

## Freedom 1

He was lonely. He missed Ripper. Even after all these years. Even after watching their friendship get torn apart by the different paths they'd taken. He had never found anyone to take his place, in his life and in his heart.

He had also never found a way to come between Ripper and his slayer. But now she was dead. Now there was nothing holding Ripper to duty, to his life in Sunnydale. Ethan looked at the assortment of articles in front of him. He lifted the first one and started to package it up. He addressed it to Rupert Giles in care of the Magic Shop. He picked up his keys to take it to the post office to mail.

In the weeks since Buffy had died the whole gang had gotten in the habit of stopping by the Magic Shop to check in before heading to their own homes. It made them all feel connected. It let them all check in with Giles. They checked in for two reasons. The first because he still made them all feel safer. The second because they knew that Buffy's death had almost destroyed him.

With Spike's help they were keeping the demon population under control. There was still no word on whether a new slayer had been called. There was no precedence on a slayer dying twice and the Council wasn't even sure if a slayer would be called.

Giles heard the door of the shop open and as he looked up he saw that Xander had arrived. That made all of them present and accounted for. Except Spike. It was still daylight outside. Besides, while Spike continued to help he drew the line at daily fraternizing. Especially now that Dawn was gone. Hank Summers had finally shown up and taken Dawn home with him. After Buffy's death Dawn had seemed relieved for the opportunity to go live somewhere away from daily danger and she had gone with her father without any protestations.

Xander looked at Giles as he walked into the shop. Giles had lost some weight and his face looked gaunt and full of shadows. He looked dangerous. Xander knew that Giles always had been but now he was looking the part as well. Xander worried about him. Something essential had died inside Giles when Buffy had died and Xander didn't know what it would take to fill that hole. He wondered if anything could.

As Giles stepped over to the table with his cup of tea Anya stood up. She headed over to the counter and pulled out a package. She looked at Giles. "This came for you. I forgot to give it to you."

Giles reached for the package and looked at it puzzled. There was no return address. He sat down, set his tea down, and slowly started to unwrap it. They all watched in anticipation. When Giles opened the box and unwrapped the contents from its surrounding tissue papers he just stared, not moving.

Xander shifted impatiently. "What is it? You're killing me here."

Giles looked up at Xander and smiled. He looked back down at the box and lifted out a knife hilt. Giles hit a button and a blade shot out.

Xander's eyes opened wide. "We're clear on the fact that I wasn't speaking literally, right?"

Giles rolled his eyes and then turned all of his attention to the knife. The switchblade was old. The handle looked worn. Giles raised the knife closer to his eyes and rubbed on the blade right below the handle and gasped. There was a small letter R roughly inscribed on the blade. He held the knife still, looking at it with wonder.

"How..?" He didn't finish his sentence but his face caught everyone's attention. It was the first time he had been captivated by something since Buffy's death. It was a look they hadn't seen for a long time. They watched him examine the knife.

Finally Xander couldn't take it anymore. "Hey big guy, wanna fill us in?"

Giles looked up, almost startled to see he had an audience. He gingerly ran his hand down the serrated edges. "This used to be mine, a long time ago."

All of their eyes widened. Everything about Giles' past intrigued them. The only time he ever spoke of it was when he had been forced to. Other than that he stayed quiet. This was the first time he had simply volunteered information. Xander wanted to know more. "How long ago?"

Giles looked up and saw their expressions. He knew they wanted to know about him. He had thought he was somehow protecting them by staying silent. He laughed to himself at his own naivety. Nothing as intangible as silence could protect these children. It had certainly not protected Buffy. "I got it when I was thirteen."

Willow squeaked. "Someone gave you a knife like that when you were thirteen?" She couldn't imagine that.

Giles nodded, holding the knife so the light reflected on the blade. He was tired of secrets, tired of hiding his past. "I ran away when I was thirteen." He

was quiet for a moment, reflecting on the time. "Right after my father told me I had to become a watcher."

Willow tilted her head looking at him, trying to imagine him at thirteen. "Where did you go?"

"London. I lived on the streets until I was almost eighteen. I was one of the lucky ones." At their raised eyebrows he explained. "I was taken in by one of the gangs. That didn't always happen. More often that not the new kids on the street were beaten by the gangs and forced to move on." His eyes were dark, lost in the memory. They all just watched him, not wanting to interrupt.

"Ethan took me in." Giles barked out a laugh. "God, he seemed so old and wise to me, even though I found out later he was only two years older than me. The street can age you pretty fast." He looked at the knife again, tightening his hold on it. "Ethan's the only reason I survived on the streets. I knew nothing about survival, nothing about living on my own. Ethan taught me everything."

Xander's shook his head. Every time he did hear about something from Giles' past it always amazed him. There was so much about Giles that he couldn't even imagine.

He looked at the knife in Giles' hands. "Who gave you the knife?"

"Ethan gave it to me."

Willow looked apprehensive. "Then or now?"

Giles looked at her. "Both, I would imagine. Well, I know he gave it to me when I was thirteen. I don't know anyone else who could have sent it to me now."

Willow spoke nervously. "Are you sure you should even be touching it? Maybe it has a spell on it or something."

Giles looked at her and back at the knife. He shook his head. "No, it's fine."

Xander spoke again. "How do you know it's yours?"

Giles turned the knife so they could see the R engraved on the blade. "Ethan scraped that R there for me." Giles smiled at the memory. This knife had meant so much to him. It meant he belonged to somebody. It meant him and Ethan were mates. That had mattered more to him than anything. He had been so proud.

"Why did he give you a knife?" Tara asked the next question, her voice soft.

He smiled at her. "You needed a knife if you wanted to survive. The streets were all about taking or being taken. A knife could make all the difference in the world in determining which of those you'd be." They all looked at the knife, trying to imagine Giles at thirteen using it to stay alive. He held it up again. "This knife is where I got my name Ripper."

He looked at them, daring any of them to ask the question they'd been dying to know the answer to for years. He held back a smile as they hesitated. Xander looked at the knife more nervously now, his imagination working overtime. He finally gave in. "Okay, I give. Tell us."

Giles' eyes took on a dangerous glint and he spoke with an accent much less cultured than the one they were used to. "Stabbin's easy. You stick a knife in, you pull it out." He flipped the knife up in the air and caught it. "This knife though..." He ran his hand down the serrated edge, the teeth deeply scalloped. "With this knife you could get more creative." He made a stabbing motion, his hand moving so quickly that they all jerked back at his movement. With his hand extended he continued the demonstration. "All I had to do was turn it and pull it down while I was pulling it out." He retracted the blade. "It'd rip their skin right off. Mess 'em up pretty bad."

Willow's face blanched. "That's how you got the name Ripper?" She looked horrified, the image all too clear in her mind's eye. Giles nodded. With the blade retracted, he sat there tossing the hilt up in the air. He couldn't believe how good it felt back in his hands.

Xander swallowed. "So you used that knife to cut people?" He had to ask but he didn't really want to know the answer. Giles just looked at him. Xander swallowed again. Giles hit the button again and the blade shot out. He flipped the knife and caught it by the blade. He lifted the knife over his shoulder and with a rapid movement threw it. Everyone jumped again. He grinned at them. That made them almost jump again. It was a Ripper grin. He went and retrieved the knife. He sat down and threw it again. It ended up in exactly the same place. He went and retrieved it one more time and sat down taking in their looks and their nervousness.

He relented and laughed. "Just once, and it was an accident. I didn't mean to do it. But it made for a good story and eventually it got around and it was an effective repellent. People didn't want to find out personally if it was true or not."

Xander was intrigued, more comfortable with the subject now that he knew

Giles hadn't sliced his way across England. "What happened?"

Again he answered in the heavier accent. "Ethan and I were attacked one night by another gang. Ethan had just given me this beauty and I had no idea how to use it. Someone started beating the crap out of Ethan and I went nuts. I threw myself on top of the bastard and stabbed him. He tried to buck me off his back but all he did was start me sliding off. As I slid down him so did the knife. By the time I was off him his back was ripped up pretty good."

He grinned and he saw how that startled everyone. He knew they would never understand what a glorious moment that had been for him, protecting Ethan. He flipped the knife again and they all braced for another throw, but he held the knife in his hand. "Ethan was pretty impressed and started telling the story to everyone we met. Pretty soon everyone was calling me Ripper." He grinned. "And leaving us alone."

Tara asked another question. "Were you with Ethan the whole time you lived on the streets?"

Giles nodded. "Pretty much. We were a part of a much bigger gang but the kids came and went. Ethan and I stayed. We were best mates and I couldn't have asked for anyone better to watch my back."

Xander pointed at the knife. "So you didn't use that much?"

Giles' eyes widened. "I used it all the time. Most of the time all I had to do was threaten somebody with it. I was pretty good at throwing it too." He threw it again, the movement a blur. It hit the same spot dead on. Xander's eyebrows were almost off his head. He couldn't believe Giles had hit the same spot three times in a row. Giles went and got the knife one more time and sat down. He ran his hands over it shaking his head. "God, I loved this knife."

Willow looked confused. "Why would Ethan send it to you? Why does he have it?"

"When I left to go to the Council I left everything behind." He looked at the knife. "Everything." He retracted the blade and set the knife back in the box. "I don't know why he sent it to me." He suddenly felt a longing to talk with Ethan. He still missed the old bastard despite his penchant for causing Giles misery. He still missed him a lot.

He left shortly after that, knowing they were all dying to talk about what he'd said. He could hear their voices rising before he even had the door shut behind him. He tucked the box tightly under his arm and headed for home.

When he got to his apartment he poured himself a scotch. He sat on the couch and took the knife back out. He thought of Ethan. He rested his head on the back of the couch and let his mind wander. The memories made him thirst for the freedom he had felt during those years. They had been hard but he'd been able to do whatever he wanted. Him and Ethan. The freedom had been exhilarating. He knew things had gone bad at the end and that he'd done the right thing by leaving but he also knew that when he had walked away from Ethan he had walked away from his freedom as well. He had never felt free again, not like he had back then. He'd walked away and embraced duty. He didn't regret it. He didn't regret a moment with Buffy. But as he sat there on the couch the yearning for a life free of responsibility shot through him almost taking his breath away.

He got up preparing to head up to the loft when he saw he had a message. He hit the play button and heard Ethan's voice. "Ripper, I was thinking of you, remembering the good old days. Thought the knife might bring them back for you as well. I miss you, old friend." Giles was amazed to feel tears in his eyes. He played the message again and then once again. Ethan had left no number. Giles had no idea how to reach him. Giles supposed it was for the best, because if he knew where Ethan was right now, Giles would already be on his way.

A week later another package arrived. Anya had called everyone so they were all sitting around the table again when Anya handed him the box. It was a much bigger package than last time.

End of Part 1

## Freedom 2

He opened it and lifted out a leather jacket. Willow gasped when she saw it and leaned forward to touch it. "It's so soft."

Giles nodded. He pulled the jacket closer to him and he bent down and smelled the leather deeply. He sat back up a satisfied look on his face. He rubbed the soft leather between his fingers.

Anya looked at the coat and frowned. "It's not new. Who would send you a used coat?"

Giles looked at her. "Ethan." He stood and put the coat on. It fit him perfectly. Anya knew he had the knife on him as well. He had it with him everyday. Giles sat back down, enjoying the feel of the coat on him. He smiled.



Xander looked confused. "Why is Ethan sending you this stuff?" He got a nervous look on his face. "He can't mean anything good by it."

Giles just looked at Xander. "I don't know. I haven't spoken with him." He looked down at the jacket. "This used to be my jacket."

Willow's eyes widened. "This used to be yours? Just like the knife was?"

Giles nodded. They all looked at him, waiting for the story. He decided to indulge them again. His accent deepened again. "Me and Ethan were running the gang by then. Nobody messed with us. We felt like we ran the whole bloody world." He looked up at them and grinned. "We decided we needed a uniform, the two of us, somethin' just for me and him. We found these jackets."

Willow prodded him. "So you bought them?"

Giles grinned again. "Not exactly."

Willow gasped. "You stole them?" She couldn't imagine Giles ever stealing.

He smiled at her innocence. He nodded. "We stole them." He grinned. "We must have planned it for two weeks before we did it." He looked at the jacket proudly. "Went without a hitch." He laughed at the confusion on Willow's face. "Willow, it was a long time ago." She snapped out of it, smiling back at him. She wrinkled her nose.

"It's weird how he's sending you this stuff. Doesn't it make you nervous?"

Giles felt the leather between his fingers again. "I agree it's unusual but no, it doesn't make me nervous." He wasn't sure why, but he didn't feel any malice behind Ethan's actions. He looked around at them and saw that they didn't agree. He shrugged at them and got up to make some tea keeping the jacket on. As he headed back to the table Xander looked up and did a double take. For a minute it had seemed as if a stranger had snuck in the room to make some tea. Giles looked so different with that jacket on, as if he was... well...someone different.

Giles just listened to them talk letting their voices slide around him. He could feel the knife in his pocket and he felt embraced by the coat. It almost felt as if Ethan could walk in the door any moment. He felt a longing for Ethan shoot through him. He shook his head at his foolishness. He left them again, wanting to be alone. He slowly made his way home, taking some time just to drive, enjoying the warmth of the coat as the breeze whipped through the convertible.

When he got home he looked for another message but there was none. He shook his head as he realized how disappointed he was. He put on some music and sat on the couch still wearing the jacket, lost in his memories of those days with Ethan. When he finally got up to go to bed he took the jacket with him. He fell asleep clutching it to his side.

If the others noted that he always wore the jacket no one commented on it. They continued to meet each night. Giles had called the Council again but there was still no word. The duty of keeping watch over the Hellmouth seemed never-ending. Without Spike they wouldn't have lasted. Giles didn't know what he would do if another slayer wasn't called. He felt weary to his bones. He knew the rest of them were tired too but they had the advantage of youth on their side. And they had the advantage of being able to go home at night and sleep without feeling the endless responsibility of it all.

A third package had arrived. Giles had it sitting in front of him and they all waited for him to unwrap it. Anya had called them again and they had all arrived early so they could talk. They shifted nervously in their chairs as they waited. It was like approaching the scene of an accident. They knew it might be grisly but they couldn't help themselves. They were all drawn into the mystery of Giles' past. Except Anya. She didn't care. She thought her past was much more interesting.

Anya was the one, however, who prodded Giles. "Well, what are you waiting for? Open it."

He looked at her and back at the box. "Oh, yes, quite right." He slowly lifted it up and felt it. It was heavy. He tore off the tape and lifted the flaps of the box open. He smiled and reached in, lifting out a crystal ball. He set it on the table putting the empty box on the floor.

Willow and Tara both gasped and moved closer. They both knew magic when they saw it. Tara reached out a finger and almost touched it. "Is that a real crystal ball?"

Giles nodded. "Yes." He looked at Tara. "Go ahead."

Tara's eyes widened and she picked up the ball and held it in front of her. She summoned some magic and could see the ball slowly respond to it, tiny spots of light like quicksilver flicking through the sphere. Willow stood close beside her entranced. Tara smiled at Giles and then with a sigh handed it to Giles.

The ball came to life in his hands. The light grew and danced around the



sphere in swirls of little vortexes. Willow and Tara both gasped again. Willow spoke. "How did you make it do that?" She and Tara had never gotten anything more than a small light show from the few legitimate crystal balls they had come across.

Giles smiled, equally entranced by the pattern of light and movement appearing in the ball. "They get attuned to you when you work with them a lot."

Willow tore her eyes off the ball and looked at Giles. "This was yours?" Her voice got very high. She'd never known anyone who wasn't a gypsy who could work with a crystal ball. "I thought only the gypsies could attune themselves with one of these. I thought that was a gypsy magic."

Giles grinned. "It is. But only because they don't tell anybody, not because it's not possible."

Even Anya was intrigued. "A gypsy told you how to work with one?" At Giles' nod she crossed her arms over her breasts a look of disbelief running over her face.

Xander just wanted facts. "Did Ethan give you this too?"

Giles reluctantly pulled back his magic from the ball and it went dark. He sat it carefully on the table. He looked at Xander and shook his head. "No, it was given to both of us, actually." He ran his hand down the side of the crystal ball. "It was how we discovered we had magic." His eyes got that look that let the rest of them know that he was lost in his memories again. Anya walked over to him and nudged him.

"Giles, snap out of it. Tell us the story."

Giles flashed them an apology. "There was a gypsy camp outside of London and Ethan and I used to sneak over there and watch them. They intrigued us. They seemed so independent and not of this world. We both wanted to be gypsies so badly." He grinned at the memory. "One day one of the women saw us and she hollered. Before we could make good our escape we were both being hauled up by our collars, dangling there like puppies." They all grinned at the thought.

Giles laughed. "God, Ethan was fit to be tied. We both struggled but it was useless. We were surrounded by most of the camp by then." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his switchblade. "Then they tried to take this from me and I went crazy. That blade meant more to me than anything." He made the blade slide out and then he retracted it. He put the knife back in his

pocket. "I don't even know what I did but something rose in me and the next thing I knew I'd knocked half of the people standing around us, the ones in front of me, off their feet with just a thought. Unfortunately, the ones behind me, the ones holding me hadn't been affected."

He shook his head. "We were almost killed right then but the gypsy woman stopped them. She had felt something in me." He picked the ball back up and it responded immediately. "She brought the two of us into her trailer and made us look into this ball. She saw that we both had magic, strong magic." Giles didn't tell them that she'd almost had them killed, even then. The woman had been afraid of how much magic she'd seen, especially in him. She had just sat looking at the two of them for the longest time as he and Ethan had stared captivated into the ball, feeling something inside of them stirring. Neither of them had realized, until later, that she had been deciding their fate, whether they would live or die.

He broke off those musings and looked back up at them. "She decided to teach us. I don't know why. But she took us on and worked with us. Ethan and I began to understand that we had been using our magic all along but without knowing it. All the times when we'd been stronger or faster than expected, all the times we'd just been phenomenally lucky all started making sense to us. It was the most amazing thing, to find that you have magic." He quietly laughed and then looked up at Tara and Willow, to see them grinning at him, their eyes bright. He grinned back.

He continued. "She gave us this ball when it was time for them to move on."

Anya still wasn't convinced. "A gypsy just gave you her crystal ball?"

Giles grinned. "Well, she didn't just give it to us."

Willow gasped, her dismay clear. "You didn't steal it?" She didn't think she could bear it if he had stolen this as well.

Giles grinned again. "No, we didn't steal it." His eyes flashed around the table and he grinned again, a wolfish grin. "We gave her something in exchange for it."

Anya took in the grin. "You gave her orgasms for it, didn't you?"

Giles looked down at the ball, remembering. He just nodded his head, the wolfish grin still in place. Those had been good times too. Xander leaned forwards. "Why..." He couldn't even finish his sentence.

Giles grinned at him. "Let's just say there were a few things she hadn't tried

and she figured a couple of young bucks like us could satisfy her curiosity." He laughed at the expression on Xander's face. He couldn't resist teasing him. "She even had a couple of ideas that Ethan and I hadn't tried already. She taught us a few things in that trailer that had nothing to do with this." He held the ball up. He sent a jolt of his magic through it and the clouds in the ball started to coalesce. Giles could almost see the gypsy woman's face in the mist.

Xander watched Giles looking into the crystal ball. He shook his head. "I don't get it. Why is Ethan sending you all this stuff? What does he want?" Xander was trying to reconcile these stories of Ethan and Giles as good friends with his own exposure to Ethan. He didn't get it. He looked at Giles. "What went wrong?"

Giles followed Xander's thoughts. "Eyghon happened." He put the ball back on the table. "I couldn't do it anymore." He looked at Xander. He answered the rest of Xander's questions. "I don't know why he's sending me these things. I haven't spoken with him in months. Not since he turned me into a Fyarl demon." Giles grimaced at that memory. He slowly wrapped the ball back up and placed it in the box. He stayed a little longer and then said his goodnights.

When he got home he took the crystal ball back out of its box and placed it on the coffee table in front of him. He couldn't imagine that Ethan would have parted with this. Ethan had loved it. After Eyghon Giles had left the apartment that he and Ethan had shared. He hadn't taken a thing with him but the clothes on his back. He touched the leather jacket he had thrown over the edge of the couch. Obviously Ethan had kept some of his belongings.

He thought of that gypsy woman again. That had been the first time that he and Ethan had touched each other. She had wanted to watch them. They hadn't cared. They were horny from the magic, they were young, and they were friends. They had jerked each other off and then later had given each other blowjobs. Most of it had been about her. They had made her writhe in pleasure. He could feel himself grow hard thinking about it. He grew uncomfortable. He released himself and ran his hand up and down his erection. Thinking about the three of them, what they had done. Thinking about Ethan, the feel of his cock in his mouth, knowing she had been watching them. His orgasm was strong and he lay there gasping for a minute.

He rose and went into the bathroom to clean himself up. He poured himself a drink and headed back to the couch to read. The phone rang. His heart started to beat a little faster. "Hello?"

"Ripper."

Giles smiled, it was good to hear his voice. "Where are you?"

"Far away from you."

Giles felt the disappointment race through him. "I was hoping..." He didn't finish his sentence.

Ethan laughed softly. "You were hoping to see me even after what I did to you last time?"

Giles nodded as though Ethan could see him. Then he realized what he'd done. "Yes." He opened his mouth to say something and then thought better of it. "I just don't think I'd go drinking with you."

Ethan laughed. "I miss you old friend."

"I miss you too." Giles paused. "Will you be coming into town any time soon?"

"I hope to." There was a pause. "Rupert, I'm sorry about Buffy."

Giles swallowed against the lump in his throat. "Thank you." He wished Ethan were here so he could hold him. "I wish you were here. I could use a friend."

Ethan closed his eyes against the pain in his friend's voice. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Giles nodded again, not trusting his voice to speak. He stood there, the phone pressed to his ear, not wanting to hang up. When the phone finally disconnected he sank to the floor. Sorrow for all that he had lost overwhelmed him and he buried his face in his hands and wept.

Another two weeks had gone by and there was still no word from the Council. A sense of dread was settling on Giles as he began to believe that a slayer hadn't been called and he, a group of children, and a recalcitrant vampire were all that stood between the world and the Hellmouth. He didn't know how long he could do it. The burden of it hung on him heavily. He had never heard of any other watcher who had had to continue to fight after their slayer had died. He understood why now. So much of his passion for the battle died with her. He had asked the Council repeatedly to at least send another watcher, someone who could assist him, allow him a moment to breathe. They had not responded to his requests.

He had lain in bed most of the day. He had called Anya to tell her he'd be late and then he had just stayed there. He hadn't needed to sleep; he just didn't

want to get up. He didn't want to face the day. He hated that he felt this way. He felt weak and used up. He reached over to the leather jacket that had made it up to the loft with him every night. He softly touched it, rubbing it between two of his fingers. The memories were always there now, memories of him and Ethan, as if the gifts had removed the finger from the dike and they had all crashed in.

The phone rang and it was Anya. "Giles, are you coming in?" He didn't respond. She spoke again. "There's another package." He sat up.

"I'll be there in a little while." He hung up and felt the excitement running through him. He wondered what Ethan had sent him. He couldn't keep the grin off his face. He shook his head, exasperated with himself. "You are a fool." He got up and went to take a shower.

When he arrived at the shop, they were all gathered again. He rolled his eyes. He was tempted to just grab the package and run but he resisted. It had actually been a relief to share some of his past with these extraordinary youngsters. He was so proud of them. The package was sitting on the table. He sat down and reached for it. It was small.

End of Part 2

### Freedom 3

Xander watched him. Anya had told him that Giles hadn't come in all day. He noticed that Giles' hair was wet, like he'd just gotten out of the shower. He felt a momentary twinge of anger at the Council. They needed to cut Giles some slack. Giles had been an active watcher longer than almost any other watcher in history and on the Hellmouth to boot. His slayer was dead and they just expected him to keep on going. He muttered to himself. "Some retirement plan." When Giles looked at him he just shook his head. He knew that the rest of them were still helping out too but he knew it was different. If Willow decided that she wanted to leave tomorrow, if they all decided that, Giles would just watch them go. It ultimately wasn't their responsibility. That had belonged to Buffy and to Giles, and now just to Giles. He shook his head again. It's not that he wanted Giles replaced but even he could see that you could only ask so much of a man, and they were asking for too much.

Giles had gotten the package open and he just looked at the contents.

Finally Anya couldn't stand it anymore. She let out a frustrated noise and spoke. "What is it?"

Giles looked up and they were all surprised to see tears in his eyes. She moved closer and peered into the box. She didn't know what she expected to see but she was disappointed. "It's just an earring." She moved away, bored again.

Giles smiled ruefully at her response. He lifted out the earring and held it in his hand. It was just a plain gold hoop, nothing extraordinary except for what it meant to him. He could still see Ethan's face as he had roughly shoved the gift-wrapped box at him. It had been a birthday present, and something more as well. A symbol of something that had been growing between the two of them, something Ethan no longer wanted to ignore.

Giles sighed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again they were filled with such longing that it almost took Xander's breath away. Xander looked to see if anyone else had seen it but they were all looking at the earring except for Anya who was just fiddling with stuff around the shop. Xander watched as Giles put the earring in the hole in his ear. He grinned at them all and Xander had a flash of how he must have looked in his youth, leather jacket, gold earring, knife in his pocket, full of piss and vinegar ready to take on the world.

Xander didn't ask what the significance of the earring was. He was pretty sure he knew. What surprised him was that it didn't wig him out, not even a little. Considering how wig-worthy the idea had always been to him, he was surprised at his reaction. But somehow he knew that whatever Ethan had meant to Giles, it had all been about love.

Giles stayed for a while, not wanting to be alone with his thoughts. He let their voices and laughter flow over him, comforted by their presence. He knew his apartment would feel lonely tonight, lonelier than usual. But in time they rose to leave and he made his way home.

He walked in and sat on the couch again, still wearing his jacket. He could feel the knife in his pocket, the earring. He saw the crystal ball sitting in front of him. He could feel Ethan all around him almost as if he was there. It made his absence all the more painful. He reached up to touch the earring. After giving him the earring Ethan had told Giles that he loved him. They had made love that night for the first time. Not sex, that had happened occasionally especially after using the magic, but it had been fast and for a purpose of relief. This night the purpose had been the two of them. They had embraced and kissed and held each other all night finding all the ways they could to pleasure each other. Giles had never experienced anything like it with another lover before or since.

The phone rang and Giles reached for it with a trembling hand. "Hello?"



"Ripper?"

When Giles heard Ethan's voice desire swept over him. His voice was thick and husky when he spoke. "Where are you?"

Ethan could hear the desire in Ripper's voice and he felt his own body respond. "Will you come to me?"

Giles sat on the couch. He asked again. "Where are you?"

"Still far away. Will you come?" There was silence.

"I can't. I can't leave here."

Ethan nodded. He knew what the Council was doing. "I want to be with you Ripper."

Giles groaned. "Why can't you come here?"

"It's not time yet."

Giles didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

"Soon." Ethan slowly hung up. Soon. But not yet. Giles' duty still held him. Ethan ran his fingers through his hair hating the Council. He grinned all of a sudden, a not very nice grin. He had been doing some searching of his own and he knew something the Council didn't. But they would soon.

Giles looked at the phone in his hand. He slowly hung up. He lay down on the couch curling his legs up. He finally fell asleep.

Only Xander and Anya were there when the next gift arrived. Giles had been stocking shelves when they heard an engine revving outside the door. Someone had parked a motorcycle outside the shop. The rider got off, took off his helmet and pulled a clipboard out of one of the compartments on the motorcycle. He checked the address, grabbed the second helmet off the back of the bike and walked in. He saw Xander. "You Rupert Giles?"

Xander shook his head and pointed to Giles. The man headed over to Giles. He handed him the clipboard. "Sign here."

Giles hesitated. "What exactly am I signing for?"

The man held up the keys. Giles' eyebrows rose. He shook his head not sure

he was understanding. The man shook the keys. "The bike, it's yours."

Xander was watching Giles and he saw the look on Giles' face. He saw the smile that changed his entire appearance, the joy that swept away for a moment all the pain of Buffy's death. He held his breath, just watching. Xander didn't like Ethan but if he had been here Xander would have hugged him just for putting that look on Giles' face. Giles signed and the man handed him the keys and the second helmet. He walked out the door and a car slid up to pick him up.

Giles just stood there stunned. He looked at the keys and out at the motorcycle. He grinned, looked at Xander and Anya and kept grinning. He looked like a kid. He headed for the door putting the helmet on. He slid on the bike and putting the key in the ignition he started it. He slowly backed it up and then he drove off.

Xander just looked at Anya and then they grinned at each other. Anya shrugged and went back to her chores. Xander just stood there for a minute, watching where the motorcycle had been parked and remembering the look on Giles' face.

Giles drove around for hours. He hadn't felt this content, this free for as long as he could remember. His head was full of Ethan. He and Ethan had gone everywhere on their bikes. This bike wasn't the one he'd had. This one was brand new. He loved it. He felt its power between his legs. He felt as if he could drive forever. He felt an almost irresistible pull to just go and never come back. To just keep driving and see where he ended up, far from duty, far from the Hellmouth. He almost succumbed to the lure but in time he turned around and headed home.

The phone was ringing as he put the key in his door. His efforts to get inside quickly made him fumble even more. He could hear the answering machine start to pick up as he finally swung the door open. He raced to answer it. "Hello?"

He heard a laugh. "You are there. I wasn't sure when you'd get home."

Giles closed his eyes, letting Ethan's voice wash over him. "I just walked in the door."

"Did you like your present?" Ethan knew he had, he could hear the joy in Giles' voice.

"You knew I would." Ethan could feel Ripper smile. "It's been wonderful, I've been driving for hours."

"Will you come join me now?"

Giles hesitated, part of him wanting to say yes with all his being. The other part...he sighed. "I can't Ethan, I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry I am."

"They found the slayer."

Giles' jaw dropped "What?"

"A slayer was called, they just found her." Ethan grinned. It would be more accurate to say that he had found her but he let that slide. He asked the one question he had been dreading. "If they ask, will you be her watcher?"

The answer was immediate. "No." There was a pause. "I'll never be anyone's watcher again, not after Buffy."

"Will you come away with me then?"

The yearning was deep in Giles but he was wiser than he'd once been. The paths they had both walked had taken them to such different places. He took a deep breath. "Ethan..."

Ethan interrupted him. He knew what Ripper was going to say. "Don't think, just feel. Just walk away. I'll walk away too. We can start over. Just you and me. We can figure out how to make it right again." There was silence. He spoke again. "Tell me that you'll think about it. Please. I don't want to live without you."

Giles ran his hand over his face, his vision hazy with unspilled tears. "I don't want to live without you either." He paused. "I just don't know. I need to think."

Ethan laughed. "That was always your problem Rupert, you think too damn much."

Giles shakily laughed back. "And you don't think enough." He paused lost in his memories again. They had balanced each other somehow. "Let me call the Council. Will you give me a number where I can reach you?"

Ethan gave him a number.

Giles looked at it for a minute. Then he gasped. "You're here, in Sunnydale."

"Yes, I am."

"Where are you? Let me come and see you."

Ethan smiled sadly, alone in his room. "No, I don't want to see you unless you're ready to stay. I don't think I could stand it."

"Please, tell me where you are."

"No, just call when you've made a decision." Ethan hung up.

Giles walked over to his window and peered outside. Somewhere out there, so close, Ethan was waiting for him and Giles had no idea where he was. It made Ethan seem farther away than ever. Giles picked the phone up and called England.

The next evening he pulled back up to the shop on his motorcycle. He opened up one of the compartments and pulled some envelopes out. He had asked Anya to get them all together and they were all sitting there, waiting. He walked in, his helmet under his arm, and approached them.

He put his helmet down on the table. He took a deep breath. "They found the slayer. She'll be here tomorrow with her watcher." He watched as all their jaws dropped. Xander took a close look at Giles, looking at his face, his eyes. He saw a suppressed excitement there, a liveliness that had been missing for weeks. He looked at the envelopes in Giles' hands. He sat back feeling a mix of sadness and joy, sadness for them, joy for Giles.

Giles continued. "I'm going away for a while." As Willow started to protest he raised his hands. "I'm not leaving permanently, not yet, at any rate. I just need to get away." He handed an envelope to Anya. "I've left some papers for you so you can handle the store while I'm gone. Are you willing to take this on?"

"Will you pay me more money?"

Giles smiled. "A lot more." She smiled and reached for the envelope. She started rifling through pages. When she saw her new salary her eyes widened. She looked at Giles and Giles just laughed. "Okay?"

She smiled at him. "Okay."

Giles started to hand the next envelope to Willow. "Here are the keys to my apartment. The slayer and watcher can stay there until I'm back. Will you give these to them?"

"How long will you be gone?"

"Six months." He still held the envelope. "Will you give them the keys and show them around?"

She took the envelope. "Of course."

He handed the last envelope to Xander. "Will you take care of my car? The keys, all the insurance information and other pertinent papers are in there. Try not to crash into anything." Xander just looked stunned as he took the envelope and held it close to his chest.

He looked at them all. "I'll check in periodically and make sure you're okay. They're sending a good watcher. You'll like her." He grinned. "She's an old friend. I spoke with her this morning and she's looking forward to meeting all of you."

He had finished and he stood there looking at them, burning them on his memory. Willow finally jumped up and gave him a big hug. When she let him go she had tears in her eyes. "I'll miss you."

He nodded and reached up to touch her cheek. "I'll miss you too. I'll miss you all." They were his family. They all heard the motorcycle. The rider idled his engine and took off his helmet. Xander watched Giles and saw as his face lit up, awash with love as he saw Ethan. Xander had to turn away, the emotion almost too strong to see. Giles turned back to them, reluctant to leave but so anxious to go.

After he had spoken with the Council, Giles had called Ethan back. They had talked for a long time. The longing and the caution had warred within Giles but they had found a compromise. They would take six months. Six months of freedom, freedom from everything. They would both walk away, walk away from duty, from chaos, from the choices that had ripped them apart. They would spend six months with each other, rebuilding the connection that had bonded them together as boys and still held them bound now. They had spoken for hours but until now Giles hadn't seen him.

Xander stood and went over and hugged Giles. He let go of him and turned him around to face Ethan and gently pushed. "Go. We'll keep things safe here for you." Giles turned back and smiled at Xander. He smiled at them all. Then he picked up his helmet and headed out the door.

They all watched as Giles swung out the door, watched as he walked over to Ethan and just held him. Ethan held him back, his eyes closed. They broke off the embrace and they just looked at each other, a look of contentment and promise on both their faces. Then Giles started putting on his helmet and Ethan put his on as well. Giles indicated for Ethan to head out and when he

did, Giles followed him.

Willow's eyebrows rose. She turned to look at Xander. "Ethan and Giles?"

Xander nodded. "Ethan and Giles."

Willow looked at Xander and saw how calm he was being. "That's sort of wow."

Xander looked back. "Very wow. How they feel about each other, I mean."

Willow sent him a loving look. Then she looked at Tara. She looked up at Anya and then back at Xander. "Cool."

Xander smiled. "Very cool."

The End