

Leap of Faith 1

Buffy looked up from her book, searching for Giles. She found him with a customer near the front of the store. The small anxious feeling that had started to grow dissipated. She knew it was silly, but she still got a panicky feeling every now and then if she couldn't see Giles.

As if he could feel her eyes on him Giles looked up, meeting Buffy's eyes. He turned his head a little to the side and raised his eyebrows as if to inquire if she was okay. She gave him a small nod and smiled at him. Giles smiled back and turned his attention back to his customer.

The truth was they'd barely been out of each other's sight since they'd come home from Talna's world. With Dawn having gone to live with her dad, Buffy, on her return, had no home, no clothes, no anything. She'd moved in with Giles, technically on a temporary basis, but they both knew she was there to stay. That first night they'd just held each other until morning, still barely believing the turn of events. That Giles had somehow found her, and that in the finding, they had discovered their love for one another.

The amazing discovery of Buffy's seeming return from the grave distracted the rest of the gang so completely they barely noticed the new relationship between Buffy and Giles. When they did start to pay attention to it they'd gotten so used to seeing them together that it sort of squeaked by without much comment. Something for which Giles was extremely grateful.

Buffy knew Giles was worried about her. She didn't think anyone else had noticed it yet, but not much about her had ever gotten past Giles. She was tired and getting more tired all the time. She couldn't seem to get enough sleep. When he had asked her about it she told him that it felt as if she was being stretched too thin, as if a part of her was being leached away. A few nights ago Giles had stopped letting her patrol. He had been afraid that she would be overpowered too easily if forced to deal with more than one vampire at a time.

Giles had paid Spike an undisclosed amount of money to take over patrolling until Giles could determine what was going on. Buffy knew he had theories but she hadn't worked up the courage to talk to him about it. The fact that he wasn't volunteering anything worried her because she figured if he wasn't talking, that it had to be bad.

Giles finished with his customer and headed back over to the group. He looked at Buffy and his lips tightened, his eyes darkening with worry. Before Buffy could see his concern he turned and began rearranging the small

pewter figurines behind him. A small smile formed on his face as he picked one up and held it in his hands, his eyes thoughtful.

Buffy looked up and saw him. She walked over to him and looked down at the figurine of a small dragon that he was holding. At least once a day she would catch Giles holding the figurine. It bore a remarkable likeness to Talna, and it had become a sort of talisman for him. She reached up a hand to touch the dragon's head. "Are you missing her?"

Giles smiled sheepishly at Buffy. "I suppose I am." He shook his head. "But it's more than that. She's been on my mind so much today. I can't stop thinking about her. I keep wondering if what's happening to you has something to do with ..." He stopped, frustrated at his lack of knowledge. Frustrated that he didn't really know what was wrong with Buffy or how to heal her.

Xander only caught pieces of what Giles was saying but it was enough to pique his interest. "Who are you missing, big guy? Who's on your mind?"

Buffy touched Giles' cheek and then turned to Xander, grinning. "His other girlfriend."

Xander's jaw dropped. "He has another girlfriend? Is there no justice in the world?" Xander wasn't really concerned. Giles loved Buffy about as much as any person could love another. He was sure of that.

Buffy responded, her voice teasing. "I'm serious. He was totally gaga over her. If she wasn't this gigantic dragon who lives in another universe I'd be like totally jealous."

Giles rolled his eyes. Then he looked at Buffy, his gaze serious again, his voice so soft it carried only to her. "Buffy, I'm worried about you."

Buffy laid her head on Giles' chest and he wrapped his arms around her. "I know you are. I'm worried too." She squeezed him a little tighter. "You'll figure it out. You always do."

Giles rested his cheek on the top of her head and prayed she was right, pushing away the unbearable thought of losing her again. Behind Buffy's back, his fingers traced the outline of the little dragon.

Xander watched the two of them embrace. He knew something was up, besides Giles having babes in every universe. Giles lifted his eyes and he accidentally locked eyes with Xander. Xander was taken aback by the worry and fear he saw there. He glanced at Willow and saw that she too had caught

the look on Giles' face before Giles cleared his expression.

Xander leaned back in his chair, the two front legs lifting off the floor, his toes, touching in front, keeping him from tipping over backwards. He watched as Giles escorted Buffy back to her chair and helped her sit. Xander looked closely at Buffy and he suddenly saw what had Giles so worried. "What's up, Buffy? You don't look so good. I mean you've both been looking tired lately but I figured it was all the bedroom hi-jinks." He frowned and looked at Giles. "It's not though, is it? Is she sick?" He looked at Buffy again, appalled suddenly at how gaunt she looked, and that he hadn't noticed it until now.

Giles let out a breath, looking at Buffy. Buffy put her hand out to clasp Giles' and he sat down next to her. Buffy felt overwhelmed suddenly with her weariness. She leaned forward and laid her head against Giles' chest, wanting to feel his strength and his warmth. She murmured and he had to lower his head to catch her words. "Tell them. We have to talk about it."

Giles wrapped his arms tightly around her and lifted his head to his four young friends. Giles nodded, his face etched with his sense of helplessness. "Yes, she's sick. But I don't know why. Buffy's been getting steadily weaker ever since I brought her back." He rested his head on the top of hers.

Xander raised his eyebrows and fixed his gaze on Giles. "So...this means what? What do you think it is? She'll get better, right?" He cast a nervous glance at Buffy.

Giles put the little dragon down on the table in front of him so he could softly rub Buffy's back, knowing the caress would make her feel better. "I don't know. I have some ideas..." His voice trailed off and he stared into one of the shadowed corners of the room.

Buffy lifted her head and touched Giles' face, bringing his attention back. "What are they? It's worse when you don't tell." She smiled ruefully at him. "Besides, I probably ought to know seeing as it's me we're talking about.

"I would have told you anytime. You just never asked."

Buffy smiled a crooked smile. "I know. I knew it was bad news. I kept hoping that I'd see a different look on your face one of these days. You know, that look you have when you figure it out and it's not as bad as you thought." She sighed and put her head down again. "Even I can't pretend anymore. I know I'm getting worse."

Giles took off his glasses and ran a hand over his face. He hated all of his theories. He put his glasses back on and squinched his face up. "Well, it's

possible that something in Talna's atmosphere poisoned you. You were there for quite some time. I made a few phone calls today to see where we could take you to get some toxic chemical screening done. See if there's something in your body that shouldn't be there. I should know more about that tomorrow."

Buffy sat back in her chair, a surprised look on her face. Then she nodded her head. "Okay, poison, big yuck but I can deal." She looked at the expression on Giles' face and bit her lip. "But, I'm guessing that's not what you really think is going on. Right?"

Giles looked at her unhappily. "It just seems as if you'd be sicker if it was poison. I find it unlikely that you'd just be tired."

"So what do you think it is?"

Giles reached for her hand again, lacing his fingers through hers. "I'm afraid that..." He turned his head away for a minute. He started again. "I'm afraid that it has to do with...with you being here, well, with there being two of you, here, at the same time. I'm not sure, of course, it's just a theory."

Buffy's eyes widened and then filled with fear. "You mean, like the dead me and the live me can't both be here in this universe?"

Xander raised his hand. "I vote for getting rid of the dead Buffy." He looked around. "Anyone with me on that?" Anya, Willow and Tara nervously nodded and then looked at Giles.

He gave them a small smile. "I wish it were that easy."

Willow frowned. "Why can't it be that easy? I mean, gross, sure. But we can dig up her coffin and send her body off to another universe." She turned to Anya. "You know, like where we sent your troll boyfriend."

Anya glared at her. "Ex-boyfriend." She huffed in exasperation.

Giles looked at Willow. "Your idea has merit but it seems a drastic step to take until we know more. This may not be what's wrong with Buffy at all."

Xander frowned. "So what do we do in the meantime? Can we research?"

Giles shook his head. "I've looked at all my books over the last two weeks. I'm running out of places to search."

Buffy reached up a hand and tried to erase the furrows between his brows.

"I'm sorry."

Giles looked at her. "What are you sorry for?"

"I'm sorry I'm putting you through this."

Giles pulled her in for a fierce hug. Only her Slayer strength kept it from hurting. "Don't you dare be sorry, Buffy. Having you back has been the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me. We'll figure this out, I promise you. I can't lose you again." He buried his face in her shoulder, swallowing past the tight lump in his throat, needing to hide the moisture in his eyes. Their four friends fought off tears of their own and Xander unhappily stood up and began to pace.

##

Hundreds of magic makers had gathered. They all listened as one by one the masters spoke their portion of the verbal lore that pertained to this situation, trying to find the answer to their quandary. Apprentices hovered near their masters, listening intently, noses quivering as they absorbed and attempted to memorize the information they would at some time be expected to know as if it were a part of them.

Talna and Mabon had spoken late into the night. Something was wrong with the magic. The magic makers were able to perform spells; the knowledge was there. They could feel the power; the ability to harness it intact. The results of the magic were the problem. Too many of the spells were going awry. Beings had been hurt, parts of their planet injured. The risk of attempting magic was growing too great, but Talna and Mabon knew that only magic would fix what was wrong.

Talna looked at the sky. The rift was growing. It had been barely visible a week ago. But now it was easy to spot. From the ground it looked like a constantly shifting cloud laced with energy from a continuous output of lightning. Talna recognized it. It was exactly like the piece of sky that had taken her from her home and thrust her into an alien universe with air that felt like acid to her lungs. Her thoughts grew soft. The place she had met Giles. An unexpected gift from a most troubling time.

Giles had been the focus of many of her conversations with Mabon. He was the only being they knew who could perform magic, outside of the magic makers. He was perhaps their only hope. Talna looked up at the sky again. He knew what this was; he had closed it in his world. She needed him to come and close it here as well. Close it before it opened more fully, bringing potential death and destruction to her planet. She also suspected, as did Mabon, that the rift in the sky was the cause of the magic gone wrong and

that it would continue to worsen. Time was of the essence.

She entered the hall and silently watched the magic makers, listening to their attempts to determine how to communicate with someone in a different universe. Her tail was twitching with impatience and she tried to control it, afraid that she might sweep a dozen magic makers out the door. She lay down, wrapping her tail tightly around her, her mind filled with thoughts of her friend, wishing he might somehow sense her and come to her aid.

Her mind was brought back to the meeting when she heard the murmur of voices growing in the hall. She sat up, her eyes searching for Mabon. She found him; he was scampering her way. She lowered her head to the ground so they could talk eye to eye. She spoke first. "Have you found something?"

Mabon's eyes were lit with excitement. His whiskers were twitching. "Yes, I think we have. We think we can do a sending, but it will require your participation."

Talna's eyes filled with hope. "You know I will do whatever it takes."

Mabon nodded. "I know that." He touched her snout with a tiny paw. "It might be dangerous. You know what the magic has been like." He gestured back to the rest of the magic makers. "We will create circles of protection around you and the magic makers who will perform the spell. We will do our best to keep any harm from occurring."

Talna nodded. "Of that I have no doubt. I know you will do your best. That is all any of us can ever do. I will trust, and I will participate. I can do no less."

Mabon turned his head and spoke to a few of the magic makers around him letting them know they were moving forward. In moments the hall was empty as they all left to prepare. Mabon turned back to Talna. "You must go prepare yourself. You must meditate and empty your mind. It must be clear when you send to him."

"May I take you to your destination before I prepare?"

Mabon gratefully pressed both paws to her snout and ran lightly up her neck until he was sitting on her back. Talna stood and carried her impossibly light burden to his own place of preparation.

End of Part 1

Xander turned to the front door when he heard the bell ring. His eyes widened when he saw who walked in. It was Dawn, her dad's arm wrapped tightly around her shoulder, as if he was supporting her. Xander spoke, mostly to alert Buffy and Giles. "Dawn, Mr. Summers." Giles and Buffy sprang apart, shocked at Xander's announcement. Giles assisted Buffy to stand.

Hank had seen Buffy since her return. Giles had driven her to LA to see both Dawn and her father, after coming up with some unlikely explanation for her continued existence. As implausible as the story had been Hank had not been able to deny that Buffy was standing in front of him, alive and well. Now, Hank watched Buffy as she approached him. After watching Dawn so closely over the last couple of weeks he saw it in Buffy right away. "You're sick too, aren't you?" He looked at Dawn. "She said she had to get to you, to you and Mr. Giles, that you'd know what to do."

They all looked at Dawn. She looked drawn as well. The shadows under her eyes were pronounced and they could see that she was having trouble standing on her own. Hank continued. "I wanted to put her in the hospital but she refused. She said she had to come here." He looked at Giles, knowing he would be the source of any answers he might get here. "Why? Why did she want to come here? What's happening to my daughters?"

Giles gestured with a hand, suggesting Hank escort Dawn over to the table. Xander started gathering up more chairs for everyone. Hank sat Dawn down and Buffy sat on the other side of Dawn, clasping her hand tightly. Buffy lifted her eyes and sent a beseeching glance Giles' way. The fact that her sister was also being affected made the whole thing even more frightening to her.

Giles stood still, hands in his pockets. Willow had beat him to the tea making so he had no momentary distraction available to him as his mind raced to take in this new wrinkle. He desperately tried to figure out what to tell Hank. Reaching for the small figurine he'd left on the table, he began to rub it, turning it around and around with his fingers.

Hank smiled as Willow put a cup of tea in front of him. He didn't usually drink tea but he thought the warmth of it might do him some good. Seeing Buffy looking as ill as Dawn had chilled him. Somehow he'd allowed Dawn's sense of sureness to affect him. He'd been so hopeful that coming here would fix everything. Hank reached around Dawn and placed his hand on Buffy's shoulder, squeezing softly. Buffy reached up with her other hand and rested it on his, smiling at him. Then she looked up at Giles. Hank looked around the room and saw that everyone's eyes were on Giles. Hank looked at him too.

Giles let out a breath. He decided to start by gathering some information. Turning to Hank he asked, "How long has Dawn been ill?"

Hank looked at Dawn, considering. "Over a month, I think. I didn't really notice until a couple of weeks ago but when I thought back on it, I realized she hadn't really been herself for a while. I told myself that it was just the shock of both her mother and her sister dying. I put her in counseling." He looked at Buffy. "She was so happy when you showed up. I was sure she'd start getting better, but she kept getting more tired and then she started losing weight, even though I know she's been eating. I've taken her to the doctor a couple of times but he hasn't been able to figure out what's wrong."

Xander looked at Giles. "If they've both been sick then it sort of blows your theories out of the water, doesn't it?"

Giles looked up at Xander and nodded. "Yes, yes it does."

Hank looked at his daughters and then again at Giles. "Mr. Giles, what's going on?"

Buffy spoke up. "It's just Giles, dad."

Giles paused as Willow brought him his tea. He took a sip and then he looked at Hank. "I don't really know where to start. Do you have any questions, anything specific you want to know?"

Hank blew out a breath. "Yes, I do as a matter a fact. What really happened to Buffy? Why was everyone so sure she died?"

Giles took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked up briefly at Buffy and Buffy nodded. The brief exchange did not escape Hank. Giles sent Hank a hesitant smile. "I'm not sure if you'll believe me."

"Try me."

Giles nodded. "All right. Buffy was dead. She did die." He took in everyone in the room with a gesture. "We all saw her die." At the bleak look on his face Buffy got up and stood close to him, wrapping her arms around him, laying her head against his shoulder. He continued. "I made the burial arrangements, ordered her tombstone." He sent a loving but pained smile towards Dawn. "Dawn helped with that." Giles wrapped an arm around Buffy, drawing her closer. That was not a time he liked to remember.

Hank watched them. Thoughts raced through his head, the majority of which he chose to ignore for the time being. He pointed at Buffy. "So, how...?"

Giles sighed. He had no idea how to take an endlessly complicated and unbelievable story and somehow encapsulate it for Hank so he could both understand and accept it. "Mr. Summers..."

"Hank, please."

Giles smiled. "Hank. Please just hear me out. The story I am about to tell you will seem impossible but it's not, and much of it I cannot prove to you right now, with the notable exception that Buffy is indeed here and quite alive." He looked down at Buffy. "Buffy and I, and in fact, everyone here, have been involved for years in a battle against evil. Several months ago we started fighting against an enemy of enormous power. She created a rift, an opening, if you will, in the sky, a way to move between universes. She needed Dawn to do that; in fact, her intention was to kill Dawn."

Giles looked at Hank to see what sort of expression he had on his face. He mostly saw astonishment there, and the rapt attention of someone listening to a good story. Giles decided it was safe to go on. "Buffy threw herself into the rift, closing it. She saved Dawn; she saved us all. But when the rift closed there was nothing to support her and Buffy fell hundreds of feet to her death." Giles wrapped both arms around Buffy at his words and hugged her tightly.

Giles continued with his story. "Before Buffy was able to close the rift a dragon from another universe flew out of it. It was huge and appeared to be quite deadly. But it flew out of sight very quickly. All of our attention was on the fight before us and then we all were coping with Buffy's death and our grief. To be honest I never gave it another thought until a few days after Buffy's funeral, when I started hearing reports about dragon sightings. Of course, everyone thought it was nonsense but I had seen the beast come through the rift so I began to hunt it, intending to kill it." He had loosened his grip on Buffy by then and Buffy looked at her dad. She decided she should probably go sit by him. Taking the chair next to him she took his hand and then looked up at Giles, gesturing for him to continue.

Giles nodded. "When I found her, she...well...she wasn't the monster I had anticipated. We were able to communicate and I found that she was a gentle and intelligent being, and she was frightened of what was happening to her. I..." He looked around the shop. "I can do magic, real magic." He looked at Tara and Willow. "Several of us here can, as a matter of fact." He paused. "I knew a spell that could send her home. I asked her if I could go with her." He smiled sadly. "I wanted to see her world. I had no reason..." His voice trailed off, not wanting to continue that train of thought. "She agreed and I sent her home, accompanying her."

Giles held out his hand and they all saw the small dragon lying there. Hank's eyebrows rose. "That's the dragon?" That seemed no more impossible to believe as the rest of the story.

Buffy squeezed her dad's hand. "No, but it looks like her. Talna's much bigger." At her dad's look she smiled. "I've met her. And she is pretty great. She and Giles took quite a shine to each other." She flashed Giles an impish smile and he rolled his eyes at her. She just grinned and gestured to him impatiently. "Tell the rest. This is my favorite part."

Giles smiled back. It was his favorite part too. "When we got to Talna's world we were met with the announcement that another human was there. When we finally made our way to the hospital I heard someone call my name."

Buffy couldn't resist jumping in. "It was me. When I jumped in the rift I sort of blacked out. When I woke up I was in this weird place filled with dragons and other assorted creatures. I didn't know what was going on. I thought maybe I'd gone bonkers, or somehow the rift had taken over the world and this was what it had turned into. Then, that day, I heard all this noise in the room next door, and then I heard Giles." She let out an amazed laugh. "I heard him. Clear as day. I called out his name and in a moment there he was, standing in front of me. Like I'd called him from the other end of the store."

Giles picked up. "I couldn't believe it was her. She was dead; I'd watched her coffin being lowered into the ground. But there she was, alive, breathing, calling me." He shook his head, his gaze on Buffy. He turned back to Hank. "All I can work out is that when she threw herself into the rift, that somehow she was split, twinned, I don't know quite what word to use. Anyway, she fell to her death here, on Earth, but she was also sent to Talna's planet through the rift that brought Talna here."

Buffy sandwiched Hank's hands between her own. "Giles brought us home, and you know the rest."

She and Giles both watched Hank as he processed the tale. After a minute he stood, pulling away from Buffy, and stalked over to Giles. "I'm sorry. Do you honestly expect me to believe that story?"

Giles opened his mouth to speak when suddenly he felt a presence in his mind. It was so strong he lost consciousness for a second and fell to his knees before he could catch himself. Pressing his hands to his head he groaned. Buffy raced over to him, her heart in her throat.

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Talna stood in the midst of eight concentric circles of magic makers. The

circle closest to Talna was composed of the magic makers who would be doing the actual spell of sending. Mabon was one of these. The purpose of the next seven circles was to try to prevent anything bad from happening. To help capture any stray magic that tried to escape, and redirect it back to the center.

Mabon had explained what would happen to Talna. Her eyes were closed and her mind empty of all thoughts. At Mabon's direction she thought of Giles, picturing him standing before her. The magic makers in the innermost circle began their chanting.

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Despite his anger, Hank instinctively reached down and grabbed one of Giles' arms. Buffy was at his other side. "Giles, what's wrong? What's happening?"

Giles groaned out a name. "Talna."

Hank let go of his arm. "Oh, for the love of God." He couldn't believe the theatrics, the lengths they would go to make him believe this fairy tale. He could see no purpose in it.

Xander watched Giles and Buffy. Suddenly he let out a yell, scrambling so fast out of his chair that he knocked it over. Something huge had just tried to sit on him. Xander looked to where he had been sitting and his jaw dropped. There was a huge dragon there. Or sort of there. If he looked hard enough he could see right through it. He realized that if this thing had actually sat on him, that he'd be toast. Flat toast. The dragon was looking around, clearly looking for someone. Xander had a pretty good idea who. He cleared his throat. "Uh, Giles?"

Giles' back was to Talna and he was partially hidden by Buffy. The presence in his mind was fading. When he heard Xander call his name he turned around. He'd have fallen again if Buffy hadn't caught him. "Talna?" A delighted smile appeared on his face.

Talna let out a relieved sigh. "I have found you." She started looking around, noticing all the people in the room. "Have I come at a bad time?"

Giles let out a laugh. He turned and glanced at Hank and then he swung back to Talna. "Actually, you couldn't have timed it better." He cleared his throat, his vocal chords already protesting against this unnatural usage, speaking her language. He turned to Anya. "Perhaps you better close up the shop." Anya nodded and moved to comply.

Talna twisted her head around until she spotted Xander. There was such a

look of unmistakable mischief and amusement in her eyes that Xander couldn't help but smile at her. She turned back to Giles. "Please apologize to this human for me. It was not my intention to frighten anyone by sitting on them."

Giles laughed again and moved his gaze to Xander. Xander couldn't help but grin at the look on Giles' face either. Giles played interpreter. "She conveys her apologies for sitting on you."

Xander waved his hand. "Apology accepted." He moved a little closer to get a better look.

Talna moved forward a step wanting to connect with Giles. She made as if to butt her head against his chest at the same time he moved forward to stroke her neck. It appeared as if they passed right through each other. Talna pulled back, her eyes still lit with amusement and pleasure. "It is good to see you, Giles."

Buffy grinned when she heard Talna say Giles' name. She turned to her dad. "That's what I heard, the day Giles found me. All this dragon talk and then the word Giles, clear as day. It was so weird." Hank just looked at her dumbfounded, speechless.

Giles smiled at Talna's words. "It is good to see you as well. I have thought of you often, and you have been on my mind all day today." His brow furrowed. "Is everything all right? Not that I'm not delighted to see you, but I can't imagine you came all this way just to say hello."

Sadness flickered through Talna's eyes. "I have need of you. I need your help."

"I'll help any way I can, you know that."

"Yes, I do know that. That is why I came." Talna swung her snout in Buffy's direction. "Your mate, she is well?"

Giles shook his head. "No, she is not well. But I do not know why she is ill. We were just talking about it when you arrived."

Talna fixed her gaze on Giles. "My apologies for interrupting such a serious matter."

"No, I'm glad you're here. I wanted to talk to you about it. I can't help but think it had something to do with her stay in your world, or the manner in which she ended up there." Giles cleared his throat and winced at how sore his throat

was already. He reached for his tea and took a sip. "Tell me, what's wrong?"

Talna paused for a moment. "The rift in the sky is back. The one that opened and took me to your universe. It grows larger every day. The magic is going wrong and beings are getting hurt. Mabon and I believe it is because of this hole in the sky. I am afraid, afraid for my people and for my planet. I am afraid if it gets much larger that beings from other universes may try to enter our world. We are a peaceful world and without our magic we cannot protect ourselves."

"Are you sure it is the same sort of opening?"

"Yes, Giles. It is a memory that is still very clear to me." Talna craned her neck and made a soft chirruping noise. Giles shifted his eyes and he could see Mabon, sitting on Talna, anchored at the base of her long neck.

So could everyone else. Willow let out a small eep noise. "Oh my God, it's so cute, what is it?"

Buffy bit back a laugh. She whispered to Giles. "Is that Mabon?" Giles nodded. Buffy turned to Willow. "That's Mabon. He's a ... well, he's sort of a mini-Giles." Giles sent Buffy an exasperated glare but Buffy just grinned. "No, really, you should have seen him. Studying the book Giles had, doing research. Just like Giles, except more squirrel like."

Giles ignored her last comments, and also ignored Willow's grinning reaction. He turned back to Talna and Mabon. "Please convey my greetings to Mabon."

Talna spoke briefly with Mabon and then turned back to Giles. "He wishes to send you greetings as well. He is concerned that we may not have much time. He would like to ask how you were able to close the rift on this side. Perhaps we can do the same thing on our world."

Giles shot a quick and apprehensive look at Buffy. He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Talna."

Talna spoke. "What is it, Giles? I can see that I have upset you. Is that question not allowed?"

Giles let out a breath. "No, it is allowed." He pointed at Buffy. "Buffy sacrificed herself by jumping into the rift. That's what closed it. She ... she died here in this universe because of it."

Talna was silent. Mabon chattered at her briefly and she answered back. Then he was silent as well. Everyone in the shop could tell that things had

taken a serious turn. Finally Buffy spoke. "Giles, what's wrong? Why are they here?"

Giles just shook his head, thinking furiously. Then he lifted his eyes to Buffy. "It must be why you and Dawn are sick."

Buffy glared at him, frustrated. "More information would be helpful here."

Giles gestured at Talna. "The rift, the one that Glory opened, it's still open on Talna's world." He took off his glasses and ran a hand through his hair. "That's got to be the reason. Somehow it's affecting you both. And it will continue to do so unless we can figure out a way to close it."

Talna spoke again. "Giles, the sending is weakening. I would not ask if I was not so afraid for my people, but could you accompany me home? Perhaps you can help us discover another way to close it, one that would not put your mate in danger. Mabon says we can bring you with us when we pull back the sending."

Giles nodded. "Of course. Yes, we must find a way to close it. I believe it is what's making Buffy ill." He moved away from Talna and began to look for one of his books. When he found it, Buffy's eyes narrowed.

"Giles, what are you doing?" She moved to be closer to him.

Giles turned to Buffy. "I need to go see it. I need to find a way to close it."

"Great, let's go."

Giles shook his head. "Buffy, I don't believe you should go. You're not well here, the atmosphere on Talna's world would be even harder on you now." Plus, Giles wanted her nowhere near that rift.

Buffy glared at him. "You are so out of your mind if you think I'm letting you go off to another universe without me."

"I don't want you to risk it. I can go check and use the same spell that brought us home the last time to return."

"Forget it. If you go, I go."

Dawn stood up. "And if she goes, I go too."

Giles let out an exasperated sound. "You are both too sick to go anywhere. I can do this on my own." He turned to Hank and Xander, sending them a look.

In response, they stood and walked towards the girls.

Talna suddenly let out a cry. "Giles, we must go now."

Giles moved closer, standing close enough to Talna to be almost within her. Buffy sprang for Giles and Dawn sprang for Buffy. Xander grabbed Buffy's arm while Hank reached for Dawn. The magic encompassed them all and with a flash of light the shop disappeared.

End of Part 2

Leap of Faith 3

The five of them landed in the inner circle, hard. Magic makers scurried out of the way to avoid being injured. All five of them groaned and with their first breath, all of them started to cough. Talna prodded Giles. "Giles, are you all right?" Giles staggered to his feet, trying to catch his breath. He looked around him and saw the other four, still in various stages of lying or sitting on the ground. Talna spoke again as she looked around as well. "I didn't realize you were going to bring everyone."

Giles crouched down next to Buffy but glanced up at Talna. "Neither did I. I told them to stay." He snorted at himself, realizing that after all this time with Buffy that he really ought to know better. Buffy was trying to sit up and Giles assisted her. Then he went to help Dawn. Hank and Xander were still coughing. Giles moved to them both. "It helps if you take shallow breaths." Giles helped the two men to their feet.

After he assured himself that all his fellow travelers were intact, Giles turned again to Talna. He moved to her, and this time when she head butted him, she made contact. Giles laid his cheek against the soft hide of her neck. He spoke softly. "Despite the circumstances, I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you again."

Talna rubbed her snout on his shoulder. "As I am to see you."

Buffy touched Xander on the arm. "See, his other girlfriend."

Xander grinned. "You better keep an eye on those two."

Hank was staring around him, his mouth open. Everywhere he looked he saw dragons, and little squirrel-like animals, and there were three suns in the sky. "Where the hell are we?"

Buffy slowly walked to him, and hugged him. "Crash course, Dad, in the weirdness that is my life." She looked around her. "I was here all alone for what seemed like the longest time before Giles showed up. I was sure I was going to die here." She flashed her dad a rueful smile. "As I'm sure you figured out already, the air here isn't great for humans."

Talna and Giles pulled back from one another and then Talna moved over to Buffy. She gently butted Buffy on the shoulder, speaking to Giles. "Please convey my greetings to your mate." Giles did so. Talna looked at Giles. "Who are the rest of our guests?"

Giles started introducing them. He started with Dawn. "This is Dawn, she is Buffy's sister." He moved to Hank. "This is Hank, he is Dawn's and Buffy's father." Last he pointed to Xander. "And this is Xander. He is ... he is my son."

Talna's eyes lit up at that and she head butted Xander. Buffy let out a little gasp. "Hey, you got the special head butting treatment too." She looked up at Giles. "Who'd you say he was?"

Giles blushed. "I said he was my son." He shrugged, looking at Xander, as if in apology. "I hope you don't mind. It seemed the simplest explanation."

Xander's jaw dropped. "Are you kidding? You don't know how many times I wished you were my dad." He grinned and gave Giles a hug. "Dad."

Giles hugged him back briefly, pleased but embarrassed at the show of affection. "Keep that up and I shall put you up for adoption, immediately." Xander pulled back, but he couldn't keep the delighted look off his face.

Giles looked over at Buffy to find she and Dawn staring up at the sky. Giles followed their gaze and saw the rift, then moved to stand next to Buffy. She spoke without taking her eyes off it. "I can feel it. It's like it's pulling at me."

Dawn nodded. "I can feel it too." She shivered and Giles put his arm around her, running his hand up and down her arm quickly, to warm her.

Talna had been conferring with another dragon. She approached the group of humans again. "Come, accommodations are being set up and food is being gathered. Let us speak together and see what can be done." She looked at Giles and he nodded. Making sure that Dawn was in Hank's care, he wrapped one arm around Buffy and placed the other gently on Talna's neck. They made their way slowly to where they would be housed.

It had grown late and they were all trying to get some sleep. Giles kept a close eye on Buffy and Dawn. It was clear the atmosphere was more debilitating to them than it was to the others, and their breathing was already quite labored. He was also concerned that being this close to the rift might be draining them of their strength even faster. Giles wished he'd been able to leave them both back home, where they would be safe. He let out a sigh, knowing he was deluding himself. They weren't safe anywhere, not until the rift was closed, and the answer to that could only be found here. And despite the hours of conferring, they were no closer to an answer, other than the most obvious one, which was unacceptable to Giles.

Buffy inched her way over to where Giles was sitting, apart from everyone. She could see the sadness on his face and she knew she was about to make it worse. "You know what needs to happen, don't you?"

Giles turned angry eyes to Buffy. "Don't you even think about it."

"Giles."

"Buffy, I don't even want to talk about this."

Although he was trying to speak quietly, Giles' anguished tones penetrated the air. Hank, Dawn, and Xander were awakened from their light sleep and inched over to join Giles and Buffy. Xander yawned and started to cough. "Man, this air sucks." He caught the look on Giles' face. "What's up?"

Giles refused to answer. He stood and strode a few steps away, his back to the group. Buffy answered. "We know how to close it. We can't just not talk about it. It's not going to just go away."

Xander's eyes opened in alarm, understanding now completely the look on Giles' face. "Buffy, you cannot jump in that thing. It already killed you."

"Don't you guys get it? It's killing me again. Maybe I'm supposed to be dead, maybe it's because I ended up here before, instead of dying, that this is happening. I can't just let this whole world die when I know I can fix it." She forced herself up and moved to Giles, touching his arm. "I'm going to die anyway."

Giles just pulled her in closely, holding her as tightly as he could, as if just his arms alone might keep her safe. "No. There has to be another way."

Dawn spoke up. "There is. Me."

Buffy lifted her head. "No, Dawn."

"Buffy, I was the one who was supposed to die. Not you. Me. I'm the reason Glory was even able to open the rift, I should be the one who closes it this time." She glanced at her dad but then pressed on. "Besides, I'm not really human. I don't really belong here." Hank's eyes widened at that, but he wasn't ready to interrupt.

Buffy shook her head in angry denial. "That's not true. You're my sister. And you do belong here, with us, no matter how you got here. And you are so not jumping into that rift."

Giles moved back to the group, his arm still tightly around Buffy. He helped her sit then sat next to her. He smiled at Dawn. "Dawn, that's very brave of you, but I cannot allow you to take that risk and not only because we love you. You are the Key, despite your human form, and we have no idea what might actually happen if we put the key in the door, which is essentially what that rift is. It could open it permanently; it could open even more doors, to a limitless number of universes. We cannot take that risk."

Dawn looked relieved to have been given such an indisputable out. Buffy took her hand. Hank scowled. "I need some more explanations. None of that made any sense to me. What do you mean that Dawn's not human? What is this key you're speaking of?" He looked at Giles, knowing that his answers again lay with this unusual man.

Giles let out a breath, again faced with the daunting task of trying to explain something so convoluted in a short period of time. He used the same phrase as before. "I'm not sure you'll believe me."

Hank snorted. "I'm feeling amazingly open minded right now. Please."

Giles nodded. "Your daughter, Dawn, didn't exist until a year ago. You didn't father her; you didn't raise her. She was made by a group of monks who needed to shield something that was extraordinarily special and in need of protection. A key, a key to open doorways between universes. So they made it human to hide it, and then to protect it, they sent her to Buffy. They implanted memories into our minds, including yours, to make us think that we knew her." He smiled at Dawn. "And we do. She is very real, and very much a part of this family. And she is, to all appearances, human, but we know she is the Key as well."

"Why would they send her to Buffy?"

Giles let out another long breath. "That is a conversation best held back in

Sunnydale when Buffy is feeling better and can demonstrate her power. But, to make a long story short, Buffy is also more than human; she is the Slayer. She has inordinate strength and speed, and is a weapon in the fight against evil. The monks knew what they were doing. Buffy did keep Dawn safe, even if she died in the doing of it." He pulled Buffy to him and kissed the top of her head.

Hank furrowed his brow, processing. He looked at Buffy and Dawn. "So, neither of them are...?" He shook his head and started over. "But, they are still my daughters, right?" That was what was important to him.

Giles nodded, smiling softly. "In every way that counts."

Hank still needed more information. "So, how was Buffy able to stop this rift by throwing herself into it, if they needed Dawn?" Hank was amazed that he was taking this all so calmly. He knew that either he would wake up soon, or it would all hit like a ton of bricks and he'd have to actually deal with this insanity.

Buffy answered her father's question. "They made Dawn out of me. Out of Summers' blood. The only way to stop the rift from growing was for Dawn to die before her blood stopped flowing. I have the same blood, so I was able to die instead."

"So you think the only way to close this rift is to jump in it again, send it more Summers' blood?"

Buffy nodded and Giles' face grew even stonier. "Buffy, the answer is no."

She turned to him. "It's not your place to give me orders. I'm the Slayer, whether I'm on Earth or whether I'm here. This world is in danger, Dawn is in danger. I can fix it."

Giles just shook his head, his heart pounding, and his heart breaking. "Buffy, I can't." Giles' voice broke and he turned away, tears running down his face. Buffy laid her head against his back, tears in her own eyes.

Hank watched them and then he looked at Dawn. "I have Summers' blood."

Giles turned his head quickly to Hank. "What?"

"I have Summers' blood." He pointed to Buffy. "She's my daughter by birth, she has my blood. If they made Dawn out of her, then they made her out of me too."

Buffy's eyes narrowed. "No way."

"Buffy, I'm not going to sit here and allow you to die when I can do something about it."

Buffy clenched her teeth. "You are not dying."

Hank managed a smile, despite his serious demeanor. "This isn't your choice either. Just as Giles can't make the choice for you, you can't make it for me." He glanced at Giles. "Could it work? Could I do it?"

Giles closed his eyes, torn, wanting to grasp at any option that would save Buffy's life, but knowing that this choice would tear her apart. "There has to be another way."

Hank continued to argue. "Look at it this way. Buffy threw herself in the rift on Earth and ended up here alive, maybe if I throw myself in it here, I'll end up on Earth alive."

Buffy glared at him. "Or maybe you'll just end up dead." Then she glanced at Giles. Buffy could see the wheels turning in Giles' mind. She shook her head at him. "Giles, don't you let him do it. I'll never forgive you if you let him do it." She scowled at her dad. "I'm the Slayer, not you."

Hank touched her face. "Honey, you may be the Slayer to all these people but to me you're my daughter. And I know I haven't been much of a dad to you, but if it comes down to a choice between you dying and me dying, I'm very clear about what to do. And it's not Giles' choice to make for me, either. It's mine."

Giles couldn't stand the conversation anymore. He stood up and walked away, and then he began to run, ignoring the pain in his chest as his lungs strove for enough oxygen to meet the needs of his body. Buffy started to go after him but Xander stopped her. "Buffy, don't. First of all, you're in no shape to go jogging, but second of all, he needs time." He glanced at them all. "You keep saying it's not Giles' choice but it is. He's the only one who can speak to the dragons." He pointed to the sky. "No one gets up there without Giles asking a dragon to take them. He's the one who has to speak the words, knowing that when he does that someone's gonna die."

Hank protested. "Surely we can communicate with a dragon, tell it what we need."

Xander shook his head. "Not without Talna's okay, and she won't do anything that Giles doesn't want her to do."

Buffy just covered her face with her hands. She was so tired, and it was so hard to breathe. She knew she was breaking Giles' heart and that she was asking him to do something she had no right to do. Even though he sent her out every night to face her fate, this was different. This was asking him to practically plunge the sword in her chest, just as she had done to Angel to save the world, and that memory still woke her up some nights.

Hank inched his way over to Buffy. Xander moved to Dawn and the two of them started quietly talking. Hank tried to get his daughter's attention. "Buffy."

Buffy looked up at her father. "I just lost Mom. I can't lose you too."

Hank sighed and he looked at Buffy, saw how tired and weary and indescribably old she was. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry that I wasn't there for you, and that I put my own needs first for so long. I don't know what happened, the years went by so quickly. And not being here when your mom died, it was unforgivable of me."

"What happened to you? Why didn't you call?"

Hank shook his head. "I meant to. But then a day went by, and another, and then I started feeling badly that I hadn't called, and after a while it all somehow became about me and not about you and I couldn't face it." He looked at the ground. "Being older does not, a great deal of the time, mean being wiser."

Buffy gave him her lopsided grin. "Well, I haven't made the smartest decisions either."

"You're young. You're entitled to make stupid decisions. It comes with the territory. I should know better." Hank looked out the door in the direction Giles had gone. "Tell me about him, about the two of you."

Buffy looked out the door too. "Tell you about him? I don't know where to start." She looked at her dad. "He means everything to me. I love him."

Hank stared at her for a minute and then he let out a soft laugh. "Every word of caution I might be inclined to give you seems quite unimportant given where we are and what we're up against." He took Buffy's hand. "He seems to love you, very much."

"He does. He's so good to me. He's taken care of me for so long. When Mom died, he took care of everything. I don't know what Dawn and I would have done without him."

"Dawn seems quite taken with him as well. And I know she misses you."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Only because I'm not around. She'd get tired of the yelling if I was around all the time."

"No, she'd do fine with you and Giles."

Buffy lifted her eyes up to her dad, angry at what he was trying to do. "Stop it, you can't do it. We don't even know if it will work. You could die for nothing."

"Oh, Buffy. There's no proof that you jumping in it will work either. Either way it's a crapshoot. If I die, you'll be sad for a while, at least I hope you would be, but you'd move on. You've lived so long without me. But if you die, I don't think Giles would survive, and Dawn would be devastated."

Buffy's voice was thick. "I don't care. You can't do it."

Hank squeezed her hand. "Well, it's a moot point, at this rate, unless Giles agrees to it."

"Which he won't."

Hank leaned against the wall and pulled Buffy up against his chest. "I do love you. I know it doesn't make up for anything, but I never stopped. I just never learned how to put the people I love first over what I do."

Buffy started to cry. "Sometimes you can't."

Hank just held her as he sat there, thinking. He needed some paper and a writing implement of some kind. And then come morning he needed to start watching the dragons. He didn't care what Xander said. Hank was sure that one of these dragons would override Talna to save this world. He just needed to figure out which one. For once, his years in the boardroom, paying attention to every nuance, and every gesture, was going to pay off. Come hell or high water, he was going to save his daughters' lives.

End of Part 3

Leap of Faith 4

Giles stopped when his body forced him to. He fell to his knees laboring to breathe, choking with the deep breaths he was pulling in. Even though he

hadn't gone far he had no idea where he was as he hadn't gotten his bearings before he ran. Giles didn't care. As hard as it was to breathe, he blessed the silence. That conversation had been killing him. There had been many times when Giles hated the fact that Buffy was the Slayer, but never as much as now.

Giles finally got his breathing under control and he sat, leaning against a rock, his heart still racing with the lack of oxygen. One of the suns was slowly coming up and he could just make out the rift. Talna found him a short while later, sitting there, staring up at the sky.

Despite her bulk, she moved quietly and Giles didn't even hear her approach until she settled down beside him. He turned and smiled sadly at her. "For something so deadly, it's quite beautiful." He looked back up at the sky. "How did you find me?"

"You were being watched over, to make sure any needs were met. Someone told me you left. Do you wish to be alone?"

Giles shook his head. "No, I find myself suddenly glad of the company."

"You are sad."

"Yes, I am."

"You are afraid she will want to help."

"She does want to help. I seem to have no shortage of volunteers willing to die to save your planet."

"I am sorry I brought you here."

"It's not your fault. I tried to leave her at home." He glanced at Talna. "She seldom does what I ask." There was a small smile on his face but it didn't eliminate the sadness there.

Talna shifted. "I do not understand the sacrifice. Why must someone die to close the rift?"

"I don't know. But, that is what closed it before. Blood. It required blood. Power of this magnitude usually does."

"Must it be in a body? We have the means to withdraw blood. Is that possible in your kind?"

Giles' eyes opened wide. "Good Lord. I didn't even think of that." He let out a laugh. "Yes, it is possible." He smiled at her. "My brain has clearly been affected by the lack of oxygen."

Talna stood, anxious to try if it was possible. "So, we will try this?"

"Yes, we will." He looked at her, standing as well, needing her to start them off, not knowing which direction to go, but she stood still, watching him. He looked at her, curious. "What is it?"

"Giles, if this does not work, take your family and go home."

"And leave you here alone to meet whatever fate that hole in the sky brings you? Take the chance that left open it could start to eat its way into other universes, including my own? How do I do that?"

"I cannot ask you to let her die."

"I don't know how to stop her. She'll die anyway. She's right about that. And either way, I'll die." Giles had no fear of dying. It was the thought of living without Buffy that shook him to his core. He couldn't go through that again.

Talna butted him with her head. "It is too much. We will find another way."

Giles looked up at the sky. "It's grown, just since yesterday. We're running out of time. If Mabon's right and it's affecting the magic, we might not be able to get home."

"I am sorry. I am sorry our friendship has brought you to this."

He looked at her affectionately. "There was no way you could know that the one might cause the other. You gave her back to me and I'm grateful for that. And I'm grateful that I have had the pleasure of your company, even if it has been for such a short while."

Talna looked at him for another moment. And then after another gentle head butt she swiveled her body and the two of them headed back from where he had fled.

##

There was much discussion as to how much blood to draw and whose blood to use. In the end they used Buffy's, as her blood was what stopped it last time. Plus, despite her illness, he knew they could take quite a bit and her Slayer healing would replenish her system once the rift was closed.

The room and the grounds outside were filled with dragons and the magic makers, all watching with great interest. Hank observed them all. If this worked, well and fine, but if it didn't he would need some assistance. Thanks to Giles' interpreting expertise he had been given a sheet of parchment and something that resembled charcoal. Hank had been quite the artist in his college days. He had no doubt he could communicate what he wanted to do with a few pictures. Focusing on the parts of the pictures that would elicit few comments, other than those directed at his talent, or lack thereof, he began to draw.

After they were done, Giles walked outside with Talna to decide how best to get the blood to the rift. Buffy was exhausted, and was lying in a huge bed in the treatment area where they'd drawn her blood. Dawn wasn't in much better shape and slept at her side.

Xander's eyes followed Giles as he walked outside. He didn't know how Giles was still functioning, especially after his mad dash last night. Xander's muscles protested every move, cramping every time he exerted himself. He sat by the open window; glad he could stay still for the time being. Xander watched as Giles handed the blood to a dragon that took it very carefully in its paws, sitting back on its haunches. With a powerful boost from its hind legs it jumped into the air and became airborne with a few sweeps of its wings.

Suddenly Xander let out a protesting yell. "Hey, he gets to ride a dragon? How come Giles gets to ride a dragon?" He pouted as Giles climbed onto Talna's back using one of her forelegs as a step stool.

That woke Buffy up. "What? Giles is what?" She attempted to stand, her heart in her throat at the thought of Giles anywhere near the rift. "Stop him."

Xander shook his head. "Too late. It's a bird, it's a plane, no, it's Giles flying on a dragon." He pouted again. "Man, he gets to have all the fun."

Marshaling some strength from deep within Buffy lurched for the door. Hank hastened after her, and put an arm around her. "Buffy, you should get back into bed."

"What is he doing?" Buffy shaded her eyes as she looked up into the sky, trying to see Giles. She found him, on Talna, hovering uncomfortably close to the rift. Buffy realized that he was probably farther away from it than it looked, but it was still too close. It could suck him in; it could grow and engulf him, one of those lightning bolts could strike them. Then she noticed the other dragon. Her vision was sharp enough that she could tell it was doing something with the bag of blood. It slowly flew some distance away. Then, with a defiant shriek that, even from that distance, made her ears ring, it

started to fly straight at the rift, but at the last moment it threw the blood into the tear in the sky and quickly veered away.

Giles watched the rift, willing it to respond, praying that it would close. But it did nothing. The blood vanished as if into a hole, disappearing without reappearing as Buffy had. It was just gone, and nothing had happened. Giles felt his stomach clench. Talna turned to look at him. "Did it take some time on your world for it to close?"

Giles shook his head. "No, it happened right away."

Talna's eyes were sad as she turned back to face the rift. "You must try and go home."

Giles ignored her comment. "Maybe it doesn't need to be her. Maybe it would take any sacrifice."

Talna craned her neck around again. "One of my people?"

Giles pursed his lips. "No, I think it needs to be human."

"It cannot be you, my friend."

"Why not?"

"Besides for the fact that I will not help you to do this, you are the only one who can get your family back home. They would be stranded here."

"The magic makers could get them home."

"You do not know that for sure, and I will not help you."

"Talna, I cannot watch her die. If she dies here, so must I."

"I understand. I honored that request before and I would do so again. But I will not carry you to your death. Which means I will not carry her either."

"Talna, your world could die, you could die."

"Yes. But I must do what I feel is right. I know you would die to save this world, just as your mate would. I would also die to save this world, as I would die to protect you." She paused, needing to flap her wings for a minute to catch another thermal. "I know that one being's sacrifice to save a world is a seemingly small one, but I also know I cannot utter those words to ask, or to allow it, if it means your death. We must find another way."

"Talna, there is no other way."

She could be as stubborn as he. "We must find another way."

Hank stood with Buffy as Giles and Talna hovered in the sky, her wings spread, catching the updrafts to keep her afloat. Buffy's brow furrowed. "Why don't they come back? What they are talking about?"

Hank put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. "They're trying to decide what to do next."

Buffy looked up at her dad, frightened. "You don't think he'd ..." She couldn't even finish the sentence.

Hank let out a short, mirthless laugh. "Yes, I believe he would, in an instant, if he thought it would save you, but I don't believe she will let him." Hank glanced around. This was the time, before Giles got back to the ground, before Buffy had the opportunity to find a way up to the rift. He looked at the dragon that had thrown the bag of blood in the rift. It was looking at them. Hank knew he might just be projecting his own human interpretation on the dragon's demeanor, but it looked angry. It looked frustrated that the blood hadn't worked, and it looked more than ready to try something else.

Hank squeezed Buffy's shoulder again, knowing that he couldn't give her any indication of what he was about to try to do. He stopped himself from looking at her, fighting the longing to tell her goodbye. Instead he just took a step away. "I'll be right back. I'm just going to check on Dawn." At her brief nod he went back to the treatment facility to get his paper. With a few quick strokes he added himself to the pictures and he rolled it up.

Dawn was sleeping. He stared at her for a second and then leaned down to give her a kiss on the cheek. Xander's eyes were focused on Giles and Talna, still hovering above. Hank went out the door and he could see the dragon's eyes following him. He gestured for it to come over, out of the way, on the side of the building. As Hank unrolled his paper he gave a brief prayer to anyone that was listening that these dragons' eyesight was similar to a humans' and it would be able to see what he had drawn.

##

Xander suddenly realized that Buffy was standing by herself. Frowning he wearily pulled himself up and headed outside. Just as he reached Buffy's side he saw that Giles and Talna were finally heading back. Xander heard a commotion and his eyes followed the noise. He let out another frustrated yell. "Man, now Mr. Summers gets to ride on a dragon? How fair is that?"

Suddenly he realized what was happening. He turned to Buffy, fear in his eyes. "Buffy, your dad."

Buffy's head snapped around just in time to see her dad being lifted off the ground by a dragon. She screamed at Giles, hoping he would hear her. "Giles, stop him."

Giles did hear her scream and he followed her pointing arm until he saw what was upsetting her so much. "Talna."

"I see them. Hold on." Giles held on as tightly as he could, his thighs and calves pressed against Talna's body. They flew to intercept but the other dragon was on a mission, and had no intention of being put off. This stranger had shown him that he could save his world, and he had to try. He was also younger than Talna and despite her efforts he flew by her and up to the rift again.

Giles yelled at Talna, trying to be heard over the wind rushing by. "Can you call the other dragons? If he falls like Buffy did, maybe we can catch him."

Talna turned on a dime and Giles had to grab her neck to keep from falling. She flew a little closer to the ground and called out. In seconds dozens of the dragons were airborne.

The dragon got Hank as close as he dared, moving directly above the rift. Giles watched, tears in his eyes, as Hank dove into the rift, the dive so similar to Buffy's dive that it brought back the memory with painful intensity. He, on Talna, and the rest of the dragons, hovered in the sky, eyes alert for a falling body.

Buffy let out a cry when she saw her dad leap and Xander pulled her into his chest and held her tightly. She started sobbing, and there were tears in Xander's own eyes as he watched the drama unfold.

Suddenly he gave a yell as the rift closed with a blinding crack of lightening. Then he saw the speck in the sky. The dragons were already on it. Talna didn't push her way in to help catch as she had Giles on her back, but they were still close enough for Giles to see Hank's face. And Giles knew that it didn't matter if the dragons caught him or not.

He had wondered about that. Wondered if the fall had killed Buffy or if the dive into the rift had. Her body, as it lay there, had been remarkably unbroken, her face peaceful, not the face of someone who had died in pain, hitting the ground, after falling a great distance. Instead, it had seemed as if the ground had simply risen to meet her, to receive her back, to honor her.

Now he knew. Hank was dead.

The dragons did catch him, though, and they bore him to the ground. Xander helped Buffy get to him and she kneeled at his side, tears coursing down her face. Giles landed a minute later and moved to her side. He let her know he was there and she turned to him, her tears wetting his chest, her hands clenched into fists. "How could he do it?"

Giles stroked her hair. "He did it to save you."

Buffy just shook her head. "It should have been me."

Giles didn't respond to her statement. He was sorry that Hank was dead, and even sorrier that it was so painful for Buffy, as it would be for Dawn. But the larger part of him was immeasurably relieved, and he felt inestimably grateful to Hank that by his actions he had allowed Buffy to live. Again, he'd been given Buffy back when all he'd been able to see was her death. He turned to Xander. "You need to get Dawn." Xander nodded and he turned back to the building where Dawn lay asleep.

There was a general sense of joy in the air, the sky whole again, but the dragons and the magic makers were keenly aware of the cause of their joy. Already they were approaching, wanting to honor Hank's sacrifice. One by one they came up and gently touched him, looking at Buffy and then also at Dawn when she appeared, her eyes reddened and brimming with tears. The two girls knelt at their father's side, Giles behind Buffy, Xander behind Dawn, as the tribute continued.

Finally only Talna and Mabon were left. Talna head butted Buffy very gently. Then she looked up at Giles. "Please tell her I am sorry for her loss. And tell her that it would not have been my choice for any of you to die." After Giles interpreted this for Buffy and Dawn, Talna spoke again, looking up at the sky. "But he has saved us. He has saved this world and words alone cannot express my gratitude." Then she looked at Giles again. "How do you honor your dead?"

"We bury them, or we burn them, and we have a ritual of sorts over the site where their remains are to be buried."

"Will you wish to do that here? We would hold his place of burial with great reverence if that is your wish."

Giles sat down by Buffy and Dawn and asked them. Dawn just looked back at her father's body. Buffy looked at him too, and then she looked around her. "It's so beautiful here." She leaned against Giles, still experiencing the painful

effects of the bad air, but already feeling some strength returning to her with the closure of the rift. "Here. Let's bury him here." She reached for Dawn and Dawn shifted until her head was resting against Buffy's shoulder. "Is that all right, Dawn? Somehow it seems as if it should be here, don't you think? Where he'll be remembered as the guy who saved this planet?"

Dawn nodded, too bereaved to speak yet. She had experienced too much death this year. The small group sat there for a long time beside Hank's body. The four humans, among them his two daughters, and Talna and Mabon, all succoring each other by their presence, and paying respect to a man who had finally proven the depths of his capacity to love.

End of Part 4

Leap of Faith 5

There was a need to hurry as the effects of the air continued to negatively affect the humans. The dragons found a suitable site in their own burial grounds. Giles and Buffy were taken on Talna, and Xander and Dawn by another, while two dragons lifted Hank's shrouded body between them. Giles and Buffy spoke over his grave, as did many of the dragons, expressing their gratitude. When they were done and the grave filled back in, the magic makers assembled. Putting a seed in the dirt they cast a spell. In a matter of minutes a tree grew over Hank's grave, covered with extraordinary yellow blossoms that emitted a smell that somehow made you think of home and family and love.

Talna spoke to Giles. "It will always bloom, and it will mark his grave until this world is no more."

Giles rested his hand on her neck, knowing that the time to say goodbye was drawing near once again. "I am glad to think that this world will be here for a very long time, and that you will be safe."

Talna craned her neck to look at Giles. "As I am glad that you will not be staying here to die."

Dawn started coughing again, and Giles turned to her in concern. "We need to go." He glanced at Talna. "I need to take them home."

She agreed. Mabon had already organized several of the magic makers to assemble the needed supplies. As Giles watched them scurry around, patting paraffin balls of wax into shape to create a circle, he pulled Buffy back into his

arms and held her. She looked up at him. "It's weird. I feel closer to him now than I have in such a long time. He really did love us."

Giles stroked her hair. "He did."

Buffy sighed. "I never thought I'd ever say this, but I think he and I were a lot alike. It's always been easier for us to show that we love someone in the big ways than in the little ways." She looked at Dawn, currently being held by Xander. "I'll need help with that. Showing her I love her in the little ways too, not just the jumping into a rift way."

"Oh Buffy, just you telling me that you need to love her that way, tells me that you do, and you will."

"Only because you show me all the time how to do it. The day-to-day love, the never-ending support love, that's the stuff that gets me through each day, knowing that's there, that I'll always have that as long as I have you." Buffy gave him a hug and then she looked up at him, running her hands over his face, loving him so much. Glancing at Talna she let Giles go, pushing him gently towards her. "I'm sorry you have to do it again, but it's time to say goodbye." She walked over to Dawn and Xander and wrapped her arms around them both.

As Giles headed over to Talna, he watched Mabon and Talna converse. Talna lifted her head and looked at Giles, a light of delight in her eyes. "Mabon has just told me that now that the magic is right again it will be possible for us to contact each other, if that is all right with you."

Giles grinned, his own eyes delighted. "It is very all right with me. It will make this parting easier if I thought I might speak with you on occasion." A couple of magic makers came running over, holding a round object in their hands between them, its size requiring both of them to carry it.

Talna looked at Giles. "Take it, it is for you."

Giles reached down and picked it up. "What is it?"

"The magic makers made it. It will allow you to contact me. You must clear your mind and concentrate and it will connect us, it will project your image to me, as my image was projected to you."

Giles held the ball tightly in his hand. "Tell them thank you, tell them I will keep it safe and use it wisely."

"They are giving it to you to thank you. To thank you for coming to save us."

"Hank saved you."

Talna butted him in the chest with her head. "Because of you. Without our friendship, without your willingness to come to our assistance, our world might have been destroyed."

Giles crouched down to be closer to Mabon. "Talna, tell him that perhaps as we contact one another that I could start to learn some of his language so he and I could speak and discuss our magics."

Mabon answered his interpreted suggestion with an enthusiastic waving of his bushy tail and an excited and quite lengthy response. Talna lifted her head, and with a humorous expression, glanced at Giles. "He is pleased with the idea."

Giles let out a soft chuckle and stood. Moving to Talna, he stroked her neck as she rested her head on his shoulder.

Xander and Buffy watched them. Xander poked Buffy. "You're right. If she wasn't a dragon and if she lived in Sunnydale she could give you a run for your money."

Buffy smiled, but she didn't respond, most of her attention now focused on Dawn. She hadn't spoken a word since she found out about their father. Stroking her hair Buffy spoke to her sister. "Dawn, are you ready to go home?"

Dawn just sighed. "Will I live with you now?"

"With me and Giles. We'll need to get a bigger place though."

Dawn just nodded. She wondered if she'd ever be able to live in a place long enough for it to feel safe. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at Buffy. "You won't die again, though, will you?"

Buffy just shook her head. "No, I've got too much to live for." Dawn started to cry and just held on tightly to her sister.

##

Giles held the book awkwardly. Buffy was sitting on his lap while holding Dawn on hers and Xander had an almost painfully tight grip on Giles' arm. "Make sure you don't leave me behind, big guy."

Giles patted Xander's hand. "I won't. It's clear that all you need to be doing is

touching so we'll all get home fine."

Buffy coughed. "Hurry, I really want to be able to breathe again."

Xander nodded. "I gotta agree with the Buffster on that one." He caught Dawn's eye and chuckled her under the chin. "And even though it was for a really sucky reason, you and me Dawn, we got to ride on a dragon."

Dawn gave him a watery smile, her eyes brightening for a moment. "Too bad I can't tell anyone."

"We can tell Anya, and Tara and Willow. They haven't ridden on a dragon."

Dawn nodded, her eyes brighter still. Then she closed her eyes again and rested her head back on Buffy's shoulder. Buffy gave Giles a kiss on the cheek. "Time to go home."

Giles nodded and with a last look at Talna, he began the incantation. A flash of light, then darkness, and then they were all back in the Magic Box, sprawled on the floor, looking up at the astonished and very relieved faces of Willow, Anya, and Tara.

##

Something hard stopped his fall, rather abruptly. Something that was hard and narrow, and Hank wrapped his arms around it to ensure that he fell no further. Risking a peek he opened his eyes and closed them immediately. He was high in the air on some metal girder, in the midst of a construction site.

A construction worker almost tripped over him. He was looking up at the sky, watching as a piece of it sealed itself shut and an unearthly crack of lightning ran across it. He let out a yelp as his feet hit something unexpected and then fumbled for even purchase again. The man looked down. "Hey buddy, what the hell are you doing here?"

Hank just shook his head. "I have no idea. Where am I?"

The man frowned at him. "You can't be up here. And what do you mean, where are you?" The man looked at the sky again nervously, remembering the hole, its appearance bringing to mind too many science fiction movies. "Is that a 'where am I', as in what planet am I on?"

Hank barked out a desperate laugh. "No. Well, yes, but I'm assuming I'm on Earth, right?" He dared a glance up at the man and saw him nodding, mute for the time being. "Am I in Sunnydale?" Again a nod. Hank let out a long breath. "Unbelievable." He closed his eyes again and rested his forehead on

the girder, stunned that he was still alive, and even more amazed that this construction was happening here, in the exact place needed to stop his fall. Hank glanced up again. "Can you help me down?"

The man looked at him suspiciously. "Are you human? Are you gonna zap me with something?"

"Fully human, just too high up. I find that I suddenly don't like heights very much any more."

"Why did the sky do that? Is that how you got here?"

Hank attempted to sit up, looking for something to anchor himself on. Thankfully, he found that there was a safety rail attached to one side of the girder. Once sitting, he looked up at the sky. Realizing that he must indeed, have gotten here from there, spewed from the sky, as it were, he let out a short astonished laugh. Just a few hours ago he never would have thought such a thing possible, in fact, had essentially called Giles a liar to his face. And now, here he was, transported from one world to another through a hole in the sky, presumably dead there, and yet, very alive here.

He looked up at the man. "I don't know what that was." Hank ran a hand over his face and told a lie. "I must have gotten more drunk than I thought."

The lie was accepted instantly; it was far easier to believe in the antics of a drunken idiot than to believe that the sky was spewing out strangers. "You're a damn fool. You're lucky you're not dead."

"I know it. Will you help me down?"

"Damn idiot." The man grasped Hank by the arm and unceremoniously yanked him to his feet. "I should call the police."

"Please don't." Hank reached for his wallet and pulled it out. Retrieving some bills he handed them to the man. "Just get me down."

The man looked at the money and then shoved it in his pocket. "Just watch where you're putting your feet."

"Trust me, I will."

"And don't you puke on me or I'll beat the crap out of you."

"Farthest thing from my mind."

With a grunt the man finally acquiesced and in a few short minutes Hank found himself on the ground, where he was yelled at by the foreman and escorted off the property. Hank questioned several passers by, figured out where he was and started running for the shop, taking a second to appreciate the air that he was breathing.

##

They were all sitting in silence. The story had been told and they needed a few minutes to process it, even those who had been there. Buffy and Dawn were crying again. Giles was standing by the counter, Buffy against his chest and Tara had Dawn on her lap.

There was a sudden knock on the door. Giles looked up and his face reflected his disbelief as his eyes met Hank's. Then he smiled. Looking down at Buffy, he brushed some hair off her face. "Buffy, there's someone at the door."

Her voice was thick. "Tell them to go away."

Giles let out a soft laugh. "No, I don't think so. You need to let him in."

Something in Giles' voice made Buffy look up at him and she saw the smile on his face. Her head turned and she let out a cry. "Dawn, it's Dad." Buffy sprinted for the door.

Xander shook his head in amazement. "Holy shit. He was right, he did come out alive on this side."

Dawn got to the door seconds after Buffy, and Hank found himself the recipient of two long and weepy hugs. After a few minutes, each of them holding a hand, they brought him into the shop to join the others. The story had to be told again, but this time the talking grew loud and animated, and smiles wreathed the room.

When they were done, Hank looked at his two daughters. "I think it's time I moved my business to Sunnydale. I don't want to lose you again." He cocked his head at Dawn. "Will you stay with me if I move here?" Dawn nodded and she gave him a hug, feeling her life shift again to one of safety. Hank glanced at Buffy, who was now leaning against Giles. "I'm assuming you two are living together already?" At Buffy's nod, Hank stood, catching Giles' eye. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

Buffy looked nervous but Giles gave her a kiss on the cheek, and he and Hank went back to the training room. Hank stared at all the weapons. "What is this place?"

"It's where I train Buffy."

Hank let out a short laugh. "Even with what I just went through it still seems so hard to believe, any of it."

Giles just pursed his lips and put his hands in his pocket, one foot up on the couch, waiting for Hank to say what was on his mind.

Hank sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

Giles raised his eyebrows. "I can hardly fault you for that. No one's prepared to believe in these things." He smiled softly. "However, it doesn't make them any less true."

"I suppose that's true enough."

Giles dropped his foot and turned to face Hank. "Thank you. Thank you for what you did."

Hank shook his head. "I didn't have much choice. I couldn't let either of them die."

"You did have a choice, and I'm sorry to say that I wouldn't have believed you capable of making that choice. I apologize for that."

"Don't. I wouldn't have thought myself capable either. I've lived a pretty selfish life and I've been a poor father."

Giles smiled. "I believe that you have the opportunity to change all of that now."

Hank smiled back. "And I will." He let out a breath. "I wanted to thank you too."

"For what?"

"For taking such good care of them."

Giles let out a sigh. "Buffy died under my care. I don't feel as if I've done an especially good job of keeping her safe. If you hadn't been with us, she might have died again."

Hank just looked at Giles. "I don't believe that. You'd have found another way." Giles looked away, his eyes haunted. Hank persisted. "Something tells me that you'd do anything to protect her, to protect them both."

Giles shook his head. "I ...it's not always enough."

Buffy walked into the room. "It is."

Giles looked at Buffy. "I told you to kill Dawn." Hank's eyes widened but he stayed silent, somehow knowing that he didn't understand, that it wasn't as simple as Giles' sentence was making it sound.

"You didn't stop me from trying to find another way. And it was to save the world."

"You threatened to kill me."

"And I would have, but if I'd really thought you would have harmed Dawn, I'd have killed you right then."

"If I'd had to, if it had been the only way to stop the world from dying, I would have killed her, and I would have accepted my death at your hands." Giles' eyes grew bright, his face anguished. "And if it had been the only way to protect Talna's world, I would have let you jump."

Buffy walked up to him and put her hand on his chest. "Giles, we do what we have to do. We always have. But it doesn't matter, not now, now that we're both safe."

"It does." Giles hadn't finished confessing. "I killed Ben."

"Did you?" She shook her head. "I wondered about that, if I had killed him when I hurt Glory so badly. I should have been the one who killed him. I'm sorry I left that to you."

Giles closed his eyes. "Your father was thanking me for taking such good care of you, when I feel that all I've done is send you to your death over and over again."

"My job is all about death, Giles. I'd have been dead a thousand times over without you. I'd be dead and buried on Talna's world without you. I'd have a heart of stone, if it hadn't been for you." Buffy laid her head against his chest and wrapped her arms around him. "I love you so much." She held him tightly for a moment and then she lifted her head up. "And for every time you think you've let me down, I've let you down so much more." Giles shook his head but Buffy laid her finger over his lips. "It's true, and you know it. You've always given me your all, and all I've done is give you the smallest part of myself for so long."

Giles' brow furrowed, wanting to disagree with her. "Buffy."

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him, not letting him finish. "Now you get the whole package deal."

Giles pulled her in close. "For which I am very grateful."

Hank watched the two of them and smiled. He had so much to learn about the two of them, about his daughters, and about this extraordinary life they lived. But somehow, despite Giles' protestations, Hank felt as if they were all in very good hands as long as he was watching out for them.

Walking softly, Hank left the room and went to join the others. Xander looked up. "What, are they smooching again?"

Hank grinned. "They will be soon."

Xander grinned. "Those two wacky kids." They all grinned and taking seats around the table, they began trying to answer Hank's questions.

Back in the training room, Giles lowered his head and captured Buffy's lips with his.

The End

March 24, 2002