

Dragon 1

She didn't understand why she had been brought here. Every breath was painful. She knew she was dying. One minute she had been in her world and the next in this strange one. The air couldn't even support her wings and she had fallen to the ground. She had pulled her heavy body through the woods, and when she was forced to rest she had tried to forage on the unfamiliar plants. On finding a cave entrance she had entered, needing a place to hide, needing to try and understand what had happened. She had been here now for too long and she knew she wouldn't last much longer. The sadness and loneliness overwhelmed her and she laid her head down on the ground and thought of home.

##

Giles had needed a focus. After he had watched them bury Buffy nothing had made sense to him anymore. He had woken up each day and gone to the shop. At closing he had locked the front door and moved back to his apartment. But the purpose of either activity was absent. He felt like a shell, abandoned by its previous owner, left on the bottom of the ocean.

A week after the funeral he had read a brief article in the paper. Someone claimed to have seen a dragon, over in the woods at the edge of town. Their claims had only been worthy of derision by the author of the article but Giles wondered. He had seen a dragon enter their skies when the rift had opened. Maybe it hadn't gotten home. Maybe it was still around. Maybe he could go kill it. And a part of him hoped that maybe he'd be killed in the process.

He began searching. He scoured the woods looking for signs of dragons. He looked for fewmets or scales or whatever else might have dropped from the beast he had only seen for an instant before his life had shattered as his slayer had fallen from the sky ending up broken and dead before him.

Towards the end of his fifth day of searching he found markings on the ground that indicated that something heavy had fallen and then more signs showing that whatever it was had dragged itself off. Armed with a sword he followed the path eventually coming to a cave entrance.

He pulled out his flashlight and keeping the beam as low as possible he entered. After he'd gone in far enough to not be able to see the entrance anymore he heard a noise and turning the flashlight off he listened intently. He heard it again. Something was breathing. Breathing and moaning. Wherever and whatever it was, it sounded injured. Giles followed the noises and in a minute he had found the beast. He shined his flashlight on it and

other than looking at Giles with its unhappy eyes it did nothing aggressive.

Giles sighed and slipped the sword into its scabbard on his back. He stood there for a minute fighting with himself. That look in its eye had touched him. It had been a look filled with intelligence and pain. Giles took off his glasses and ran his hand over his face. His compassionate side won the battle and he approached closer to the dragon. Despite how stupid it made him feel he spoke to it. "A...are you all right?"

The dragon took a tortured breath and opened its eyes. It had moved closer to her. She tried to shift away from the intruder but movement had become too painful. She let out a cry of pain. Giles winced at the noise and he took a step closer holding up his hands. "I won't hurt you."

She lifted her head a small amount and spoke. "Where is this place?" Giles didn't understand what had been said except that the language seemed somehow familiar to him. He encouraged it with his hands to speak again, hoping he might determine what language it was speaking. She hoped she understood the gesture and asked her question again. "Where am I?"

Giles let the unfamiliar words play through his mind. He sat there lost in thought as he ran it through the immense language files in his brain. After a few minutes he found a potential match. He cleared his throat. The language was rough on a human pharynx. He did his best. "You are on Earth."

Her eyes grew large in amazement. She made the effort of lifting her head even higher. "How do you know my language?" Giles shook his head and tried to use his hands to tell it to speak slowly. She repeated her question. "How do you know my language?"

He thought for a minute, interpreting its words the best he could. He pointed at himself. "I am..." He tried to think of a simple word, "...a teacher."

She nodded. "Where is this earth you speak of?"

Giles shook his head. He had no answer for that without knowing where it came from. Most of the questions he wanted to ask would have no point of reference for either of them. He moved a little closer. "Are you hurt?"

She closed her eyes and took another tortured breath. "The air is bad. I am dying." She opened her eyes back up and found him crouching close to her, by her head. She looked in his eyes and saw no malice there. She spoke again. "What happened? Why am I here?"

Giles tightened his lips, the pain rising in his chest at the thought of Buffy. His

eyes filled with tears. She watched him and then she asked a different question. "Are you in pain?"

He looked at it, surprised by both its perceptivity and its kindness. He hesitated for a moment. "No, not in my body." He gestured to himself.

She spoke again. "In the part of you that loves, then?"

Her question caused a few tears to spill over. "Yes, in the part of me that loved."

She moved her head closer to him. "That part of me is wounded too. I miss my home. I miss my family."

He sat down and pulled his knees up tight against his body and wrapped his arms around them. He answered its previous question. "There was a fight, a fight with a powerful being. The door between worlds came down for a moment. You must have been sucked in."

She thought for a moment. "I was flying and then I was falling. It is good to at least understand why." She closed her eyes and rested her head back down. As welcome as it was, the conversation was wearying her. She spoke softly. "I am sad to die so far away from my home." She drew another breath.

Giles watched its body labor with the effort. "Can I bring you anything? Do you need water or food?"

She thought for a moment. "I do not think I can eat your food. I tried to when I first fell but I became ill. I do not know about your water."

"Shall I try and bring you some?"

She shifted her body a little and couldn't stop a moan of pain from escaping. "No. It will just prolong my death." She looked at him, some fear in her eyes. "Do you think if I die here, that I will still meet my loved ones in death?"

Giles nodded his head. "Yes, I do." He truly had no idea, but telling it that seemed pointless and unkind. He looked at the dragon, taking in its size and shape. "Are there other beings on your world? Ones with a different shape than yours?"

"Yes. There are many. But we live in peace with one another."

Giles sighed. "It sounds wonderful."

"It is." She lifted her head again and looked at him closely. "What are you? What kind of being are you?"

"A human. I am a human, a man, a male of my kind."

She laid her head back down. "I am a female of my kind." His eyebrows rose. He wasn't sure why, but that somehow surprised him. He let out a soft chuckle. She looked at him curious. "What does that noise mean?"

His eyebrows rose again. "It means a lot of things. In this instance I was making fun of myself for making assumptions." He reached out a hand and almost touched her.

She saw him. "You may touch me. It will not hurt me." He gently touched her skin. She was softer than he'd have imagined. She closed her eyes. "It has been lonely. I am grateful that you are here."

He chuckled again, shaking his head. At the questioning look in her eye he explained. "Don't worry, I have no intention of harming you, but I came in here expecting to find a deadly beast that I..." He blew out a breath.

"That you would kill?" She finished his sentence. He nodded. She looked at him sadly. "Is this a hard world to live in?"

"It can be very hard sometimes. Too hard."

They sat there in silence for a long time. The only sound was her breathing and Giles occasionally clearing his throat. It felt raspy from trying to speak her language. Giles let his mind free associate as he sat there. Suddenly he let out a gasp. He looked at her. "I...I might be able to send you home."

Her eyes widened at that. "Is this true? How can this be true?"

He squinched his face up and reluctantly pointed at himself. "I can do some magic. I might know a spell that would send you home."

She lifted her head and brought it close to his. "You would do this for me?"

He bit his lip. "Yes, I can't promise it will work and I need to go get some supplies but I will try." He looked at her. "How sick are you? How much time do you have? Do you have any idea?"

"The breathing gets harder all the time but I am strong. I will last until you get back."

Giles stood and looked down at her. "I will be back, I promise you." He turned and moving quickly he headed out of the cave.

##

Giles planned his arrival back to the shop after he knew Anya would be gone. He didn't want to deal with her questions. He also didn't want to chance having Willow there as he started pouring through his spell books. Giles knew that Willow and Tara would both probably be of assistance and be willing to help, but he wanted to do this on his own. Plus, if he was honest, he had an agenda in mind that he wouldn't be able to do if anyone accompanied him. The thought kept racing through his head despite his best efforts to dismiss it. He dismissed it once again as he opened yet another book.

Finally the spell he had been thinking of lay before him. Spells to return things back to the way they were supposed to be were, for the most part, remarkably straightforward. The real power lay in mucking about with the natural order of things. He didn't believe he'd have any trouble summoning the magic required to complete the spell and he had all the ingredients at hand. Giles sighed and leaned back in his chair. He looked around the shop and he could almost feel the presence of all the young people he'd come to love so much. They had been trying so hard to support him since Buffy's death. The problem was that there was nothing left to support. Nothing for them to hang on to, for them to hold while he pulled himself together.

He thought about writing them a note. He actually tried but he couldn't decide what to write so in the end he wrote nothing. Willow knew what to do if he was ever missing for an extended period of time. Everything was already taken care of.

He found a bag and packed up his supplies. Holding the book tucked under his arm he walked back out to his car. Giles drove as close as he could but eventually the trees grew too thick and he was forced to park. He turned his flashlight back on and found his way back to the cave. He suddenly panicked that perhaps he had taken too long and she would be dead and he began to run. As he turned the last corner in the cave he heard her breathing. He stopped to catch his breath. She spoke. "You came back."

He nodded, still bent over, hands on his legs, above his knees. He took another deep breath and stood. "I told you I would. I'm sorry I took so long."

Her speaking was slower and he could tell her pain had increased. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

He walked over to her. "Yes, I believe I did."

She lifted her head and looked at him. "Hu-man. What is your name?"

"Giles."

"Giles." She repeated it back to him. She said it astonishingly well. He smiled at the sound of his name coming from her mouth.

He asked her the same question. "And yours? What is your name?" She answered with a long, completely unintelligible string of syllables. He bit his lip. "Would it offend you if I asked you to shorten that for me?"

Her eyes lit up with humor. "No Giles. You may call me Talna."

He repeated it. "Talna." He smiled and then looked at her in concern. "Will you get back in time? Will you recover if I send you home?"

"I think so. But if not, at least I will die in my home, with my loved ones around me. I will die in peace."

He pulled his supplies out of the bag and began to set up for the ritual. When he had surrounded her with candles he approached her and crouched down in front of her. "Talna? I have a request to make." He swallowed at the thought of what he was going to ask her.

"What Giles? What would you ask of me?"

He paused, and then spoke. "Will you let me come with you?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Why do you wish this? You will most certainly die there as I would have died here."

He nodded. "I know. But I would rather die seeing a new world and meeting more of your kind, then wasting away here." His eyes filled with tears but he held her gaze.

She gently butted his chest with her head. "Are you that wounded hu-man? Is it a mortal wound?"

He gently touched her snout. "It is. I don't expect to recover."

"Are you able to accompany me? Will your magic send us both?"

"I'm not sure. I...I would need to be touching you. If that will cause you pain I won't ask you to do it."

She stared at him for a while. "I will do this for you, Giles. I will be proud to introduce you to my people." A touch of fear came into her eyes. "Where will the spell place me? I am afraid if it puts me back where I was that I will kill us both. One of my wings is broken. I cannot fly."

Giles lips tightened. "I'm sorry. I don't know the answer to that. Are you still willing to try?"

Her answer was immediate. "Yes. I want to go home."

He sprinkled an herb around and started lighting the candles. Before he lit the last one he stepped inside the circle. He looked at her and she motioned with her head making a step with one of her powerful legs. "Best get on top. It will be safest for you." He furrowed his brow not wanting to hurt her but she swung her head again, pushing him.

He stepped on her leg and swung himself up. He winced at her small moans. He knew he was hurting her. Giles hadn't quite appreciated how large she was until he was sitting astride her. He reached out a hand and softly touched her hide. "Are you ready Talna?"

She stretched her head back looking at him. "Yes Giles, I am ready."

He could feel her muscles tensing underneath him. He gently stroked her hide again. Shining his flashlight he began to read the words of the spell. As he felt things start to shift he tightened his hold on her with his thighs. When the spell was complete he saw a blinding flash of light and then everything went dark.

End of Part 1

Dragon 2

Buffy took another labored breath. It was getting harder and harder to breath. Moving around was torture, every part of her ached. She would have thought she was in hell except the creatures she was surrounded with were so kind to her. So that left her wondering just where she was. Wondering what had happened. Had the world been destroyed? Is this what it had become? Had she saved Dawn? There were no answers to any of her questions.

At least she had found something she could eat. They had brought her one thing after another that she just knew wasn't fit for her metabolism. Then they'd brought her something that looked like a pear. It wasn't a pear but it

was fruity. When she'd picked it up they'd only allowed her a small bite and then they had observed her. She could tell she was in some sort of hospital building just because of how they acted and because there were other sick...things...there.

The pear-like fruit had caused no ill effects so she was allowed to eat all she wanted and they started bringing her other similar foods. She had gone to bed that night with a full stomach for the first time in days. She had lost track of time. Days were done when the sun...or suns...went down. Sometimes there were two of them, and sometimes there were three.

She looked around at the assorted creatures around her. Mostly they were like that creature that had flown through the rift while she'd been talking with Dawn up on the scaffolding. But there were others as well. She observed no animosity between them. It was peaceful and if she hadn't felt so lonely and confused she might have found the rest a welcome relief to the pressure of the last few months. But she was lonely and she never understood anything they said. She knew the air was poisoning her and that she was getting sicker and weaker. Buffy knew she would die soon.

She missed everyone. But she longed for Giles. Things had gotten so unpleasant between them at the end. And yet, she never would have had the strength to do what needed to be done if it hadn't been for him. He was the source of her strength. He had been for so long and she was desperate for him now. Her strength on every front was wearing out.

She heard a commotion outside. She didn't even try and rise. For the last couple of days every time she tried to stand her legs cramped so badly she had fallen. So, she lay there and listened.

##

They did come in airborne but only about twenty feet off the ground. Talna was able to use her one good wing to avoid crashing. She skidded to a stop, trying to keep her back level so she didn't throw Giles off her back.

He could feel the difference in the atmosphere immediately. The air hurt to breath. It burned his lungs. He looked around and was surprised to find that he still had the book and the flashlight clutched in his hands. Despite the difficulty breathing his eyes were wide with amazement as he looked around. It was a beautiful place, the colors soft and inviting. The light looked so different from the light at home. He looked up in the sky and saw three suns. He grinned.

They were starting to attract a crowd. Talna turned her head and looked at

Giles. "You are safe?"

He smiled at her. "Yes, Talna, I am safe. And you? Are you safe now?" He didn't even need to ask, he could feel how much easier she was breathing and she was moving with much less difficulty.

"I am home and my loved ones come to greet me." She bent her leg again, making a step for him to descend. He carefully climbed down and stood at her side.

Her welcoming committee almost knocked her over in their enthusiasm. Upon ascertaining that she was hurt one of the larger dragons had to speak quite sternly to the smaller ones to stop their rambunctiousness. There was a tangle of necks as heads were gently butted against each other.

There was wonder in their eyes as they saw Giles. Talna spoke to the crowd gathered around, speaking too quickly for him to follow. He could only catch a word here and there. Her companions spoke quickly back to her and she swung her head to Giles, her eyes wide. "Giles, they say there is another human here."

Giles eyebrows almost rose off his head. "Another human? How extraordinary. Where?"

She extended a front claw and pointed towards the huge building complex ahead of them. "In there. It is not well. It is having trouble breathing."

Giles could understand. It wouldn't take long before he was not doing well either. His curiosity about the other person was consuming him. But he was also concerned about Talna. He touched her softly. "Do you require medical care?"

"Yes, but it is here I will receive it." She started to slowly walk to the complex. "Walk by my side, Giles. You are my honored guest while you live."

He paced himself to her and they headed into the building. The doors, everything about the place was massive. He supposed it would have to be to allow the dragons easy access. He accompanied her in and watched as a swarm of eager helpers began to assess her wounds.

Buffy had been listening but all she heard was the gargled sound of the dragons speaking. There was a lot of activity happening in the room next door. Then she heard one of the dragons speak. She didn't understand anything she said except for one particular word.

Talna turned to Giles. "Is there anything I can get for you Giles?" He could see the concern in her eyes. "I can see it is already hard for you to breath."

Buffy's brow furrowed. She could have sworn the dragon had just said Giles.

Giles shook his head. "No, thank you. I knew it would be hard."

Buffy's eyes opened wide. He was speaking like the dragons but she'd know that voice anywhere. She forced herself into a sitting position and called his name out loud. "Giles?"

Giles' head shot up. His heart skipped a beat. "Buffy?" He turned to one of the dragons. "Where is she?" The dragon pointed to the room next door. He raced there and saw her sitting on a bed. He stopped in the doorway not believing what his eyes were seeing, that somehow she was alive. He whispered her name. "Buffy?"

Her eyes filled with tears. She couldn't believe he was here. He snapped out of his trance and raced to her side, sitting next to her and pulling her into his arms. He wept as he held her for the longest time.

Talna had followed him in and watched him. She walked over closer to the two of them and gently butted Giles with her head. He looked up at her. She pointed with her snout at Buffy. "Is she who you grieve for? Is it she that you loved?"

Giles nodded. "Yes." He looked at Buffy and cupped her face with his hand. His eyes were filled with wonder as he looked at her. "Yes, this is who I love. I thought her lost to me forever."

Buffy poked him with her hand, still holding him tightly. "Hey, dragon guy. What's going on?" She was confused. "How did you find me?" She looked even more confused. "And how come they know you?" She rested her head on his chest, out of breath from just those few sentences.

He stroked her hair. He could feel her straining for breath. He waited until she could pull her head back again. Talna looked at Buffy and then looked back at Giles. She spoke. "She is not well and soon you will not be either. Can you use your magic to take both of you back to your home world?"

He looked at Buffy and softly smiled. "Yes, I can take us home." He frowned and then looked at Talna. "I think I can. I'll need some supplies."

Talna thought for a moment. "We have magic makers of our own. I will send for one. They will assist you." She gently butted Buffy. "What is this one's

name?"

Giles smiled. "Buffy."

Talna tried the word out. "Buffy." Buffy smiled at the sound. Talna looked at Giles. "She is a female of your kind?" At his nod, she continued. "She is your mate?"

Giles blushed. He spoke briefly in response. Buffy prodded him again. "Hey, I'm still feeling out of the loop here. What did she just ask you?"

Giles took a breath. "She wanted to know if you were my m..mate."

Buffy's eyes widened and then she blushed. "What did you answer?"

Giles looked at the ground for a minute and then back up at Buffy. "I told her you were." He blushed again and tried to explain.

She interrupted him. "No, it's all right. It's true in a way. We did belong together." She smiled at him and slowly lifted her hand to touch his face. All her movements were slow. "I can't believe you're here. How did you know I was here?"

Giles' eyes got sad. "I didn't. I buried you Buffy, back in Sunnydale. You're dead there. I don't understand how you can be alive here. And yet here you are." He stared at her, the back of his fingers rubbing her cheek.

She pulled away. "I'm dead? You mean, like dead dead?" He nodded. She frowned. "I feel really alive. I am alive, aren't I?" Her face got nervous. "Maybe we're both dead." She gasped as she remembered something. "Is Dawn okay?"

Giles smiled at her. "Yes, you saved her. You saved us all." He remembered his manners. He gestured to Talna. "This is Talna. She was sucked into our universe when the rift opened. I was helping return her. That's why I'm here." He reached out a hand and touched Talna's snout. She butted him in return. He spoke in guttural tones again introducing Buffy to Talna. Talna gently head butted Buffy again.

Buffy grinned. She looked at Giles. "Tell her I'm pleased to meet her." She sent Giles a quizzical look. "And where'd you learn to speak dragon anyway?"

Giles turned to Talna. "She is glad to meet you." His eyes grew bright with tears. "How can I thank you for this?" He motioned to Buffy. "You have given me back my life."

Talna butted him so hard he almost fell off the bed. "As you have given me mine. You owe me no thanks." She started to turn. "I must get my wing attended to. I will not be far if you need me."

Giles nodded and stood. He watched her as she left the room and then he sat down next to Buffy again. She was watching him. "You guys kind of bonded, huh?"

Giles smiled a small smile. "You could say that." He ran his hand down her face again, shaking his head in amazement.

She asked him again. "So explain this to me. How come you speak dragon? I mean, somehow it doesn't really surprise me. I mean if there was anyone who would show up in the dragon universe, speaking dragon, and having a dragon buddy, it would be you, but still, I don't get it."

He shook his head. "They speak an ancient language that I was fortunately familiar with. There are so many languages that we know so little about, where they originated from, what the beings were like who spoke them. I can't explain why they speak it." He looked down at her. "I just thank God that I understood it." He tightened his lips. "I went after her to kill her. I thought she was a demon. If I had succeeded..." He couldn't even finish the sentence.

She held him as tight as she could, given her weakened state. "But you didn't. And you found me. All I've done over the last few days is pray that somehow you would. Even though I knew it was impossible, I wanted you here so bad. I missed you so much." She started to cry.

He shifted in the bed so he could lean against the solid part and hold her in his arms. He stroked her hair, and murmured softly to her as she cried. After a while he spoke his thoughts out loud. "I still don't understand how you can be alive." He pulled off his glasses and tapped one of the ear pieces against his lips.

Buffy finally stopped crying and looked up to find him deep in thought. She giggled a little. He looked down at her smiling. "What's so funny?"

"You. Even in another universe you're total research guy." She scrunched her face up. "Can we go home? Can I go home if I'm already there, dead?"

He hugged her tight. "Assuming they can get me the supplies I need I should be able to take us home. I...well...I don't know for sure but if you're alive here I'm quite sure that you'd be able to be alive there."

She almost didn't care. He was here with her now. Warm and strong and holding her. She felt like she was in heaven now. She took a breath that was too deep and she started to cough. Giles patted her on the back. He looked at her concerned. "I don't want to wait much longer. This air is not healthy for humans. Talna was dying when I found her. Our air was toxic to her kind."

Buffy was thinking about something. "Why didn't you have supplies with you? How were you planning on getting home?" Giles didn't answer her. She pushed away and stared at him. "You weren't going home, were you?" She whispered. "You came here knowing you would die here?"

Giles wouldn't look at her. He took a minute but finally answered. "Yes."

She put her hand out and forced his face towards hers. He still kept his gaze down. "Why?"

He spoke softly. "I was already dead. When I buried you..." He stopped, his throat too tight to allow any more words to pass. He shook his head. His eyes lifted to meet hers and the sadness in them made her own eyes tear. She put her hand on his chest. "But I'm here and I'm alive."

He pulled her in for another bone crushing hug. "Yes, you are." After a moment he pulled away. He tucked some hair behind her ear. "Somehow you must have been split in the rift. Something must have happened to send you to both places." His eyes began to get that look again.

Using the hand on his chest she prodded him to get his attention. "Hey, you can research all you want when we get home."

He flashed her a rueful grin. She lifted up her hand and ran her fingers over his lips. She had never thought to see that smile again. The words left her mouth almost without her volition. "I love you."

His eyes grew startled for a moment and then he smiled at her. "I love you too Buffy."

She shook her head. "No, that's not how I mean it."

Giles sent her a confused look. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure yet. I just know I don't mean it that way."

Giles rolled his eyes. "Thank you for your oh-so-clear explanation."

She poked him again. She suddenly felt very tired. She laid her head down

on his chest. His arms wrapped tightly around her and he held her as she rested.

End Part 2

Dragon 3

Giles had almost drifted off to sleep when he heard someone entering the room. He had difficulty telling one dragon from the other but he was able to recognize Talna immediately. He smiled at her. She nodded her head in greeting. She approached the bed he and Buffy were on. "Giles, I have brought a magic maker."

Giles looked confused for a moment. He didn't see anyone with Talna. Suddenly he saw a movement and his eyes widened as a small creature on her back took a step towards him and then sat upon its haunches staring at him with bright eyes. The best description Giles could come up with was a cross between a squirrel and a ferret. Giles tried but couldn't keep a grin off his face. He stood, bowing somewhat awkwardly. He spoke to Talna. "Please convey my greetings."

Talna turned her head to her companion and spoke in a language Giles had never heard and that sounded like a mixture of chirps and whistles. She turned back to Giles and her eyes had a glint of humor in them. "He returns your greetings and says to say that he thinks you are very odd looking too."

Giles barked out a laugh. "I'm afraid I would be quite a failure as an ambassador if he could read me that easily." He frowned. "Is 'he' the right word?"

"Usage of the word 'he' will not be offensive to the magic maker." She turned to confer again and then turned back to Giles. "You may refer to him as Mabon."

Giles nodded his head. He turned to Buffy to find her watching the exchange. He gestured to Mabon. "Buffy, this is Mabon. He is one of this world's magicians. He will hopefully help us get home."

Buffy started grinning too. She looked up at Giles. "You're kidding?" She looked back at Mabon and then again at Giles. "For real?" She giggled. "I guess that means I shouldn't try and pet it, huh?"

Giles bit his lips to keep from laughing himself. "No, I would advise against

that." He looked at Talna. He pursed his lips wondering how to convey what he needed and then he lifted a finger up. "Ah!" He turned and grabbed his magic book. He opened it up to the spell that had brought Talna here and would hopefully allow him and Buffy home. He looked at Talna. "Perhaps Mabon could look at these pages. There are pictures of the herb I need and the other ingredients as well."

Talna passed that on to Mabon. She put her head on the bed and Mabon scampered down. He looked up at Giles and patted the bed with one paw. Giles laid the book down next to him. Mabon looked at the pictures carefully, sitting on the pages so as to more closely scrutinize the illustrations, occasionally rubbing a paw over his face.

Buffy giggled again and looked up at Giles. "He's just like you, except that you don't sit on your books."

Giles rolled his eyes at her. "Very funny." He moved to the other side of Buffy to sit and she leaned against him. Her breathing had become even more labored although she was doing her best to hide it. He needed to get her home soon. They both sat there watching Mabon as he alternated between scurrying across the pages, sitting in rapt contemplation and then chittering at Talna.

Without even thinking about it Giles nuzzled Buffy's neck, breathing deeply of her scent. Buffy's eyes widened and she almost pulled away. Then she got a reflective look on her face and a lopsided grin started to form on her lips. She snuggled back deeper into Giles' chest and enjoyed the feel of him. Giles pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

Talna spoke and Giles placed his attention on her. "Mabon believes he can meet your needs. He says he may need to make a substitute for the herb but that it should not affect the spell. He is familiar with spells like this."

Giles nodded. "I appreciate all the help that he, that you both, are giving us."

Talna looked at him sadly. "I shall miss you when you leave, Giles."

Buffy watched as Giles fought for his composure. He spoke back to Talna. "As I will miss you."

"I will assist Mabon in assembling the supplies. We will return as soon as possible." Giles nodded. Mabon scampered back up Talna's neck and situated himself on her back. Giles let out a little sigh as they left.

Buffy turned to him. "What was that all about? What made you so sad?"

Giles gave her a shy smile. "She said she would miss me."

Buffy touched his face gently with her hand. "I understand how she feels. I never want to be without you again either." She stretched up and placed a small kiss on his lips and then she rested her head on his chest. She was feeling more and more tired and as she listened to his heart beat and felt the shift of his muscles under her cheek she felt Giles' strength and felt bolstered by it. Giles held her tightly while they waited for Talna and Mabon to return.

When they did return Giles stood and after a brief conversation with Mabon using Talna to interpret, he began to set up the spell. When he was almost done he turned to Talna. He wasn't quite sure what to say. He started with the easy part. "Please thank Mabon for his help. And please thank the..." He swept the area around him with his hand. "...the...beings here for keeping Buffy alive." He glanced at Buffy and then back at Talna. "Talna, thank you for allowing me to accompany you here, for understanding my heart, and then for giving it back to me." He blew out a breath, trying to push past the lump in his throat. "I wish I could stay. At least for a while."

Talna stared at him for a minute. "I know that we are not meant to be in each other's worlds but my heart is sad that I will not see you again."

Giles moved close to her and rested his forehead against the side of her head. He stroked her gently. "I am glad I met you." He tapped his chest, over his heart. "You will live here now."

Talna swung her head to look at Buffy. "Take care of your mate. Love each other well."

Giles nodded and walking into the circle he took Buffy's hand in his. "I will."

Talna prodded him with her snout. Giles turned back to her, his eyes questioning. She gestured to Buffy. "Tell her that. Tell her my words now." She watched Buffy closely.

Giles took a deep breath and turned to Buffy. "Talna wants me to tell you that...that we should love each other well." He looked at her and she saw hope and resignation there in his eyes.

Buffy rose to her knees and pulling Giles in to her she rested her forehead on his. She spoke softly to him. "Tell her that I will. That I promise to love you well. And thank her for bringing you to me." She snuck her arms around him and turned her head shyly to smile at Talna.

Talna watched her for a moment and then looked back at Giles. He cleared his throat and rubbed at his eyes for a moment. He cleared his throat one more time and then looked at Talna. "She says she...she will love me well. And she thanks you for bringing me here."

Talna swung her head back to Buffy. "Tell her she is most welcome. And that I leave you in her care. Tell her it is an important charge I give her." She butted his arm one last time and then moved back, out of the circle.

Mabon scurried around the circle using a flint type rock to light the balls of paraffin. As the last one was lit Giles sat on the bed.

Buffy crawled into his lap. At the look of surprise on his face she grinned. "Hey buddy, I'm with you. I don't want you to leave me behind accidentally."

He grimaced at the thought and held her around the waist tightly with one arm. With the other he opened the magic book. After one last look at Talna he began the incantation.

Buffy held on to Giles tightly as a blinding flash assaulted her eyes. She heard snatches of noise and everything grew dark. Then it grew quiet but she still couldn't see. She blinked her eyes, nervous. "Giles?"

"I'm right here, Buffy."

"Are we back? Why can't I see anything?"

He let out a soft chuckle. "Yes, I believe we are back. And you can't see anything because we're in a cave." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his flashlight. He turned it on and shined it around the cave.

She took a deep breath. "Oh God, I can breath again." She took another one. "That feels so wonderful."

Giles did the same. "Yes, it does, doesn't it?"

She slid out of his lap and turned to face him. She put her hand on his face. "What did Talna say to you? After you told her what I said. What did she say?"

Giles shook his head. "It's not important."

She took one of his hands in hers. "I don't believe you. It was important and it was something she wanted you to tell me. What was it? I want to know."

Giles ran his thumb over hers. It made her stomach do flip-flops. He looked at

her. "She said she was leaving me in your care and that it was an important charge she was giving you."

Buffy smiled softly. "Boy, she fell for you like a ton of bricks, didn't she?"

Giles glanced down at their joined hands. "Yes, well, I'm afraid I fell for her rather hard too."

"That's my Giles, always has a way with the ladies." Giles snorted and tried to pull his hand away. He felt confused and his heart was hurting. He wasn't even sure why. Buffy let him pull back his hand but then she climbed back into his lap. She drew his arms around her. "Can we just stay here?"

Giles ran his hand down her hair. "What do you mean?"

"Can we just stay here? In this cave. Just you and me."

Giles wanted to say yes. "Why would you want to do that? Don't you want to see your friends, see Dawn?"

"Yes, I do. But..." She hugged him tighter.

"But?"

"It's what Talna said. I feel that. I feel how important it is, what she asked me to do. It feels so simple here." She took a deep breath. "I'm afraid if we leave that you won't let me...love you."

Giles pulled her away from him by her shoulders and looked at her confused. "I still don't understand."

"Giles, I love you."

He ran his hand across her cheek. "I know that. I love you too."

She shook her head. "No, Giles, not like that."

He sighed. "This conversation is feeling very familiar."

She moved to her knees so her face was level with his. She held his face with her hands and she pressed her lips against his. His hands flew to her hips and for a moment she wasn't sure if he would pull her closer or push her away. She ran her tongue across his lips. He groaned and pulled her closer wrapping his arms around her. She ran her fingers through his hair then wrapped her arms around his neck. The kiss was gentle but thorough and it

lasted a long time. When they finally broke apart she put her hands back on his face. "That's what I mean. I love you." She ran her hands along his forehead and down the sides of his face. "Talna gave you to me and I'm not giving you back." She looked around to orient herself and then pointed towards the exit. "And when we get back out there, I need you to believe that. That we're...you know..." She hesitated, grateful for the darkness that hid her blush.

Giles smiled, his heart full. "That we're mates?"

She smiled back at him, relieved. "Yes, and that we need to love each other well. You know, both ways. Me loving you and you..." She glanced down at the ground, feeling insecure all of a sudden.

He leaned forwards and captured her lips in another soft kiss. "Buffy, I love you too. You cannot possibly imagine how much."

She let out a tremulous breath. "Yes, I think I can." They sat there for some time, looking at each other, reassured by the look on each other's faces, the love they saw there. She pressed another quick kiss on his lips. "You know what I want more than anything?"

He shook his head. "No, what?"

"I mean besides for you?"

He grinned and shook his head again.

"A shower and some pizza."

He stood and pulled her up. "Love of my life, your wish is my command."

She let out a satisfied sigh. "I could definitely get used to this."

He laughed softly and reached down for the flashlight. "Don't forget, Talna said she was leaving me in your care."

"Don't worry. After a shower and a pizza, I'll take care of you."

He grinned again and took her hand. "You're right, I could get used to this too." She laughed and together they headed out.

The End

September 21, 2001