they were all about to be real, dead humans. He rolled his eyes.

"At least someone is looking forward to our inevitable doom."

"Not... inevitable. Highly likely, perhaps, but not--"

"Giles? Shut up."

Giles did shut up, but he still looked far too chipper for a man on his way to a fiery, chompy doom. Ethan decided to watch Buffy instead, since she was a much more appropriate unending fount of angst and hopelessness. As it turned out, she proved more entertaining than usual. Well, she, along with the two vampires who were huddling in the shadows. She was staring at the blonde, the blonde was staring at her, and the brunette, Angel, was glaring at the both of them, and talking. Constantly. Even though the other two seemed to be paying him no mind. Except the blond, who occasionally made a comment in Angel's general direction and then went back to gazing.

"She has a real thing for vampires, doesn't she?" Ethan felt compelled to comment after about a half-hour of this.

"Oh, Lord," Giles groaned. "Don't even get me started."

Ethan chuckled.

Then remembered he was about to die and sobered again. Not that death hadn't always been a possibility, of course. He sighed. He really had to work on his tendency to make impulsive, probably deadly decisions. If he lived. Which, of course, seemed unlikely.

"Oh for god's sake," Giles said, after another few blocks. "You're not going to die. We have six Slayers, two vampires, a zillion-year-old demon, and one of the most powerful witches in the world on our side. Last time I fought a dragon it was only with a vampire, a thousand-year-old ex-demon, two witches, and Xander."

Ethan glanced over at the young man in question, who was currently enthusiastically

recounting the plot of a comic book with Andrew. They were supplying character voices and sound effects and occasionally acting out the more important panels.

Ostensibly, this was to provide moral support to the Slayers--a small handful of whom were actually watching with at least some form of amusement--but Ethan suspected those two would behave like that even if they were alone in a room with no windows. Though, after a moment, that particular thought took a turn that even Ethan was loathe to contemplate.

"Right," he said. "Good point."

Still, when their group split off from the main army, Giles looked like he was perhaps having second thoughts.

Willow heard it well before they saw it. It made a deep, wheezing, snuffling sound as it breathed, and its claws scraped and clattered on the pavement. They'd taken the back way, through twisty alleys stuffed with old trash and occasionally bodies. Willow had nearly decided it might be worth casting that spell that made you not able to smell stuff regardless of the whole no-nose factor when Buffy brought their group to a halt and turned to her. "So, we're all clear on the plan?"

"Yup," Willow said.

The plan being as soon as they got in sight of the dragon, quickly cast a silencing spell to keep it from summoning the troops. After that, the plan was, verbatim, "Kill the dragon." That sentence was helpfully underlined three times, just to make sure they didn't forget that important step of the process.

They all gathered close together after that, bunched into a herd like nervous cattle. Or just like nervous humans, which they were, all except Spike and Angel and the blue demon girl. They could all hear the dragon-noises now. Not just the loud grunts and scratches, but also the footfalls and the leathery rustle of wings. She tensed, remembering their last encounter with a dragon. A small fledgling, according to Giles. This one sounded more like a full-grown dragon. Fun. Even the little one had been, well, big.

The closer they got, the less they smelled the garbage and the more they smell the rank scent of carnivore and sulfur. It made her miss the garbage.

They stopped at the mouth of the final alley. It had grown darker and darker as they walked, and here, near the portal, it was dark as night. The darkness shielded the portal and the demon world beyond from the sun, but had the benefit for them of allowing Spike and Angel to fight alongside them.

They all looked at her then. She still hated being put on the spot.

"Come on, Will," Kennedy said, "You can do this."

"This, I can do," Willow agreed. "Closing the portal? That's gonna be the tricky part."

Then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and cleared her mind. A quick chant, a rush of power, and then the huffs and grunts of the dragon vanished abruptly. The nail-on-a-chalkboard screech of its claws on the pavement, however, remained painfully present. That was ok, though. It couldn't call down the troops, and that was what mattered.

"All right," she said, "That's it."

She glanced back at the group. Everyone looked at least a little nervous, but most of the Slayers, even little Katie, seemed ready to go.

"Ok," Buffy said. "Let's go."

So they went.

It was, indeed, a dragon. A big dragon. And behind it, as advertised, was the portal, a great, dark rip in the night. The dragon or something had knocked down the neighboring buildings and had made a nest of the twisted steel beams and concrete, atop which it now sat, with its neck twisted

around... apparently grooming itself like an incredibly large, incredibly ugly gerbil.

Incredibly large being an understatement.

They were all going to be lizard chow.

"Hey!" Buffy shouted, "Down here!"

Ethan groaned.

The dragon slowly lifted its head and turned its heavy neck, and looked down at them all from up on its nest of rubble, almost disdainfully. Then it snorted, open its mouth and--

No, it didn't try to roar for help. Of course not. Why should it bother, after all, when it could just *breathe fire on them*. The group had a moment to yip with panic and scramble out of the way. All but for Ethan and Willow who, as simultaneously as synchronized swimmers, raised their arms and shouted, "Pyrus Repellio!"

And then the flames engulfed them.

Then the flame was gone, and they looked at each other, and Willow grinned. "Magicy instincts," she said, and he found himself grinning back.

For a second.

And then they both scrambled out of the way as huge dragon jaws smashed shut right where they had been standing. Ethan didn't stop running until he'd climbed up a nearby stack of rubble, and found a small indentation where he'd be relatively out of the way. There was, perhaps, shame in running and hiding, but quite frankly, he was a sorcerer, not a fighter, and he was not going to be standing around in the middle of the field of battle. Death was much much worse than shame. In most cases.

As he turned back to the battlefield, he found things in full swing. The fighters had charged the beast, waving swords and shouting back and forth. The dragon was swinging its head this way and that as though confused as to why these small creatures were bothering it. Frankly, Ethan didn't see what Katie found so charming about the beasts. They were nothing more, really, than an overgrown reptile with a very bad case of halitosis, in his opinion.

Then, stunningly quick for a thing of its size, it snapped up one of the Slayers. Mystical strength had nothing, apparently, on being swallowed whole.

Like a shockwave had gone through them, the other fighters lunged backwards. Ethan felt sick. He wasn't even sure which of the Slayers it had been. Couldn't tell, in the hustle, who was still present. The dragon paced forward and the fighters fell back more, like foam chased by a tide. They were shouting to each other, still.

Ethan slung his bag off his shoulder and dragged out his candles, lighter, knife, and chalk, and began to create a power circle. He looked up every few seconds, watching as the fighters began to move in again, in quick charges and feints, avoiding the dragon's reach by precarious inches it seemed.

He froze, though, still holding a burning candle, when he looked up yet again, to see Giles and Katie mere feet away from the hind foot of the big creature. They were watching the foot, and watching the head. Not watching the big, spiky tail, which was swinging around in a dangerous-looking manner and now was--

"Immobilis!" Ethan shouted, almost without thinking, dropping the candle, flinging only his own raw power into the word.

The dragon, for a moment, froze, and Giles looked around, saw the spikes moments away from him, and grabbed Katie and yanked her out of the way, just as the spell released and the tail swung through where they'd been only a heartbeat earlier.

Ethan shook as he sat down on the rubble. That had been far too close.

Then he noticed something. The dragon swung its head around and looked straight at him. Oh crap. He snatched up the candle he'd dropped and finished lighting it, then got to his feet, his mind sorting through and discarding possible incantations.

The dragon was pounding his way, each step shaking the earth. It unfurled its huge wings and looked just all the more imposing. It was incredibly hard to think of Latin conjugation with a giant lizard bearing down on oneself.

In fact, in the end, the truth was, he would have been dragon bait if it had been up to him. Sadly, keeping his head in a crisis really wasn't his best talent.

Fortunately for him, however, the dragon was so focused on charging over to eat him up it failed to notice that Buffy had caught hold of it and clambered up its scales. That would be the downside to being so heavily armored... a lack of sensitivity to little humans scampering across your back and up your neck and then, two seconds before you eat the obnoxious little sorcerer who messed up your fun, ramming their sword through a chink in your scales and into your brain, killing you instantly.

The dragon collapsed to the rubble with an earthshaking roar. Buffy leapt free of the chaos as neatly as a house cat.

Ethan sank back against the wall of rubble behind him, his knees shaking too hard to hold him up on his own. A moment later, Giles scrambled up beside him, asking if he was all right, if he was hurt. He shook his head.

"Nice work," Giles added, "With the immobility spell."

"Ah. Yes, that was... yes," Ethan said, still not entirely coherent.

Giles ran his hands up and down Ethan's arms, briskly, as though checking for brokenness, then he stepped back and looked down at the dead dragon.

"My. It's... it's big, isn't it?"

"You notice that *now*?" Ethan said.

"Well, I'd *noticed*, it's just now I'm... noticing."

Ethan managed to pull himself away from the wall and peered down at the dead thing as well. The remaining Slayers and the others were standing around the immense body. To scale, they were about the size of rabbits next to a water buffalo. Its teeth were about the size of a man's hand, which Ethan could see clearly because Angel was currently attempting to pry one of them out. Dragon's teeth were quite useful, though it had never really occurred to him he may one day see one in its natural habitat. He usually bought them all neatly powdered and utterly unthreatening. He had once needed one intact, but apparently that one had come from a much younger dragon.

Angel wrenched one of the fangs out and trotted over to Buffy, who was inspecting her sword which was still stuck through the dragon's head. He held it out like a cat offering its master a dead bird. Buffy's reaction fit the metaphor perfectly.

Angel looked befuddled, then turned and climbed up the rubble toward Giles and Ethan.

"Hey, you want one?" Angel asked, holding it towards Ethan, much to Ethan's surprise.

"Kinda traditional for the people who killed the dragon to get one."

"I didn't--" then he remembered how much he'd paid for that damned tooth. "Thanks," he said, taking it carefully by one of the less-bloody bits.

"Hey," Angel said, "In our line of work, even distracting the big chompy thing is part of the team effort."

"Ah," Ethan said, though Angel was already climbing back down. Ethan looked down at the tooth, then up at Giles, ruefully. "I'm sure it will serve as a lovely reminder of one of my more humiliating moments."

Giles laughed, and then kissed him.

"I think you were brilliant."

Ethan wasn't sure, but he thought he might actually be blushing. No... probably not.

Then Willow was calling up, "Hey, is that a good station for you, Ethan?"

He stepped to the edge and looked down again, nodded. "I've got my power circle mostly prepared."

"Ok! Tell Giles to get down here. I think I found a spot for him."

Ethan turned, mock-dutifully, to Giles.

"Get down there, she's found a spot for you."

"Yes, thank you. I heard," Giles said, drolly.

Ethan watched Giles pick his way back down the rubble. Watched him closely, the way he moved now, with more care than he had in his youth, but still with the same grace of a fighter. His

strength showed through in flashes as he navigated the concrete and steel, gripping handholds and turning and lowering himself. There was, as always, a powerful beauty to him, that captivated Ethan now, the same as it had when he was young, the same as it always did.

He looked away when Giles finally hopped to the ground, and found Buffy, looking up, watching him watch Giles. She looked away quickly when she saw he'd seen her, and then walked off to join the Slayers who had gathered near the base of the portal, on guard for unanticipated guests.

Ethan turned his attention back to completing his power circle. He took his time, now. He cleared off the dust and debris from the relatively flat slab of concrete he stood on, then redrew the chalk circle around himself. Then he carefully lit and stationed each candle. He sat in the center of the circle and shut his eyes when that was done, then drew a deep, slow breath, centering himself.

He stayed that way, breathing slowly, letting the lingering adrenaline and terror fade away. Slowly, he felt the build in him, around him, the power gathering. He could sense the power of the portal, pulsing and hot. He could sense the power of Willow, a bright whiteness on his mental eyes. And then, faint but growing, he could sense Ripper's power, cool green.

Willow's voice began, then, her chant carrying clearly over the ruins. The power rose with each word, all of their magics drawing in towards the rift between worlds and beginning to swirl around the edges. Ethan shut his eyes and focused on the energies, waiting until it was his turn and then picking up the chant from Willow.

His own power surged sharply with the words, the power of the earth flowing up through him. It tingled in his chest, almost pleasurable as sex, and he almost smiled as he spoke. Now this, this was what he was meant for.

It was almost a letdown to allow the next verse of the chant to pass to Giles.

Only for a moment, though, and then Giles picked it up and the power surged again. Their power, combining into a white heat around the flickering red of the portal, beginning to pull into the center, beginning, at the top and bottom, to stitch the tear shut again.

Willow's power was the strongest flavor in the mix, something sweet, like berries. It nearly overwhelmed the ozone tang of Giles' magic, and the salt metal of his own. She could have carried this spell on her own, but it wouldn't have been good for her. He and Giles were merely her safety net, unnecessary support. Still, when they reached the next stanza, speaking it together, feeling the rush of that strong power was more than worth being nothing more than an adjunct. And then, the rift abruptly tightened halfway closed in one jolt. Angry, excited pleasure. He vaguely heard the Slayers commenting.

Willow took over the last verse of the chant, and all he had to do, all he could do, was hold on and let the power rip through him, pour into the rift, and then, like yanking a noose around the top of a sack, the rift jerked shut. A moment... and then it was gone, as though it had never been there.

Everyone gathered under where the portal had been after that. Except Jenn, of course. Their one casualty. Giles reached the group before Ethan and Willow. Willow joined them next, flushed but grinning with triumph.

"That was *great!*" she said. Giles smiled and caught her when she threw herself at him, hugging him.

"Sorry," she said, stepping back, sheepishly. "I get, like, caffeinated after a good spell."

He smiled, and then Ethan reached the group, looking much mellower than he had the last time Giles saw him, shortly after almost being eaten. He came up to Giles and bumped against his side, slipping an arm around his waist with no hesitation.

And why should he hesitate? Giles asked himself, sternly. *You're among friends here.*

Kennedy certainly wasn't showing any hesitation...

Giles averted his eyes discreetly.

Then Buffy came up to them, with her arms crossed.
"Hey," she said, and to Giles' surprise, she was addressing Ethan, "You ok?"
Ethan looked taken aback for a moment then said, "Fine. I'm fine. Thank you. Nice...
stabbing."
She smiled halfway.
"Well, it's what I do," she said. Then she turned to Giles. "Guess we'd better go and see
how everyone else is faring, huh?"
He nodded.
"Then can we go home?" Katie asked, appearing beside him.
"I certainly hope so," Giles said. "I think I've had just about enough of, er, not-so-sunny
California."

Epilogue

Ethan stretched luxuriously on the rope hammock, carefully tugging each muscle and letting the tension relax away, like he was melting in the light of the warm, yellow sun. Oh, bliss. Hawaii was a vast improvement over the shambles of L.A. He reached a lazy arm out and found his cool mai tai on the deck beside him, picked it up and took a small sip of the coolness, not opening his eyes behind his sunglasses.

Rupert hadn't even had to be talked into getting this quiet, secluded bungalow, well away from the hotels where Council funds had put up the army of Slayers for a week of well-deserved rest and rejuvenation--a part of the Council's new, humane policies. Ethan really liked the Council's new, humane policies.

He also really liked the head of the Council. Yes, indeed. Especially when he came bearing refills for Ethan's drink, and then carefully climbed in the hammock with him, trying not to spill them both out onto the sand.

"Mmmmm," Ethan said, which was as coherent as he planned to get for the rest of the day.

Giles made a few similarly meaningless but happy sounds and wriggled until they were both enmeshed in the rope, pressed together, body to body. Warm sun, warm bodies, cool palm shade, the only sound the calls of seabirds and the rush of the surf. This was definitely the kind of life Ethan could see himself happily leading.

Well, ok, for a few hours, anyway. Any longer and the craving for stimulation would grow too much to be ignored. Then he could drag Giles off to one of the island's gay clubs. Oh, yes. Ripper claimed to not like to dance, but once he was persuaded, he moved with the same grace he fought with.

Ethan reached up and stroked Rupert's hair.

Giles hadn't been enthused when Ethan had demanded they go out dancing. He didn't dance. However, as often (though not always) was the case, Ethan was right. They returned to their little bungalow well into the night, not even drunk, just high on the adrenaline of moving and loud music and each other's bodies. Giles kissed Ethan deeply, knocking him back against the door to their cabin, and Ethan's hands slid up under his shirt, running a staggered route up his sweat-sticky back.

"Have you ever made love in the ocean?" Ethan murmured, pushing his lips close to Giles' ear.

Giles shuddered and said, "Yes, and it was sandy and awful, and no, we're not going to."

He worked one hand around behind Ethan and undid the lock, groping Ethan's arse with the other, partly to distract him from his plans for aquatic adventures, but mostly just because he was

very fond of Ethan's arse. Then he shoved the door open and caught Ethan before he could *actually* fall through the door, and they continued kissing all the way over to the little window seat on the opposite side of the small room. Giles had worked Ethan's shirt off on the way over, so Ethan gasped at the cool glass panes against his bare back when Giles pressed him there gently.

The rhythm of the surf vibrated the glass. Giles undid and pulled off Ethan's trousers, went to his knees. Ethan groaned, already hard, and so beautiful: naked with moonlight falling over his shoulders, his head tilted back, his eyes closed, the entire Pacific ocean and a sky full of stars spread out behind him.

Then Giles shut his eyes and lost himself in the scent, the taste, the feel and the sounds of Ethan. Salt at the tip of his cock, heat and hardness of blood and desire firm on Giles' tongue. Whispers of need and want and love. Fingers curling and loosening in the fringes of hair at the nape of Giles' neck.

"Rupert, gods, Rupert, yes, you're so good at--oh, gods."

Giles ran his hands up and down Ethan's sides, thighs, anywhere he could reach, still drunk on the feeling of this body, this body that had been moving against him, almost making love to him, all night on the dance floor. Driving him insane, leaving him aching, hard, needy. Sucked and licked and moved his tongue just there where Ethan would moan every time, at just the slightest of touches.

Then, in a choked voice, Ethan said, "Don't--Don't make me come. Gods. Want to fuck you--"

Oh, god, yes.

Giles pulled back and looked up, watching Ethan's chest heave in the starlight. Ethan looked down with eyes dark enough to rival the night outside.

"Rupert..."

Nothing more than that. But he didn't need to say anymore.

Giles rocked back on his heels and pulled his shirt off, tossed it aside. Then he rolled to his feet, kicked off his shoes and dealt with his trousers and pants. He loved the way Ethan stared at him. It made him feel wanted, desirable. Just like the way Ethan had touched him all day, all night did.

But somehow, Ethan's small smile was the most affecting part of all. Giles smiled back, then walked the few steps to the kitchen island, to the bag of things they'd bought that afternoon. He took out the small tube of lube and turned to find Ethan pulling out the fold-out bed. He walked to Ethan as Ethan spread himself out across the sheets, smiling again, a slow-burning smile that promised a long night.

Giles crawled across the cool sheets and draped himself over Ethan. Again, they kissed, deep and hard, then soft and slow, just tasting each other, feeling each other. Didn't have to leave this bed for a week if they didn't want to... He breathed Ethan, lived Ethan. Loved Ethan.

Wanted him inside him.

He rolled to his back and Ethan followed him, like a moth drawn to light, coming to lie on top of him. He loved the solid weight, the hot hardness against his hip, and said so, whispered his love of this to Ethan between their damp, touching lips.

"Want you," he said, "Want you inside me. Fuck me, Ethan. Take me."

Ethan groaned deeply, scrabbled for the lube and found it. A moment later, he reached between them, and Giles drew his legs up quickly, spread wide, giving him room to slide his fingers down and then inside. Giles pressed his head back and moaned.

Ethan took his time, finger-fucked him slow and deep, reaching for and finding that spot that sent sparks up his spine.

"God, yes, Ethan. Oh, god."

"That's my boy," Ethan murmured, "That's it."

So hard, so good. Bloody hell, yes. His mind reeled with the pleasure of it.

"Want you," he gasped, then. "Please. Ethan, please."

"Yes, yes," Ethan said as he moved up, over him, lifted his legs and pushed them up,

hooking Giles' calves around his shoulders. Fiery burn in his thigh muscles and then a new burn, of penetration, of Ethan sliding into him, slow and sure. There was barely any pain, though. He was relaxed, at ease, wanting this with all that he was.

When he opened his eyes, he found Ethan's looking down at him. Then Ethan began to move. And then, still inside him, still fucking him, Ethan let himself down across Giles' chest, let Giles' legs slide down around his hips. They kissed as Ethan reached between them.

"Everything," Ethan breathed. "My everything."

"Yes."

~*~

The End