

Watchers Retreat 1

Giles looked at the invitation with an annoyed astonishment. Six years as an active Watcher, in charge of the most amazing Slayer the world had ever seen and that whole time he'd never received an invitation. Then he moves back to England, barely still functioning as a Watcher, and they send him one.

He looked at the location again. Visions of the Cotswold's ran through Giles' mind. And then were sadly dismissed. Giles let out a pained half laugh. For the first time, the Council had decided to hold the Watchers Retreat in the United States. In California. Northern California, but still...California. The land he'd run from.

The invitation was strongly worded. It was expected that all Watchers would attend. Giles lay the invitation down on the table, sighing. His status as Watcher was tenuous at best after abandoning his Slayer. If he chose to not attend this event he was reasonably certain that he'd be getting fired again. He also wondered if he was finally getting invited so they could put him up on a stage and point a finger at him and tell all the other Watchers to use him as an example of what not to do.

Giles ran a hand through his hair. He couldn't help thinking that they'd be justified in doing just that. Don't give your Slayer such latitude, don't let your Slayer date a vampire, don't let your Slayer have civilian friends, don't let your Slayer wrap you around her finger, don't come to love your Slayer, don't let your Slayer quit the Council, don't let your Slayer be raised from the dead, don't leave your Slayer, ever.

He'd been lucky. There were enough Watchers in high places that thought the circumstances extraordinary enough to allow the possibility that leaving his Slayer was perhaps warranted, even though, at this time, Giles couldn't imagine having done such a stupid and cruel thing. So, he'd kept his job, barely, and didn't even have the satisfaction of thinking that he'd done the right thing.

But some decisions couldn't be fixed. He'd tried. It had taken him a few months but Giles had finally realized that he shouldn't have left. But by then it had been too late. She had avoided his calls from the onset. He knew she was angry, he just hadn't realized how angry. When he started trying in earnest to contact her she rebuffed all attempts, refusing to talk to him, refusing to even let messages be passed along to her.

He decided to just go to Sunnydale to talk to her in person, tell her that he wanted to come back, that he'd been wrong. She was nowhere to be found. Instead, he'd found Spike. And Spike had taken entirely too much pleasure in

letting him know that he wasn't welcome, reminding Giles of his own speech to Spike about there being no way to Buffy. Buffy was off limits to him. And as long as Giles was in Sunnydale, Buffy wouldn't be. So, if he didn't want people dying because the Slayer was gone, he should go on home.

Giles had left. At this time, he had not spoken to Buffy for an entire year, and was afraid that he wouldn't ever speak to her again. The thought of that was like a raw wound. A wound that didn't seem to show any evidence of starting to close.

The only people he spoke to consistently now were Anya and Dawn. He had spoken every now and then to Willow or Xander, when they were at the store. But he had sensed their discomfort at being stuck in the middle, because every time he'd spoken to them he'd begged them to get a message to Buffy for him. Giles couldn't blame them for avoiding his calls. Anya just told him no, and then talked business. And Dawn, well, she had latched onto him as her absentee father of choice, and whenever they spoke, she had so much news to tell him that he barely got a word in edgeways.

Dawn kept him current on all the news, including news about Buffy, for which he was desperate. Although most of what he heard filled him with dismay. Even with a year's passage, she wasn't doing well. She was still depressed a good deal of the time, and angry. She hung out with Spike too much, even though they weren't having sex anymore. Giles had been relived at the ending of that phase of their relationship but he couldn't believe that being with Spike so much could be good for Buffy. She needed positive influences in her life.

Giles was glad to hear that she seemed to be taking her responsibility to Dawn more seriously, and had managed to hang on to her, despite all the hovering done by Children's Services. Giles was proud of Buffy for that, and wished he could tell her so.

Giles sighed and looked down at the invitation again. Maybe a few days in the woods would be just what he needed. Some nature time, some quiet time, perhaps reconnect with the Watchers he used to be friends with. He brushed the sad thought away that he'd be so close to Buffy and yet not be able to see her. He squared his shoulders. It was time for him to move on. He needed to find his place again, and this retreat would be just the ticket.

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By the second night, Giles was actually glad that he'd decided to come. While he had received a few odd looks when some of the Watchers found out who he was, most of them were thrilled to meet him. They were delighted to meet

a Watcher who'd actually had a Slayer, someone who had come face to face with so many demons and apocalypses. It all seemed like a grand adventure to them. By the time they'd all crawled into their tents last night, Giles' voice was almost raw from answering all their questions and from the stories he had told.

Over the day, Giles had found several of his old friends, and managed to successfully dodge the Watchers, including Travers, that he wanted to avoid. They were spread over a sizeable area in the Trinity Alps. By report, there were close to 300 Watchers attending the retreat, almost perfect attendance. When the Director had spoken earlier he had commented that they had left only one Watcher at the Council Building, and that the more than capable support staff were on duty and taking care of things. The only other absent members were a few Watchers scattered here and there throughout the world where communication and travel seemed consistently difficult.

Tonight, he and about 25 other Watchers were sitting around an enormous camp-fire. A bottle of Scotch was being passed around and they were all pleasantly tipsy. Giles had been relieved that the classes taught today did not consist of him being made an example of. Although most of them had been a waste of time as far as he was concerned.

There had been a lecture on classifying demons, and another on new fighting techniques, and one on how to improve your researching skills. Giles listened politely to all of them and kept his mouth shut, even though he could have taught all the classes far better than the instructors they brought in. Instructors who probably had never even seen a demon, or actually had to use any kind of fighting technique in a real fight, against something that was trying to kill you.

Giles pushed those thoughts away. Those days were over. Time to move on. He passed on the bottle next time it came his way. He knew if he drank much more he'd start getting morose, and when he got morose he fixated on Buffy, and then he'd just drink himself into a stupor. Giles leaned back on the log behind him, and stared into the fire, letting the conversation around him fade away into a companionable but unobtrusive sound.

He'd missed this. People his age, people who shared his passion for knowledge, for learning, people who thought nothing of staying up all night, nose stuck in a book. Willow had come close, and he had valued her friendship, but she was young and had other priorities. Giles frowned. And magic. That was something else he felt badly about. He should have stayed for her as well.

He found himself being poked by the one of his old friends. Giles turned to

him. "Yes, Daniel?"

"Why are you frowning?"

Giles gave him a sad smile. "Just some bad memories."

Daniel held up a bag of marshmallows. "Will this help?"

Giles' eyes lit up and he gave Daniel a real smile. "Yes, I think it will."

Daniel handed him a stick and gave him the bag. "Have at it, then."

Giles pulled out a marshmallow and stuck it carefully on the end of the provided stick and then edged closer to the fire. Several of his fellow Watchers were toasting their own marshmallows and he gave them all a shy grin.

He was on his third marshmallow when they all heard the cry. It started off softly but grew in volume until it was all but deafening. It seemed to come from everywhere at the same time, making it impossible to pinpoint its origin. It was unearthly and Giles could feel a panic building rapidly within him in response to it.

Being accustomed to panic he took a deep breath. Looking around he saw the panic in the other Watchers' eyes. They were all springing to their feet, poised to run. The other camp sites seemed to have been similarly effected. Giles could hear frantic cries, people running. One of the men made as if to join them. Giles caught his arm. "Where are you going?"

The man pointed. "I...I just need to go." His voice was breathless with his need to flee.

"Where?"

The man looked lost for a moment, having no ready answer. "Can't you feel it?"

"I can, but until we know that we are indeed in danger, and where that danger is coming from, running serves no purpose."

He hung on to the man when the night air was again filled with the unearthly scream. When it died off they could hear even more yelling and the sounds of continued flight. Giles could see them as shadows running through the woods in all directions. There didn't seem to be any specific place to go to assist anyone, just mass pandemonium. Giles felt that adding to it would be

distinctly foolish. Nevertheless, he could feel the anxiety growing around him. Giles glared at the Watchers he was with and spoke sharply to them. "No one is going anywhere. Stay."

He was gratified when they all seemed to be obeying him. He had used that glare and tone of voice to keep a pack of unruly teenagers out of danger, he trusted in his ability to keep a group of adults in line. Giles could hear scattered phrases, people calling for one another or asking what was going on. Occasionally a cry of terror rang out, quickly silenced. And the running continued.

When a third cry filled the air, Giles first made sure that the man he was still holding was all right. Once reassured, he started slowly walking around the fire. He walked outside the ring of Watchers, speaking slowly, trying to keep them calm, while he continued to try to determine what was threatening them, if anything was threatening them. The echoes of the last cry died away, leaving an eerie silence.

It was too quiet. There were at least two other campsites in close proximity and despite the snapping of the fire, he should have heard voices, especially after these events. He was tempted to yell, to see if anyone would answer him, but until he knew what was out there he hated to draw unwanted attention to their camp site. Giles cursed. "Damn." He turned to the Watchers. "Do any of you have weapons with you?"

They all looked at him, surprised at the question. Daniel answered. "I imagine some of us have knives, but that's probably it. We don't usually bring weapons to these retreats. Everything we need for practice sessions is generally provided."

There was a sound of something running through the brush straight towards them. Giles reached down and picked up one of the sturdier sticks that had been gathered for kindling. He had it up to brandish as a weapon when a woman ran into the clearing. She let out a cry of relief when she saw a group of people and she threw herself in Giles' arms. "Oh, thank God."

Giles patted her on the back, trying to remember her name. With a sigh of relief he recalled it. "Maddy, Maddy, what happened?"

She pulled back, embarrassed now. "I'm sorry. I was just so frightened."

"Did you see what it was? Did it attack anyone?"

She shook her head. "I don't think anyone saw it, whatever it was. I'm afraid we all went into a bit of a panic and started running. I was with Rich and

Benjamin but I got separated from them. Then I thought I heard voices and ran this way."

Giles held her by her shoulders and looked at her. "Are you all right? Were you hurt?"

Maddy shook her head. "No, I'm fine, I just panicked." She looked embarrassed now. "I'm really sorry."

"That's all right. Adrenaline is a funny thing. You never quite know how you're going to react when it starts to pump through you. That was quite an unsettling noise."

Daniel pointed at Giles. "We'd have bolted too if it hadn't been for Rupert here."

Another voice came from across the fire. "We've got ourselves an experienced Watcher with us." It was the man Giles had kept from running.

Giles smiled briefly. "Yes, well, until we know what that thing is, I'm not sure we should be celebrating yet. We need some weapons to be on the safe side. I've got some in my tent. Those of you with knives need to get them. Just to be on the safe side, please walk in groups." As they all continued to look at him he gestured impatiently. "Go." As if released from a spell they all moved to their tents.

Giles went to his own tent and rustled around in it. He fished out a crossbow, his broadsword and scabbard, and his own collection of stakes. As he backed out of his tent he backed right into Maddy. He stood quickly, turning. "I do apologize, I didn't know you were there."

She scrunched her face up. "I'm still feeling a bit nervous. I thought I'd stick with you. I hope you don't mind."

Giles smiled. "No, I don't mind." He handed her the crossbow. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

She nodded. "Do you have any bolts?"

"Ah." Giles crawled back into his tent and brought out a black canvas bag. He handed it to her. "Bolts."

She looked down at his small arsenal. "Do you always travel with all these weapons?"

Giles let out a short laugh. "It gets to be a habit. When I was in Sunnydale you could always count on being attacked by something whenever you were unarmed."

"Sort of like it always raining the day you forget your umbrella."

Giles flashed another one of his brief grins. "Exactly." He gestured back to the fire. "Let's head back."

She moved aside so he had room to stand beside her and they both headed back to the camp fire. Nerves were still on edge and everyone was talking at the same time. They all grew quiet when Giles arrived. Everyone held up his or her knife, as if for inspection. Giles doubted the ability of some of those knives to cut butter, let alone kill a demon, but it was better than nothing. "I don't know what we're dealing with. That could have been a demon cry, or it could have been some indigenous wild creature."

Suddenly the cry rent the air again, although they could tell it was farther off. While it evoked that same sense of dread, the distance helped lessen the effect. As they all started talking again, Giles thought he heard something. He held up his hand for silence. He heard it again. A cry for help. Daniel spoke. "Someone's hurt."

Giles nodded. "Yes. We need to go and get them." Giles didn't wait for volunteers. He pointed at Daniel, and the two men next to him, Steven and Wendell. "You three, you're with me." He pointed at the rest. "No one wander off. Stay close to the fire. If you don't have a knife, stay close to someone who does." He turned to Maddy. "In the bottom of my duffel bag is a first aid kit. Would you go and get it?" She nodded.

Giles pulled a stout stick from the flames, enough of it unburned to provide an easy handhold. Steven looked at him. "Why don't we just get our flash-lights?"

Giles swung the torch like a baseball bat. "These make better weapons, they have a longer reach, and most demons are ridiculously frightened of fire." Within seconds the other three men followed suit and also pulled torches out of the fire. Giles flashed them a small grin. "Just try not to set anyone on fire." As Giles turned to head off he realized he didn't really know where to go. He'd have to risk making some noise. "Hello? We want to come and get you but you need to call again." To his consternation he received at least three answering responses. "Good Lord."

A woman that Giles didn't know well approached him. Giles looked down at her, waiting for her to speak. When she spoke it was with a French accent. "I

am a physician. Perhaps I should accompany you."

Giles thought for a moment and then shook his head. "No, we'll bring them back here. Set up an infirmary; perhaps see who has extra bedding, towels, things we can use as bandages. I'm afraid my first aid kit won't go far. Hopefully we can get extra supplies in the morning." He peered off into the darkness. "And hopefully no one is hurt very badly." At the woman's nod he gathered his helpers and headed off to where he thought one of the wounded was.

They actually found five. And all five had sustained serious injuries. Three of them were injured from falls taken while they were running. Giles assumed the other two had been attacked by whatever had made that cry. They were incoherent with their fear, unable to speak clearly. Giles had stumbled across both of them by accident as they went after their three other comrades. Giles wasn't even sure they realized that they were safe for the moment.

Whatever had attacked them had tried to rip them apart. One of them had a deep slash from his collarbone down to his hip. The woman who had been attacked had her back slashed. Giles was confused as to why they'd been left alive. He didn't see the point of the wounds. Until they calmed down enough to talk he wasn't going to get any answers, but the level of their fear was enough to convince Giles that they were dealing with a demon of sorts.

Once the doctor saw that Giles had some skill in first aid she left the smaller gashes for him to suture shut, while she concentrated on the larger ones. She also had two bones to try to set and immobilize with makeshift splints, and she was afraid the last Watcher they had found was having some sort of heart attack. With no medication on hand, all she could do was try to keep him still and calm. Maddy was sitting with him now, speaking softly to him.

When everyone was as stabilized as they could be, the physician walked over to Giles. "That's a pretty thorough first aid kit."

Giles smiled. "It's seen a lot of use." He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a tired sigh. Giles looked at her. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Celiane."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Celiane. I'm very glad you were here."

"As I am glad you were here."

Giles nodded briefly then gestured with his chin to the man with chest pain. "Will he be all right?"

"I don't know. If he's incurred some significant heart damage, then the answer is no, unless I can get him some treatment." She let out a frustrated sigh. "And the gash wounds on those two are already infected." She glanced up at Giles. "Is it possible that the infection is due to the demon? I've never seen an infection start so early and so aggressively."

Giles nodded. "Very possible."

She sighed again. "I've given them a dose each of the oral antibiotics you had in your kit, but the infection continues to worsen. They need some intravenous antibiotics."

"I'm afraid I never considered the need for such powerful antibiotics or heart medicine to treat the injuries I tended to. We always had a hospital in relatively close proximity." Giles sent her a small reassuring smile. "You're doing the best you can." He looked out into the forest. "I'm afraid there are more wounded out there. I feel I should go and look."

Daniel touched his shoulder. "I'll go and look. You've been working non-stop. We'll do some sweeps." He looked at his watch. "It will be light in a couple of hours and then we can do a more complete job."

Giles nodded his thanks. "Check in frequently please. And don't get separated. Whatever this thing is, be it natural or supernatural, I believe that cry is to cause its potential prey to run off alone so this...this thing can kill them more easily." He looked at the two Watchers who had been attacked. They were both sleeping, benefiting from the sedatives in Giles' first aid kit. He was afraid that the reason they had been left alive was because there had been too much prey last night. The pickings too easy for this creature to worry about the few who fell to the side. The quiet continued to unnerve him. It made him wonder how many Watchers had fallen tonight.

End of Part 1

Watchers Retreat 2

Giles listened to one of the women crying. He felt like crying himself. Seventy-five Watchers left alive. That's all they'd managed to round up. And that included the wounded. That left well over two hundred Watchers unaccounted for. Giles couldn't believe it. Two hundred Watchers gone, maybe as many as two hundred and twenty five.

They'd found fifty bodies. A third of those were dead from falls. Racing in the dark through woods, on a mountain, had provided too many opportunities for deadly injuries. A few were dead for no identifiable reason. Shock, or fear, or perhaps heart failure. Several of those had been older. The rest of them had been mauled, torn apart and their organs eaten, their bodies left behind, like empty shells.

That still left one hundred and seventy five unaccounted for. Giles could only hope that those Watchers had run farther, perhaps making it to safety. Perhaps a few of them had already made it to the bottom and had gone for help. His biggest fear was that they were all dead, picked off one by one by the creatures that had attacked them. If the creatures had followed the bulk of the Watchers that had run, it would explain why, after those first dreadful cries, there were no further attacks for the rest of the night.

They'd finally found an injured Watcher who was able to speak of what he had seen. Apparently there'd been more than one of the creatures. They'd attacked at the same time, using their cries to elicit the panic that caused so many to run.

Even more frightening was the fact that this had been deliberately planned. All the vehicles had been destroyed and the communication equipment had been smashed beyond recognition. Most of the food supplies had been contaminated and the weapons were missing. They had no way to get down off the mountain quickly, and no way to call for help. And it was clear that someone had assisted those creatures, perhaps even setting them loose, with the specific objective of killing all the Watchers.

They had twenty-three injured, and they were stranded. Two of the Watchers slashed by the creatures were already dead from the infection. It had overwhelmed their systems and they'd gone into septic shock. No one else among the injured had died, but several were headed in the same direction. A group had been pulled together to go to search all the tents for weapons, medical supplies, and anything else that might be of use. They hadn't found much. The few cell phones found were too far out of range for calls to be completed.

Only the fact that they'd been so busy had kept the few remaining men and women from falling apart. And now that they were having a quiet moment, and could truly assess the damage, it was staggering. Everyone's eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep and painful emotions. Everyone had lost friends, lifetime companions. And everyone knew that it wasn't over.

Giles wasn't sure when he'd ended up in charge of this ragtag group of Watchers, but here he was, standing in front of them, trying to marshal his

thoughts. He finally decided that complete honesty was called for. "As you know, our situation is fairly grim." He looked at his watch. They had already spent so much time trying to gather supplies and find any more survivors. "We must assume that they will be back. It is possible that whoever did this is satisfied with what they achieved last night, but I don't believe they will be. I don't believe whoever it is will rest until we are all dead."

Giles wished he had some good news but he didn't have any. "I think that, after last night, it is clear that the creatures prefer solitary prey. They use their cry to confuse and separate their quarry. Therefore, I believe we will be safer together, and we must endeavor to stay together, and allow no one to run off if they return."

Several Watchers had informed him earlier today that the use of earplugs had no effect. Two had even been asleep with earplugs in place when the cries had started last night and they had found themselves running before they'd fully woken. They'd been lucky. They'd both fallen in their half asleep state and had somehow missed being torn apart.

He looked at the tired faces in front of him. Everyone was exhausted, most of them having now been awake for well over 24 hours. "The best case scenario is that some of us who left last night have made it to the bottom, and even now, are getting help. It took six hours to be driven here from Weaverville. However, that road was circuitous. It's possible that someone could go in a much more direct route and reach bottom in a few hours on foot."

He tapped his watch. "It's already early afternoon. While we can hope that help is on the way, we must prepare for the worst. We have people here who are too ill to be moved. And even if we attempted to move them, none of us, at this point, will get very far trying to carry them. Which ultimately means that whether we stay or whether we leave, we will end up facing these monsters again if they continue their attack tonight. I suggest that we stay and spend the next few hours trying to fortify our position. Cut more weapons, clear a larger circle for better visibility. Then, in the morning, we can try to get off the mountain."

Giles scuffed at the ground with his boot. "I know our chances are slim. And I cannot ask anyone to stay. It is possible that if you left now, you might make it to the bottom before dark. A few of you must go. We have to get some help, or more of the injured will die. I need a few of you, the most fit among you, to get us that help. If many of you choose to leave, perhaps you could take some of the less wounded with you. I will give you a few minutes to make your decision."

Giles turned away, to allow private conversation. If too many of them left, they

would doom the ones staying behind, but Giles wouldn't blame any of them for leaving. While he gave them some time he looked at the weapon cache again, the few stakes and spears that some of the Watchers had started to make. According to the one coherent witness, the creatures were huge, at least seven feet tall, claws on both hands and feet, and ghastly to look at. Their faces seemed to consist of nothing but mouth.

Only his crossbow, his sword, and the spears could be used to fight. The spears, if thick enough, could double as quarterstaves. Anyone getting close enough to use a stake would be too close to the creatures' lethal claws. And while all of them had gone through the obligatory Watchers weapons training, too few of the people here, maybe four or five, besides him, had any fighting experience worth mentioning.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and saw Wendell. "Yes, Wendell."

"I run marathons. I'm strong. I don't really want to leave you but I'll go for help."

Giles smiled at him. "Thank you."

A woman he didn't know approached as well. "I do a lot of mountain climbing. I've actually climbed here before. I can go too." She hesitated.

Giles encouraged her. "What?"

"My husband. He climbs too, but he broke his arm last night. He'd still like to try."

Giles nodded. "Of course." Giles understood her need to take her husband with her; he just hoped he didn't slow them down too much. He looked at the three of them. "Take what water and food you'll need. You'll have no time to forage. Our lives may depend on you reaching the bottom." At their nods, he gestured. "Go. Now."

He went back to the main group. "Whoever plans to leave, you need to leave now if you hope to get down before it's dark. It's time to choose." He pointed to the three gathering what supplies they'd need. "These three will be going for help. However, if any of the rest of you reach the bottom, please call for help as well." He smiled sadly. "I don't imagine they could possibly send too much assistance."

Giles held his breath as he waited for the greater part of the Watchers to get up and leave. He let it out when he realized that only seven had risen. Two of

the less wounded had risen as well. Giles nodded at them, and they quietly pulled their supplies together and within a few minutes they were ready to follow behind the first three, who had already left at a fast pace.

He looked over the remainder and counted heads. Sixty-one in total, and twenty of them wounded, some very seriously. Organizing them into groups of six or seven, he had one group try to get some sleep. Listing off the chores of kitchen duty, enlarging the clearing, foraging for wood, making more spears, gathering rocks for throwing, and helping Celiane with the wounded, Giles had the rest of them split themselves up according to preference and had them start their jobs.

Giles wished they had more time. He wished they had more reliable weapons. He wished there were more experienced fighters among them. Mostly he wished that he could close his eyes and when he opened them that Buffy would be there. Not that Buffy could necessarily kill these creatures on her own, but at least they'd have a fighting chance. Shaking his head at his own foolishness he sent a prayer skyward that the Watchers who had left would make it down safely, and then he sent a second prayer for the ones who had stayed.

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Spike had heard about the plan. Demons with big plans like that couldn't keep their mouth shut. He'd known about it for a week. The day after he'd first heard of it he'd talked to Buffy.

##

"So, Slayer, still hate your Watcher?"

There was a small hesitation, but then she answered, her voice hard. "Yes."

"Don't care if you ever see him again?"

"No."

"Still hate the Council?"

"Yes."

"Be okay with you if they just vanished then?"

"Yes." She turned to him, exasperated. "Does this stupid conversation have a point?"

"Nope, just wondering."

"Then can we just finish patrolling? I'm tired."

"Fine. Don't get your knickers in a twist."

"Shut up, Spike."

"What, you're offended because I said knickers? Luv, I've torn your knickers off with my teeth, remember?"

Buffy let out a disgusted noise and shivered. "Don't remind me." She glared at him. "Don't ever remind me."

"So does that mean you don't want a quick shag before you go home?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Spike, the shagging stopped months ago and it's never starting again. Ever. And if you mention it again, I'm staking you."

Spike put his hands up. "Fine. Just thought I'd ask."

"Well, don't."

Spike pointed at a vampire who had just jumped through the bushes and now stood there, menacing them. "You plannin' on killin' that?" He was busy lighting a cigarette.

Buffy let out another exasperated sigh and after a few punches she staked the vampire. "There, happy?"

"I'm practically coming in my trousers."

"That's it. I'm going home." Buffy spun on her heels and stalked away.

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So now a week later, as far as Spike was concerned, he'd done his bit. Buffy couldn't be bothered, so he couldn't be bothered. He looked up at the sky. It would be dawn soon. Time for him to get back to his crypt. As he headed back he wondered if Giles was already dead. Spike didn't really care one way or the other, he was just curious.

##

For some reason Buffy couldn't sleep. She'd fall asleep for a few minutes but then she'd dream and the dream would wake her up. In the dreams people

were running, screaming, and she felt this panic, like a live presence inside her. Every time she'd awakened her heart had been pounding, and she hadn't wanted to close her eyes again.

As the night passed her unease grew. Finally at daybreak she gave up even trying to sleep. She got up and sat by her window, watching the sunrise, trying to find a moment of peace. It eluded her. She couldn't get past the feeling that something was very wrong.

She moved out of her bedroom and went to check on Dawn. Dawn was sleeping, her breathing regular. Buffy peeked in Willow's room as well. No problems there. Buffy didn't think her other friends would appreciate a call this early just so Buffy could make sure they were all right.

Buffy headed downstairs and poured herself some juice. Maybe she'd go run. Maybe that would help. Maybe she just needed to exercise, work the dream out of her system. Going back upstairs she threw on some running clothes and slipped outside.

She paid no attention to where she was running. She just let her feet guide her. An hour later she found herself by Willy's. Buffy heard a noise in the back and she went to investigate. She found Willy emptying his garbage. "Hey, Willy."

Willy jumped a little but when he saw it was she he gave her a nervous smile. "Hey, Slayer."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing much." Then Willy looked as if he just thought of something. He pursed his lips. "Did you get ahold of your Watcher?"

"What?"

"Your Watcher. Did you tell him not to go?"

"Go where? What are you talking about?"

Willy started to look nervous. "Spike didn't tell you?"

Buffy was getting annoyed. "Tell me what?"

Willy backed away. "I thought he'd tell you. He's known for a week. Honest, I was sure he'd tell you or I'd have told you myself."

The unease that she'd been feeling for hours started to grow. "Willy, talk to me. What's going on? Where's Giles?"

"He's at a Watchers Retreat. They all are." He pointed north. "Up in Northern California."

Buffy ignored the pain she felt at the thought of Giles being here, and the fact that he didn't call her. She knew it was irrational. She knew she'd made it excruciatingly clear that she wanted no part of him, but it still hurt. Everything about Giles still hurt. Especially the part of her that wanted nothing more in life than for him to be back here with her.

Buffy knew he'd tried. She was still reasonably sure that he'd come back if she asked. But she'd been too angry before, and now, it had been too long. She didn't have any idea how to approach him. How to deal with the mountains of emotion that currently separated them. She forced her attention past the hurt and refocused on Willy. "So, he's at a retreat. What's the big deal?"

"It's a trap. All the Watchers..." Willy swallowed.

Her stomach was churning, tendrils of dread coiling in her gut. "All the Watchers what?"

"Someone wants them dead. It started last night. I'm sorry, I really thought you knew."

Buffy's voice was tight. "What do you mean someone wants them dead. How can someone just kill all the Watchers?"

"It's this demon. He hates them. It started a few Slayers ago. This demon killed a Slayer, back in England. So, the Watcher went crazy and started a war against this guy. Got a bunch of his Watcher buddies involved and they went out and killed every one of his kind they could get their hands on. Apparently it was quite a bloodbath. Anyway, this demon's been plotting his revenge against the Council ever since."

"So, he's just planning on killing them all?"

"Yup, no more Watchers, no more Slayers. Demon heaven. At least that's what he says."

"How's he doing it?" Buffy still couldn't believe a demon could kill that many Watchers. Sure, if they were all like Wesley they'd be in trouble, but some of them had to be like Giles. Some of them had to know how to fight.

"He messed around with some experiments and made these things. I haven't ever seen them, I guess no one has, but he seemed pretty sure that they'd get the job done."

Buffy refused to even consider that Giles might be dead. "Where are they? Where's the retreat?"

"In the Trinity Alps." He sent Buffy a cautious look. "It's a big area. And it's like a ten or twelve hour drive from here. And I don't know where the actual retreat is happening. The only reason I remember the Trinity Alps is cuz that's a bad area, bad stuff happens there. I thought it was a weird place for the Watchers to be getting together. You'll never find them."

"I'll find them. And I'll find Giles. And he's not dead." Having Giles be across the ocean from her was bad. Having him not be a part of her life in any way was worse. Having him dead was not bearable. He needed to be alive so she could call him sometime, forgive him, and ask him to come back. If he were dead, it would be too late.

Willy smiled sadly at her. "I don't..."

Buffy yelled at him, interrupting him. "He's not dead."

"I just don't want you to get your hopes up. This demon sounded pretty sure of himself."

"I don't care. He's not dead." She gestured into the bar. "I need a map. Do you have a map?"

Instead of going to the bar Willy walked to his car and opening the door he snapped open the glove compartment. He pulled out a stained and tattered map of California. "Here."

"Show me."

He unfolded it and pointed to the Trinity Alps. Buffy could have cried. There was so much of it. Willy pointed to the town of Weaverville. "If you're gonna go, go here. Then ask around. Maybe someone will know where they went."

Buffy nodded tersely and she grabbed the map. Without another word she turned and ran.

Willy watched her go. "Poor kid." Shaking his head he started shoving the garbage bags into the dumpster.

##

Spike found himself being thrown across his crypt. Buffy was screaming at him. "You knew? You knew and you didn't tell me?"

Spike picked himself up and kept a good distance between them. He knew immediately what she was talking about. "So what if I did?"

"All the Watchers are there, that means Giles is there."

Spike shrugged. "I asked you if you cared if you saw him again, you said no. I asked you if you cared if the Council just vanished, you said no."

"That doesn't mean I want him dead. It doesn't mean I want them all dead."

"What difference does it make? If you don't ever plan on seeing Giles again, why does it matter if he's alive or dead?"

Buffy lunged at him and shoved him against the wall. "It's Giles. You had no right to keep this from me."

Spike moved away again. "Well, not much I can do about it now. They're probably all dead already."

Buffy was having none of it. "He's not dead."

"I don't get why you care."

"It doesn't matter. He's not dead and I'm going to find him, and I'm going to bring him home."

Spike shook his head. "You can't kill these things."

"I've killed a lot of things that can't be killed. What do you know? What are they?"

"He bred 'em. He bred 'em so they were unbeatable."

"Everything can die."

"You gotta get close enough to chop its head off, and you can't. It's tall and has a long reach, so you can't get it by a frontal attack. The sound of its voice works on a human's nervous system, makes them panic."

Buffy thought back on her dreams. She had dreamed this. They'd been

prophetic dreams. As she had laid in bed, Watchers were being killed, maybe Giles... Buffy shook her head. "What else?"

"That's all I know."

"What about this demon? How can he be killed?"

"Usual way, nothing special about him except his lust for revenge. You gotta admire that."

Buffy punched Spike. She stared at him as he lay on the ground. "You should have told me."

Spike tested his jaw. "No use crying over spilled milk. It's done, Slayer."

She shook her head. "He's still alive. I'm going up there and I'm getting him."

Spike stood and stared at Buffy. He saw the resolve on her face. "Fine, let me get my coat. We can take my car."

"I'm not asking you to go. I don't want you to go." She took a step toward him and Spike took a step back. "If any of the Watchers are dead, and you are still here when I get back, I will stake you. If Giles is dead, even if you're gone, I will hunt you down, and I will kill you. Get out of town, and don't come back, and pray that Giles is still alive."

Spike rolled his eyes. "You've been threatening me for years. The blush is off that rose."

Buffy had her stake out and had it against his chest, pointing at his heart, before he could even react. She looked at him, deadly serious. "I'm doing you a favor. When I bring Giles back, after I tell him that you knew, that you could have prevented this, he'll kill you anyway. If you're still in town, you're dead either way, whether I come home with him or without him. The only thing that's gonna save you is if I die up there too."

Spike tried to push her hand away, unsuccessfully. "Look, if you're gonna be that way about it, let me come. I can help."

"I don't want your help. I'm not letting you near Giles. And I'm not gonna make Giles have to deal with you. Be gone, Spike. I mean it. Recess is over." With that she pulled the stake away and stalked out of his crypt.

Spike sat down on the ground. "Shit." Running his hand through his hair he began trying to figure out where Dru might be. Maybe it was time for a visit.

End of Part 2

Watchers Retreat 3

Willow wanted to go. Fortunately Dawn had already left for school or Buffy figured she'd have to argue with her too. Buffy shook her head. "No."

"Buffy, if Giles is in danger, I want to help."

Buffy shook her head again. "I need you here to take care of Dawn."

"Buffy."

"Willow, I don't want to hurt your feelings but if you come, you'll be one more person I need to watch out for. If you were still doing magic I'd throw you in the car, but you're not, and you can't. So, stay here, and take care of Dawn. I need to know she'll be okay. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Without another word Buffy ran upstairs to change and pull some supplies together. Willow frowned and picked up the phone.

##

By the time Buffy was getting ready to load up her car Xander had already arrived. Buffy glared at him. "Xander, you're not going either."

"Yes, I am. My truck's new, it'll make the drive faster, and I drive much better than you do. If we actually have to do some four wheeling you need me." He threw out his ace in the hole. "Plus I've been up that way before."

Buffy shook her head. "No."

Xander pointed to the car. "I've already got the truck ready to go. Willow's loaded a cooler; I already took the first aid kit from your car. I've got weapons and flash-lights. Stop wasting time arguing." He reached for her weapons bag and couldn't even lift it. Grinning sheepishly he let it go. "Okay, you carry that one."

"Xander, I have no idea what we're going up against."

"All the more reason to have some backup. I can always go for more help. If I drive, you can nap, so you'll be good to go when we get there. I can do the manly thing and drive, and you can do the girly thing and ask for directions if

we get lost."

"What about work?"

"I called in. Family emergency." He tapped his watch. "We're wasting time."

Buffy let out a long breath. She turned to the house and glared at Willow. Then she ran to her and gave her a hug. "You'll watch out for Dawn?"

Willow nodded. "Just bring Giles back alive, okay?"

Buffy nodded and running back to her bag she hoisted it up and threw it in the back of Xander's truck. "Let's go."

Xander grinned, clapping his hands together. "Woohoo, road trip."

Buffy looked at her watch. It was nine o'clock.

##

Maddy appointed herself in charge of looking after the man who was looking out for all of them. She brought Giles some food and she made him eat it. Then she ordered him to take a nap. Giles protested. "Maddy, there's too much to do."

"Rupert. The work is getting done. And everyone has had a chance to sleep except you. You'll be no good to us dead on your feet." She pointed to his tent. "Go, it will be dark in a couple of hours. I'll wake you."

Giles was suddenly so tired he wasn't even sure he could make it to his tent. He gave Maddy a bleary smile and forced his legs to make the trip before giving out. When he reached his tent he lay down on his sleeping bag and was asleep before his head hit the ground.

##

Buffy thought she'd go insane. She was very glad Xander was driving. With the energy building inside of her she'd have been ricocheting off the other cars. Even though she'd lived here all her life, somehow she had never appreciated just how big this damn state was.

When they finally passed the city limit sign for Weaverville Buffy let out an enormous sigh. "Finally." She looked at her watch. Seven o'clock. It had taken them exactly ten hours, and that was driving way past the speed limit and only stopping long enough for bathroom breaks. Ten hours. That left them with only about two hours of light. The little sliver of moon wasn't going to

provide any assistance tonight. As they drove into Weaverville, Buffy let out a sound of dismay. "What...does everyone just go to bed by eight?"

The town looked closed. All the stores were closed, and there was no one walking around. Xander was looking too. "Man, this place is dead." He grimaced at his choice of words. Xander kept on driving. "There's gotta be a bar. Every town in California has a bar. It's like a law."

They found it right at the outskirts of town. When they went inside, Buffy found another reason to be glad Xander was with her. All the guys in the place were looking at her like she was the first woman they'd seen in a long time. Not that she couldn't have fought off any of these losers, but she didn't have the time. She went right up to the bar. "I'm looking for a big group of people. They came up here a few days ago to go camping. Did you see them? Do you know where they are?"

The bartender shook his head. "Nope."

Buffy looked at the man sitting next to her. "Did you see them?" She turned around and raised her voice, trying to get everyone's attention. "Did any of you see them?" They all ignored her. She walked to the jukebox and pulled it away from the wall, unplugging it. That did get everyone's attention.

Someone yelled from the back corner. "Hey, bitch, that was my quarter."

Buffy glared at him. "I'm looking for a group of people, like a few hundred of them. I know they were headed this way. I need to know where they are. Did anyone see them?" All Buffy saw was shaking heads. She felt like ripping a few of them off. "No one? What, were you all too drunk to notice?"

Xander touched her arm. "Uh, Buffy? Not sure that's gonna help."

Buffy counted to ten. Suddenly a man came out of the restroom. She walked over to him. "I need some help."

The man gave her the once over. "I'll be glad to help you, darlin'."

Buffy rolled her eyes. She spoke slowly as if speaking to an idiot. "I'm looking for a group of people. Camping. Big group. They may be in trouble."

The man glanced up at Xander, who had moved to stand behind Buffy, and let out a disappointed sigh. Then he pointed down the hallway. "There's a guy in the office. He showed up a while ago yelling for help. Maybe he knows something." He grinned. "Not much help to be had around these parts." He gave Buffy a look from her head to her toes that let her know that there was

one particular kind of help he'd be glad to lend her. "I let him use the phone."

Buffy let out a noise of disgust and then turned to head down the hall. The man watched her backside and sighed again. Then he put his hand in his pocket and fingered the money the man had given him. A hundred dollars, to use the damn phone. He'd have let him use the phone for ten but he certainly wasn't going to argue with a man who felt like giving away his money.

Buffy slammed into the office. The man on the phone looked up, alarmed. When he realized he wasn't in any immediate danger he held up his hand and started to talk again. "Weaverville. We'll need emergency equipment. There were 22 wounded when I left, and there may be more now." He listened for a minute. "Yes, helicopters, and emergency vehicles that can make it up the mountain. Whatever can get here the fastest. The road to the camp is about three miles past the city. You can't miss it."

The man ran a hand through his hair. When he spoke again, his voice was thick. "No one's called in? No one?" His eyes filled with tears at the answer and his voice caught on a sob. "God." Buffy watched him as a tear made its way down his cheek while he listened to whoever he was speaking to. "Over two hundred." There was another pause and a nod. "Yes, we'll need several search and rescue teams, heavily armed. I'll call if I find out anything else, or if anyone else gets in." With that, he slowly hung up. Rubbing his hands down his face he pulled himself together. "I'm sorry, did you need to use the phone?"

"Are you a Watcher?"

His eyes opened wide. "Yes? How did you...?"

"I'm looking for Rupert Giles. Is he here? Is he okay? Over two hundred what?" Buffy was afraid she might throw up; her stomach was in such knots.

"Rupert?" Wendell was so tired. Nothing seemed to be making sense. "Who are you?"

"I'm Buffy. Is he okay?" Her voice was getting louder.

"Buffy? His Slayer?" At her nod, Wendell sat down. "I don't bloody believe it." Then before Buffy could say another thing he was up and heading for the door. "You have a four wheel drive here?"

Xander nodded.

"Come on. We can talk on the way."

Buffy grabbed his arm. "Is he alive?"

When Wendell hesitated Buffy felt something start to die inside of her. But then he spoke. "He was." He looked at his watch. "He was, six hours ago when I left."

"What do you mean was? Was he injured?"

Wendell shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I'm tired and I know I'm not making much sense. I'll tell you anything you want to know but we need to get up there."

Buffy let go of him and the three of them sprinted for Xander's car. As he backed out of his parking space Xander asked for directions. Wendell pointed to the right. Xander looked back at him. "Is he close?"

"No. It took us six hours to drive up there the other day. I'm hoping if you're up to driving like a bat out of hell we can get there faster."

Xander put on his seatbelt and made everyone else buckle up as well. "One bat comin' up."

Buffy looked at Wendell and gestured towards Xander. "This is Xander, by the way."

Wendell smiled tiredly. "Hello, Xander. I'm Wendell." He looked at Buffy. "I don't understand how you can possibly be here."

Buffy's lips tightened. "There's this bar in town, a place demons go. The guy who owns it is a human. I was out running this morning and ran into him. He told me." Buffy didn't mention anything about Spike, or about the fact that she could have known a week ago. That would be a private confession to Giles if...no, when she found him.

Buffy suddenly found herself feeling terrifyingly alive. This entire last year had been lived in a muted haze. Nothing really made an impact. She'd come close to dying a dozen times and hadn't really cared. She found herself not really loving anyone, especially herself. All she did was exist. But right now, she was wide-awake. And she cared so much she thought it might tear her apart. Buffy put her hand out to brace herself as Xander took the left hand turn Wendell indicated. Then she braced herself as Xander came to a screeching halt at Wendell's command.

Wendell was out of the car in a moment, Buffy right behind him. "What are we

doing?" Then she saw them. A man and a woman.

Wendell yelled. "Sarah, Doug?" They saw him and they whooped and started running, the man clearly lagging behind and in some pain. Wendell and Buffy met them half way. The woman had tears running down her face. "Oh, God, did you see them all?" She bit back a sob.

Wendell closed his eyes. "I tried not to look."

Buffy glanced at them both. "What happened?"

Wendell introduced her. "This is Buffy, Rupert's Slayer."

Sarah's eyes opened wide. "Get her up there. Don't waste time talking to me. They could all be dead by the time you get up there. All of them." Her voice had a touch of hysteria to it. "There were so many of them."

Buffy just wanted somebody to tell her something. "So many what?"

"Bodies. They're everywhere." She looked at Buffy. "Go."

Wendell agreed. He pointed back down the road. "There's a bar about three miles down the road. I already called the Council and they're sending help. I spent almost an hour trying to get some help from around here before I realized that was a lost cause. I should have just called the Council right way. The Special Ops team can get this organized more quickly and effectively than I ever could." He reached out and touched Sarah's shoulder. "No one's called in. I think we're the only ones who made it down." His voice grew thick.

Sarah broke down and turned to hug her husband, crying against his chest. He had tears running down his own face. "No one's called in?"

Wendell shook his head. "We'll go back and do what we can. Call the Council; let them know you're all right. Let them know you can organize efforts down here."

Sarah pulled away from her husband and gave Wendell a hug. "Be careful." She looked at him as if she might never see him again. Then she looked at Buffy. "Go get your Watcher. Most of us still living are alive because of him."

Without another word Buffy and Wendell ran back to the truck. Sarah and Doug continued making their way to the road.

When they got back in the car, Xander gunned it again. He wanted to take advantage of the remaining sunlight. Buffy fought against her own rising panic

and looked back at Wendell. "How many Watchers came to this?"

"Over three hundred."

"How many are still alive? That you know are still alive."

"If you count me, Sarah and Doug, about sixty-five."

Xander's eyes opened wide. "Holy shit. That's all?"

Buffy did the math. "So almost two hundred and forty Watchers died last night?" Buffy couldn't believe it. "How many didn't come to this retreat?"

"Just a handful. They'd never had such an attendance at a retreat before."

Buffy filled Wendell in on the demon behind this attack. How the whole thing had been planned for years. Wendell shook his head. "How is it possible? How could a demon plan this?"

Buffy shook her head. Xander offered a suggestion. "Maybe he can look human. Maybe he works at the Council."

Wendell ran his hand over his face. Buffy looked at him. "When's the last time you slept?"

Wendell tried to figure it out. "About thirty-six hours ago."

She pointed to a cooler. "There's food and water in there." Wendell's eyes lit up for a brief second and he opened it up. He pulled out a sandwich and unwrapped it. Buffy asked another question. "So Giles wasn't hurt?"

"Giles? Oh, you mean Rupert?" At her nod he shook his head. "No. In fact none of us who were with him when the creatures struck were hurt. He kept us all calm and wouldn't let any of us run off. That's when the creatures killed everybody, when they were running and alone."

Xander smiled briefly. "Sounds like Giles. Mr. Let's Be Calm About This."

Buffy smiled tightly in return. "Yeah, he's Mr. Calm Guy, let's think about this before we go do anything rash." She tapped herself on the chest. "I'm the rash part." She grimaced. "I mean, not really a rash, but, you know, being rash, doing the not be calm thing."

Wendell couldn't help but grin at her. "I get it." The grin didn't last long. Neither did his appetite. He finished half the sandwich and then it started

sticking in his throat as he thought about what had happened. He rewrapped it and laid it on the seat next to him.

Buffy's eyes filled with tears just looking at him. Her voice was shaky. "I'm sorry."

Wendell nodded tightly, without responding.

"He's really all right?" Buffy felt she had to ask again.

He nodded again but then he looked at his watch and his lips tightened. "Buffy, if they attack as soon as it's dark, we won't be up there in time."

Buffy felt the sting of tears. "We'll get there in time. We have to."

"They killed over two hundred of us last night. All he has left is sixty of us now, and a third of those are injured. He's the only one who brought weapons." His voice got loud, as if now that he was finally speaking of his fears, that it was essential that he get his point across. "One sword. One crossbow. Forty Watchers, most of whom have only picked up a weapon in class."

Buffy's eyes grew dark, her voice mutinous. "We'll get there in time. He's not going to die."

"If any of them run, they'll die. How can he keep them all from running? You haven't heard their cries, you don't know what it does to you." He covered his face with his hands. His whole body was shaking.

Buffy didn't know what to say to him, how to console him, how to reassure him, not when she was in such desperate need of reassurance herself. His words had filled her with dread. If they'd managed to kill 240 in one night, how could forty hope to last? Buffy wished she could make this car fly. Xander was already driving so fast Buffy didn't dare ask him to go any faster.

Xander couldn't stand the tension in the car or in his own gut. He spoke without thinking. "Hey, Buffy's died twice, and she made it okay."

The ludicrousness of the sentence got Wendell's attention. He looked up from his hands. "What?"

Xander repeated himself. "Buffy's died twice, and she's okay. Giles will be okay too. We've all almost died so many times you wouldn't believe it. That's our specialty. Us and Giles. Almost dying, but then not. Except for Buffy. She dies every now and then." He stopped speaking, as he had to concentrate

getting around a hairpin curve.

Wendell looked at Buffy. "You've died twice. Really died?"

Buffy nodded. "The first time was when I went up against this vampire called the Master. He drowned me." She pointed at Xander. "He found me and did CPR. That's when the second Slayer got called."

"And the second time?"

Xander frowned. "Don't you guys know this stuff? Don't you keep up on what's going on with the Slayers?"

Wendell sighed. "It's become astonishingly clear just how much 'stuff' we don't know. It's appalling."

Xander agreed, his voice harsh. "You're supposed to be about the Slayer. How can you not know she died? She was dead for three months. Giles left, went back to England." He was furious. "How can you not know that?"

Wendell had no defense. He looked back at Buffy. "Three months? How are you alive?"

Xander was on a roll speaking his mind. "That would be me too. Me and Buffy's other three friends. We did a spell. Ripped her right out of heaven."

Buffy turned to Xander. "Xander."

"We've never even talked about it, Buffy. Except for you thanking us oh so graciously when you probably wanted to tear our heads off. And then our feeble apologies when we found out what we did." Xander wiped at his eyes.

Buffy let out a sad sound. "Don't you start crying. You need to drive." She put a hand on his arm. "It's all right."

"It's not all right. We ruined your life. I'm supposed to be your best friend and all I did was ruin your life."

"You didn't know." Xander chose not to respond. She spoke more insistently. "You didn't know."

"We should have figured it out. We should have talked to Giles first."

Buffy let out a sigh. She had so often wished they had. Giles would never have let them do the spell. Then she connected the dots. "Look, if you'd

talked to Giles, he wouldn't have let you do the spell, but then he'd still be here at this retreat, and he wouldn't have us coming to rescue him."

Xander rolled his eyes. "Is that logic supposed to make me feel better?"

"I'll make a deal with you. If you get me up there in time so we can rescue Giles, I'll be so glad I'm alive I'll get down on my knees and thank you for bringing me back. Okay? Do we have a deal?" Buffy could barely talk for the lump in her throat.

Xander glanced quickly at her. "Deal." He put his eyes back on the road and sped up.

Wendell was staring at the both of them. "He told us so many stories last night and they seemed so unbelievable." He shook his head. "Three months. You were dead for three months?"

Buffy nodded. "I woke up in my coffin. That was not fun." She glanced at Xander. "Sorry, Xander."

"Don't bother me, I'm driving."

She glanced at him to make sure he wasn't upset. She saw the intense concentration on his face and she relaxed.

Wendell was still staring at her. "No wonder he loves you so much."

She stared at him. "What?"

"Rupert. Every story he told, it was so clear how proud of you he was, and how much he loved you, and how much he hated that you'd, well, that he wasn't your Watcher anymore."

Buffy unsuccessfully fought back tears. She brushed them away. "He's my Watcher. He'll always be my Watcher."

Wendell smiled softly at her. "I believe that. And you know what else?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, what?"

"I'm beginning to think that we might just get to them in time."

End of Part 3

Maddy waited as long as she could. But when it became fully dark she didn't dare wait any longer. She knew Rupert would already be annoyed she'd let him sleep so long. When she arrived at his tent she looked down at his sleeping form. Then she crouched inside and touched his shoulder. "Rupert."

Giles growled and mumbled something indecipherable.

Maddy grinned and touched him again. "Rupert." In an instant he was awake. She watched his face as he slowly oriented to his surroundings. Then he sat up and ran a hand through his hair. She wished she could help; he was looking rather ruffled. Fighting off the temptation she simply gestured outside. "It's dark."

His eyes widened. "Good Lord. And you're just now getting me up?" Just that fast he was up and brushing aside the netting to his door, heading toward the campfire, running his fingers through his hair again. Giles could only hope that the creatures would give them some time. He smiled at the greetings that met him when he reached the clearing.

Giles looked around with amazement. The clearing was huge. Granted they hadn't been able to do anything with the trees, obviously, but all the scrub and smaller trees were gone. Nothing could get close to the fire without being clearly seen. There was a huge stack of firewood, more than enough to keep a blazing fire going all night; there was a sizeable pile of spears lying to the side and hundreds of good-sized throwing stones.

Daniel handed him a cup of tea. Giles smiled gratefully. Then he turned and smiled at Maddy as she joined them. He took everyone in with a look. "You've done an amazing job."

Nervous grins and flashes of pride met his words. Daniel smiled. "We just did what you told us to do."

Maddy grinned. "We're Watchers. We're good at that."

Giles let out a half laugh. "Yes, I suppose we are." He looked off into the darkness, wondering what fate lay in store for them tonight. Giles attached the scabbard so the sword hung at his back. He practiced withdrawing it a few times to make sure nothing would prohibit his immediate access. Maddy watched him, noting the familiarity he had with the weapon, the way his body moved. She bit back a sigh.

Giles picked up the crossbow and handed it to Maddy. "Please stay by

Celiane, and the wounded. I don't know if you'll be able to kill any of the creatures, but a few bolts may dissuade them from attacking that area." Maddy nodded, and took the crossbow and picked up the bag of bolts. Giles retrieved a spear and standing in front of them all he began a quick lesson on the most effective methods of using a weapon in an actual battle as opposed to the controlled environment of a training room.

##

They had no way of knowing if they were making good time. Wendell had been driven up during the day with the rest of the Watchers, and had not bothered to notice any landmarks, not that he would have noticed them now that it was dark. Xander's truck had excellent headlights but they still only lit up the road.

Once it had grown dark, Xander had been forced to slow down. As the road weaved back and forth climbing the mountain there were higher and higher sheer drops on one side of the road or the other. There was no room for error.

Buffy was a wreck. No one was talking. Xander was concentrating with every ounce of his being. Wendell had finally succumbed to his exhaustion and was sleeping in the back seat. The silence wasn't helping. Buffy noted the time on the dashboard. They'd been driving for two and a half hours. She tried to figure out how long it might take them. After a minute she stopped. No matter what, even if it was in fifteen minutes, they could get there too late. It all depended on when the creatures showed up.

Buffy stared out the window wishing there was a full moon. The woods were so dark. Her enhanced Slayer vision only compensated just so far. Suddenly, Xander slammed on the brakes and Buffy put her hands on the dashboard to stop her forward momentum. Wendell woke up with a cry as his seatbelt bit into him. Buffy looked ahead in the road and saw what had stopped Xander. Two bodies.

Buffy got out of the car and slowly approached them. When she saw what had been done to them she turned away. She looked into the woods to give herself a few seconds and saw two more bodies. Buffy found herself afraid to look anywhere else. "God, they are everywhere."

Xander was trying very hard not to puke. He got Buffy's attention. "Help me get them out of the way. I don't want to run them over." Buffy moved to Xander's side. She looked at his face and gently squeezed his arm. "You okay?"

Xander shook his head. "Not even a little. Come on, we gotta get to Giles." His face was pinched.

Buffy grabbed the arm of the body closest to her. He was lying on his stomach; he'd been cleaned out from the back. As she tugged him she gasped. "He's still warm. This happened recently." She looked down at the body next to his and it made her jump. "Oh, God."

Xander glanced down. "What?" He didn't really want to know. He couldn't imagine anything being worse than what had been done to these people.

"Look who it is."

Xander took another look. He'd been wrong. This was worse. He knew this guy. "Travers."

Buffy nodded. She'd hated him for a long time now, but no one deserved this. Wendell called from the car. "What is it?" He'd seen too many of these bodies already and had no desire to see one up close again.

"It's Quentin Travers."

Wendell let out a long breath. "All the directors were here. I'm afraid they're all dead now."

Seeing Travers had made her momentarily forget. But now she gestured to the other man. "The guy next to him? He's still warm." Against every instinct she had, Buffy reached down and touched Travers. He wasn't at all warm. He was cold and stiff.

Suddenly they heard the cry of one of the creatures and Buffy felt her blood freeze. Wendell yelled out. "Don't run. You must fight it." Buffy hung on to Xander and just stood there, waiting for the panic to fade. It seemed to take a very long time. The cry repeated and this time Buffy was able to pay more attention. She pointed back in the direction they had just come. "It's down there." Buffy glanced at Wendell. "It's farther down the mountain."

Wendell got out of the car and ran over to the other body. He looked at the man's face. "Some of them must have decided to leave after I did. This guy was with us this morning. Some, or all of them, must still be on the mountain. One of the creatures must be going after them."

Xander swallowed. "Boy, they really don't want any Watchers to get away, do they?"

Buffy let out a cry. "If they're attacking down here, they may be attacking up there. We've gotta go." She yanked on the bodies, pulling them to the side of the road. Xander and Wendell were already in the car when she hopped in. "Go."

As Xander started to drive they kept seeing bodies. Only a couple of the corpses were in the road and Xander managed to steer around them. As they drove, the entire night took on a surreal feel, and Buffy kept hoping she'd wake up from the nightmare.

##

Giles and the rest of the Watchers heard the cry from farther down the mountain. Giles closed his eyes in pain, wondering if anyone had made it down, or if they were, right now, being picked off, one by one. Suddenly he felt anger shoot through him. He stood up tall and spoke to the Watchers. "You mustn't run. If they make that cry again stay in your teams and talk to one another. Make them bring the battle to us. Our goal is merely to survive the night. No one need try any heroics by trying to kill the creatures. We must simply keep them at bay."

He walked over to Celiane. "How is everyone?"

She hadn't wanted to announce it to the group so she spoke softly to Giles. "We've lost two more. The infection, it's overwhelming their systems. Their claws must release a toxin into its victims. I simply can't fight it."

Giles put his hand on her shoulder. "You've done everything and more that you could. Most of them would already be dead without your expert care."

She smiled at him. "The same could be said of you."

"I have been fighting demons for six years. It is simply something I know how to do. Nothing more."

Celiane put her hand over his. "It's much more than that. You have a way..."

She didn't get to finish her thought as another creature let out its shriek. Giles had to fight its influence and he began to walk amongst the Watchers, much as he did last night, talking to them, giving them something to focus on. One tried to break for it and Giles caught her, grabbing her around the waist. He hung on to her, feeling her body shiver with the need to escape.

The panic faded. The woman rested her head against Giles' shoulder for a moment, composing herself. Then she flashed him a rueful look. "I'm sorry."

Giles graciously shook his head. "Nothing to apologize for." He smiled briefly down at her. "Are you all right now?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm all right." She picked up the spear she had dropped and held it with some resolve and repeated herself, sounding almost as if she meant it. "I'm all right."

Another brief smile crossed his face. "Good." He watched her for a second, his lips pursed. "It's Maria, right?"

Maria nodded, pleased he'd remembered. She had to fight off the urge to just stay standing by him. Telling herself to stop being silly she went back to her spot. Giles watched as her team welcomed her back without any remonstrations. He was glad of that. No one should be made to feel bad for reacting to that noise.

That sound was like nothing Giles had ever experienced. It seemed as if it crept inside through his pores, oozing through his nervous system. Giles didn't think a deaf person would be immune. He was sure it was magic and he wished again for some ingredients, for a spell book. Or Willow or Tara. He'd even take Ethan.

He continued to walk the perimeter of the circle, watching the woods, waiting for the next stage of the attack. Giles thought again of Buffy, of how many times they'd waited like this. A sense of sadness permeated his being as he realized that it was more than likely that he'd never see her again. He was afraid that he would die on this mountain and never heal the breach between them. She'd be notified by post of his death, as she was his beneficiary. He'd never even told her that.

A noise made him spin around, one hand reaching for his sword. It was Daniel. Giles let out a sigh of relief. "Please warn me next time, Daniel. I'd hate to skewer you accidentally." The fact that he hadn't even heard him approach made Giles aware of the fact that he'd been dangerously woolgathering at a time when he could ill afford to do so. Pushing thoughts of Buffy aside he concentrated on Daniel. "Is something amiss?"

Daniel let out a harsh rasp of a laugh.

Giles shook his head at himself. "I suppose that's a fairly silly question to be asking."

"It's just the way you asked it. As if perhaps you were concerned that we'd run out of tea."

"Now that would be a crisis." He smiled at Daniel, absurdly grateful, somehow, for this inane bit of conversation. "Let me try again. Do you need something in particular?"

Daniel shook his head. "You're making people nervous walking along the edge. I've been assigned to you as bodyguard."

Giles looked startled. "That seems a bit excessive."

Daniel disagreed. "Rupert, if something happened to you, we'd all be dead. We know it even if you don't."

The cry split the darkness again. It was much closer now. Giles kept walking until he got around to the wounded. Most of them had been tied down so they couldn't get up. But they still felt it. He walked among them, touching their shoulders, or their arms, trying to reassure them. Celiane was doing the same. The silence after the cry died away was unsettling. The woods should never be that silent. There should be owls hooting and the sounds of small animals scurrying through the undergrowth, but right now there was nothing. Giles had to fight an absurd desire to start singing, just to fill the air with something.

Giles looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. The sun had risen at close to six this morning. Seven hours. They had seven hours to get through.

##

Buffy looked at the dashboard clock for the fifteenth time in the last thirty minutes. She almost felt like smashing it, so it couldn't keep mocking her with the time. Eleven o'clock. She was tempted to jump from the car and run. She knew the car was going much faster than she could, but at least she'd be doing something. They had all heard the cries heading farther up the mountain. She knew at least one of them was heading for Giles, maybe was already there, maybe was already killing him, gutting him. Buffy's jaw was clenched so tightly her teeth hurt. She couldn't ever remember praying so hard.

##

After a while the night noises started up again. Giles could hear the collective letting out of breaths of all the Watchers. No one was foolish enough to think that it was done, but they were all thankful for the reprieve, even if it was just for a few minutes.

Giles caught some movement through the trees. He took his glasses off and tried to determine what he'd seen. He shook his head after a minute.

Whatever it was had moved, or had never been there to begin with. Giles resisted the urge to check his watch, knowing that only minutes had passed since he last looked at it.

There was a commotion in the area where the wounded were. Giles walked over to see what was happening. Daniel was right behind him. Celiane was doing chest compressions on the man they'd found last night complaining of severe chest pain. She caught Giles' eyes and shook her head. Giles closed his eyes for a moment. Another Watcher dead.

It was as if someone was watching, knew there was a distraction, and knew when to strike. The deadly voices filled the air, seeming to come from all around. It sounded as if there were hundreds of them. Giles could feel his skin crawl, could feel the overwhelming need to get away, to do whatever it took to be free of this noise. He let out a groan, the effort to stay in control excruciating, and fought against what his mind and his body were screaming at him to do.

He might have been lost but for someone bumping into him. The force of the contact almost knocked him down. He spun around and saw two of the Watchers running, heading out of the clearing, running on pure instinct. Instinct that would get them ripped apart.

Giles yelled after them. "Stop, they'll kill you." He was ignored. They kept running. Giles took off after them. He got about ten feet when he was tackled and slammed to the ground. Giles didn't even know who had attacked him but he fought to get back up. He felt another slam, and then another, and found himself at the bottom of a stack of Watchers.

He was furious. "Let me go, I have to get them back."

Daniel was the one who had first tackled him. "You can't. You'll just be killed too."

Giles still fought, even though he knew it was too late. "You can't just let them die."

"I can, to keep you here, to keep the rest of us alive." Daniel didn't want anyone to die either, but he was very clear about whom he needed to keep alive.

The reverberations of the cries were winding down. But instead of a respite, all it did was make it easier to hear the tortured screams when the creatures struck. Giles pounded his fist on the ground in frustration. "You should have let me go."

Daniel shook his head. "You'd be dead right now. And then we'd all die."

Giles knew Daniel was right, but he couldn't stand it. Two more Watchers. Is this how the night would go? One by one, watching them die? For a moment he wished he had run, that he'd been killed. At least it would be over. Knowing how endless this night would be caused a sense of helplessness to drive like a fist into his gut. Then the moment passed. He let out a breath. "I'm all right. Let me go."

Daniel looked at him, caught his eyes, and assessed him. Then he nodded. The other two men climbed off and then Daniel got up. He offered a hand to Giles to help him up and Giles took it. Once he was standing he felt anger sweep through him again. He was glad of it. He'd take the anger over the helplessness any day. He pinned the rest of them with his glare. "No one else dies. No one. Not a single damn one of you. No one runs, no one leaves the safety of this group. Are we clear?"

Everyone nodded. Giles had an odd feeling that he was talking to a class of children, warning them about the consequences of some infraction, one school mate bullying another, or stealing someone's lunchbox. Giles bit back the hysterical laugh that was threatening to escape. They might as well have been, as poorly equipped as this group was to deal with this crisis facing them. If he had control of the Council, even for a day, he would change so much.

Giles felt someone move to his side. He looked and saw it was Maria. He raised his eyebrows, silently asking what she needed.

She spoke quietly. "Don't look, but do you see that man, the one in the denim shirt, the one on the end there?"

Giles nodded, wondering what was going on.

"He did it."

Giles looked at her. "I don't understand. He did what?"

"He pushed those two. I saw him. He told them to run. He egged them on."

Giles shook his head. "I don't...I can't believe that."

She looked at him, her countenance grave. "I've been standing there fighting with myself. Trying to convince myself that I was wrong, that I didn't see it. But I did. You have to believe me."

Giles could tell that she meant what she was saying, but he hoped she was mistaken. The thought that one of their own, that someone who had seen how these creatures killed...it made him sick to his stomach. He could hardly bear to think about it let alone deal with it. The problem was that he couldn't afford to avoid it. If there was a traitor in their midst, he had to know. Giles glanced up at the man, only to find him staring back at him.

End of Part 4

Watchers Retreat 5

Giles approached him cautiously. "What's your name?"

"Tom."

Giles spoke loud enough for everyone to hear him. "Does anyone here know Tom?"

Several people spoke up. Giles focused in on Daniel. "Most of us know him. He organized this retreat."

A nameless dread started to form in Giles' gut. "He is a Watcher, then?"

Giles saw Daniel nod. "Of course. He's been a Watcher for as long as I've been one."

Another man spoke. "We were in training together."

On the face of things, Giles might have let it drop. But his sense of dread continued unabated. And he was starting to be aware of something. As he tried to look at the man, Giles found it difficult to stay focused. He found his eyes sliding off of Tom and getting caught up in what was next to him, or behind him. Giles had to constantly work to keep his attention directly on him. He looked around and noticed that most of the Watchers weren't even paying attention anymore, when a few moments before all their eyes had been glued to Tom.

Giles tried to sense if there was magic at work, but he couldn't be sure. His inability to determine the use of magic left him with another possibility to rule out; Tom might not be human. And while there were some demons that had human blood, there were many who didn't. Giles reached into his pocket and pulled out a small knife that he then opened. "Tom, I hate to ask you this, but I

need you to hold out your arm and let me knick you."

Tom moved away. "What the hell do you need to do that for?" He glanced over the crowd. "He's gone round the bend. One of those monsters has got in his head or something."

That got everyone's attention again. No one was prepared to take Giles on, or doubt him, but there was some muttering in the crowd. Giles tried again. "Just a small cut. I'll do the same to myself. In fact, I'll do it first." Giles made a quick cut across his forearm, just deep enough for blood to well. "That's all."

Tom shook his head again. "You just keep away from me." His voice got loud. "It's not bad enough we have to deal with monsters, you have to start threatening us too?"

"I think you're protesting too much. I think you would let me cut you if you had nothing to hide." Giles looked to the side and gestured to Daniel and Steven. "Please hold him." As they started to move in Tom's direction, Tom started to edge his way to the border of the clearing. Giles tried again. "You'll get my full apology if my suspicions are ungrounded."

Tom had reached the end of the clearing and he stopped. His eyes glittered; his stance unfriendly, as he realized his charade was over. He pointed to the woman. "Is that how you found out? Did the bitch tell you?" He sent a malevolent look her way. Maria found herself taking a step closer to Giles.

Giles swallowed some bile. "You did what she said? You forced those two to run?"

Tom laughed. "I did a whole lot more than that." He glanced at the group watching him. "Soon, you'll all be dead." He pointed at the woman. "Including you."

Giles felt her press up against him. Giles had heard the words and heard the venom in Tom's voice but he wanted desperately to have misunderstood. "Pardon me?"

Tom snickered. "Polite to the last, aren't you? You heard me. You'll all be dead soon. Everyone of you."

Giles carefully put his knife away and then he reached back and drew his sword. He took a step towards Tom. "You did this? You arranged this?" His voice was soft but no one there mistook it for anything but deadly. "All these Watchers dead because of you? Why?"

"Because Watchers are vermin." He smiled, a feral smile. "I've been planning this for years, waiting, and hating. Living among you, pretending to be your friend. It made me sick. I swore revenge and now I'll have it." He grinned again. "So, tell me. If a Watcher's alone in the woods when his body is ripped open, does he make any noise?"

Giles started slowly moving towards Tom, his sword out in front of him. Everyone was mesmerized, watching this play out, watching this next surreal chapter to a weekend already too macabre for belief. Giles spit the words out. "What the hell are you?"

Tom stepped out of the clearing and he let his body change. His height didn't change but the rest of him morphed into something from hell. Cloven hooves, horns, red eyes, thickened skin. Tom, or whatever he was, laughed at them. "You'll all be dead, and then I'll find the rest. Anyone who made it to the bottom; they'll die first. Then I'll go after any of the Watchers who didn't come and join in the fun. I know where they all are, I know how to get to them. And with all of you dead, there'll be no one to warn them." He smiled at Giles, his mouth full of sharp teeth. "And then, just for fun, I think I'll go after that Slayer of yours."

Giles let out a cry of anguish and lunged for the demon. His movement was so fast the demon almost didn't move in time. But he did, shifting to the side, barely avoiding a sword through his chest. He grinned at Giles, taunting him. Then his eyes opened wide and he looked down at his stomach. A crossbow bolt was sticking out of him. Giles took instant advantage of the situation and raising his sword he swung out quickly from left to right, cutting the demon's head off.

Giles watched as the demon's death registered in its eyes, and then his head toppled to the ground, followed by his body. It seemed to fold in on itself, shrinking until nothing but a skeleton remained. Giles wished he could feel a moment of exhilaration at the demon's death but he couldn't seem to muster it. He just wanted to cry. All this death. Killing the demon didn't undo any of it.

Giles did glance at Maddy, and he managed to send her a brief smile. "Good shot."

Maddy shook her head. "I was aiming for his heart."

"It was enough." Giles pulled out his handkerchief and he wiped his sword off. Placing it back in its scabbard he threw the square of linen in the fire.

The woman was staring out into the woods. "Do you think maybe they'll go? Now that he's dead? Do you think it's over?"

Giles wanted to say yes with all of his heart. He indulged himself in a momentary fantasy of a hot cup of tea, and a few roasted marshmallows. But he'd already seen the movement in the woods again. Sighing, he pulled his sword back out. "No, it's not over." He spoke softly, hoping his voice would carry. "We don't know how much control he had over them. Be wary. Keep an eye on each other, make sure you're armed, but no one make any sudden movements."

He glanced at Daniel, who had moved next to him again. Then he looked at Maria, and the other Watchers who were around him. "And please, everyone stay a sword's length away from me. I'd hate to take anyone's head off accidentally. All right?"

They all hesitated, but then reluctantly moved a few steps away from him. Daniel was reluctant, because he was still in protect mode. The others, because they felt safer being close. Giles was again reminded of a classroom of children. He wished he were able to allay their fears.

Giles heard a yell, and he saw one of the Watchers pointing. He turned to find that at the edge of the clearing one of the creatures was visible now and it was truly horrific to behold. Then it emitted its cry. Giles could feel its pull, and he knew, beyond a doubt, that these creatures would never stop killing as long as there was fresh meat around. They had been created for this, to slaughter and consume until there was nothing left to kill.

Giles reached out a hand and pointed at the rocks. Several Watchers had claimed to have good throwing arms. They slowly reached the pile and began picking up rocks, loading their pockets, one kept in their hands, ready to throw at Giles' command.

The creature let out its cry again. No one ran. Somehow seeing the creature helped. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that being in the woods alone with that thing meant certain death. It drew closer. Giles watched it, trying to understand its behavior. It seemed confused. As if it could sense that its prey was near, but its prey wasn't behaving the way it ought.

Giles was afraid if it got close enough to sense exactly where they were that it would attack. Giles gestured to the rock throwers, and held up one finger, and then he touched his head.

A woman nodded. They had all decided before that she had the most accuracy. She let one fly and it hit the creature in the head. It let out a roar and backed away. Then it slowly advanced again. Giles held up one finger again, and touched himself on the chest. He wanted to see if the creature

seemed more sensitive in any particular spot. The woman let fly again and again the creature retreated, but without the cry.

As it seemed to deliberate its next move, Giles looked around the clearing, frowning as he noticed that the Watchers assigned to keep guard around the rest of the perimeter were focused on the creature. As he was opening his mouth to remind them to stay alert he finished his visual sweep and his eyes opened in horror as he saw another creature almost on top of the wounded Watchers, right behind Maddy. He yelled out. "Maddy, down." Then he ran.

Maddy obeyed him and ducked, then screamed as she saw the creature out of the corner of her eye. Her movement saved her as the vicious claws raked through the air where her torso had been seconds ago. She stumbled, twisted, falling onto her back, the crossbow falling out of her hand. The creature reached out to deliver a second killing blow, one that took into account her position on the ground. Maddy tried to back up, crablike, but there were wounded behind her.

Then, suddenly, Giles was there slashing out with his sword. Giles plunged the sword into the creature's upper body, hoping to hit a vital organ. All it did was enrage it. It let out one of its cries and raked out again with its claws. Hearing the cry at such close quarters dazed Giles. Barely managing to keep his sword up, he at least managed to not get caught by its claws. Then, as his head cleared, he began to fight the thing.

He never got another chance at its body. All he could do was slash at its arms, but the cuts seemed to have no impact. Giles couldn't see any blood, or any indication that he was slowing it down. Giles heard Maddy load the crossbow behind him. Then he heard the snick of it being shot. The arrow landed in the creature's mouth.

The creature backed away, trying to get the bolt out, its claws ineffective for such a task. It retreated further. Maddy shot it again. This time it retreated until it was out of sight. Giles spun around to see what the other creature was doing. It was still in the clearing, still being deterred by the rocks being thrown. Then he checked the rest of the perimeter. He was glad to see the Watchers were back on guard.

Giles glanced at Maddy. "Once again, nice shot."

She sent him a fleeting grin. "Thanks for saving my life."

Giles nodded, smiling softly. "You're welcome." He found a more central location and spoke softly to them all, making sure everyone was still keeping guard. "Their mouths seem to be an area of weakness. Aim there." He

pointed to where the creature he and Maddy had fought, had retreated. "That one knows we're here. I suspect it will be back to cause us problems." Gesturing to the one in the clearing he spoke again. "I don't believe this one has made its mind up yet. Let's try to keep it at a distance so it doesn't find out how close we are."

He found himself slipping into research mode. "Curious. Clearly they are capable of hunting prey and yet we seem to be confusing it. I believe that other one stumbled upon us by accident and because we weren't paying adequate attention. Perhaps there are too many of us for it to distinguish individual prey. Perhaps there are too many smells, too many distractions." Giles ran a hand down his jaw.

He heard a couple of gasps and then Maddy was pulling at his arm. "Less Einstein, more D'Artagnan."

He glanced up to see the creature coming back, the bolt now gone from its mouth. He sent Maddy a look. "I might suggest more Robin Hood."

Maddy's eyes widened and then she was loading a bolt and letting it fly. It hit the creature's mouth again but didn't take a good hold. One swipe from its claws dislodged it. Giles quickly glanced to make sure the creature in the clearing was being adequately held off, and that the Watchers on guard were keeping on eye out for the rest of the perimeter. All they needed was for another creature to stumble upon them.

Giles moved closer to the creature, not wanting the fighting to be so close to the wounded. Maddy let another bolt fly that struck the creature in its arm. It let out another bellow. Giles almost dropped his sword. "Good Lord." He shook his head to clear the dizziness. Then he let out a cry as he saw a Watcher start to run. Giles was too far away. Stabbing his sword into the ground he grabbed the crossbow from Maddy and shot the man in the leg. As he went down, Giles yelled for someone to go get him.

Giles handed the crossbow back to Maddy. "Here."

Maddy stared at him even as she was loading it up again. "You shot him."

"Oh, I do apologize. How thoughtless of me. Next time I'll let him keep running. Perhaps we can have a cup of tea while he's being eaten."

Maddy narrowed her eyes at him. "Do you always get sarcastic when something's trying to kill you?"

"Yes. Actually I'm fairly sarcastic a good deal of the time. Or so I've been

told." He glanced around, noticing several other alarmed looks being cast his way. He glared at them. "I don't fancy anyone else getting eaten by these creatures. So, if you run, I'll shoot you. And I will try very hard not to kill you. But I make no promises." He glared again, taking in the Watcher with the bolt in his leg. "So, I suggest that you not run."

The Watcher was clearly in pain, but he mostly looked chagrined. "I'm sorry. I just lost it." He glanced up at Giles. "I never thought I'd appreciate getting shot, but thank you."

Giles smiled briefly, noted Celiane coming to assist, then turned back to the creature nearest him. Maddy sent another bolt into the creature. So far the bolts were keeping it from approaching too closely. She glanced up at him. "By the way, that was a nice shot."

"I've been shooting at running vampires, aiming for their hearts, for a long time. A leg is a much larger target."

Maddy loaded the bow again. "Rupert?"

"Yes?"

"We've already used a third of the bolts. At this rate they won't last very long."

Giles sighed. The mountain of rocks was fast disappearing as well. He looked at his watch. 11:30. They wouldn't last more than a couple of hours. Giles wished he knew if someone had made it down, if someone was coming to help them. Giles wished for so many things that his head ached. Once again he wished for Buffy. His eyes swept over the few remaining Watchers. He knew they were all depending on him and he questioned his ability to keep them alive.

He heard a yell and he looked up to find the first creature advancing, ignoring the rocks that bounced off its hide. Giles sent Maddy over to assist. The creature he was keeping an eye on was still a respectable distance away. But then, suddenly it wasn't. It moved so quickly Giles barely got his sword up in time. Again he found himself parrying with the monster, trying to keep its claws from gouging him. He heard people behind him and saw the rocks start to fly.

This creature was undeterred by the rocks. A Watcher darted forward and tried to stab the monster with a spear. Giles pulled his sword back so he didn't cut the Watcher by mistake. The creature screamed and attacked the man, sending him flying, his shoulder torn open. Giles cursed and lifted his sword again, standing in between the creature and the wounded Watcher.

The creature bellowed again, frustrated at being kept from its prey.

It lashed out at Giles. He successfully avoided being torn open. Giles wondered how long his luck would hold, not to mention his stamina. He couldn't fight like this for long. The creature was too strong, and every blow against his sword hammered into Giles' body. Giles heard a cry but he couldn't afford to look at what was happening on the other side. He heard the snick of the bow and realized Maddy was back. The creature staggered back a few feet when it got hit in the mouth again. Giles spoke. "The other one?"

"It left. It never came in all the way. Maybe after enough arrows it decided it wasn't having a good time." She let out a cry as the creature unexpectedly lunged for Giles.

Giles got his sword up, but not in time. The creature was able to slash his forearm. Giles winced at the pain, and at the burning. He assumed the burning was from the toxin that was now in his body, that would now start infecting him. Switching his sword to his other hand he started fighting back ferociously.

##

Buffy almost screamed at the clock. 11:30. She turned to Wendell. "Why aren't we there? It's been four and a half hours. Shouldn't we be there? Are you sure this is the right way?"

Xander snorted. "Buffy, this is the only way. There haven't exactly been a lot of forks in the road with mountain on one side and cliff on the other."

Buffy let out a frustrated noise. Suddenly Wendell let out a cry. "This is it. We're here. I remember those rocks, they sort of look like a dinosaur."

Buffy sent him a look, but then his words sunk in. "We're here? Where are they?" She opened her window to listen.

"Keep driving. It shouldn't be far."

"I thought you said we were here." Buffy was beginning to feel like Xander's truck was another coffin. She had to get out.

"We are, but it's a big area. They're spread out all over the place. Our campsite was about a mile from here."

Xander kept driving, wondering if Buffy was just going to jump out the window. He swept around another corner and Buffy saw them. And she saw

Giles, fighting with a creature, blood running down his arm. She was over the seat and practically crawling over Wendell to get to her weapons. Withdrawing a sword she opened the door. Xander slowed the truck down to come to a stop but Buffy didn't wait. She jumped and rolled and then was on her feet running as fast as she had ever run before.

##

Giles was fighting for his life, and he was fighting for the lives of everyone behind him. And he was terrified that he was losing. He had given up some ground. The creature was ignoring the rocks and the bolts, purely focusing on him, somehow recognizing that Giles was the obstacle keeping it from its food. Giles let out a cry as he felt a claw graze his shoulder. He knew he couldn't keep this up for much longer. But he also knew that if he couldn't fight this creature off with his sword, that an inexperienced Watcher with a spear in his hands wouldn't stand a chance. He let everything else fade away and concentrated on nothing but the fight in front of him.

Maddy saw her coming. They all did. She was like a blur and for a moment they wondered what she was, and if she meant them harm. Then Giles let out another cry as a blow from the creature almost knocked the sword from his hand. As he tried to find his grip again he saw the blow coming that would end his life. Giles knew he wouldn't get his sword up in time. With one last thought of Buffy, and an acute sense of sorrow that he had failed to protect these people he watched the claws descend.

End of Part 5

Watchers Retreat 6

Suddenly the creature stopped moving. Giles watched in disbelief as its head came loose of its body and rolled to the ground, followed by the rest of it. Not understanding, Giles looked up and his eyes locked with those of his Slayer. He wondered for a moment if he were dead. He softly spoke her name. "Buffy?"

Buffy let out a cry and threw herself in his arms. "You're alive. I don't believe it, you're alive." The relief of finding him safe and sound almost overwhelmed her. "Oh, God. Oh, God."

Giles wrapped his arms around her, still not quite believing it. "How...?" He pulled back so he could see her face. "You're really here?" He glanced up and saw Xander, and then Wendell.

Wendell grinned at him. "I brought you some help."

Xander waved. "Hey, big guy. Thought we'd drop in. Never could resist a camp sing-along."

Giles looked back down at Buffy, trying to take it in, that somehow, miraculously, she was there, that she had saved him. Not to mention the fact that she was actually talking to him, and hugging him. Suddenly none of it mattered. He held her tightly. "I have never been so glad to see anyone in my entire life as I am to see you."

She pulled back, tears in her eyes. "Really?"

Giles let out a short laugh. "Really." He cupped her cheek. "I've missed you so much."

Buffy let out her own soggy laugh. "I've missed you too."

He hugged her again and looked at Wendell. "Where was she?"

"Down in Weaverville, looking for you."

Giles looked down at Buffy. "How did you know where I was?"

Buffy's face darkened. "Can I tell you that later?"

"Of course." He turned her, keeping one arm around her, to introduce her. "This is Buffy, my Slayer."

Buffy grinned when she heard his phrase. My Slayer. Not the Slayer, but my Slayer. Something inside of Buffy began to unwind. Giles reached out to Xander and pulled him in for a hug. Xander clutched at him for a moment, so glad to find him alive after that never-ending drive that he was struggling to fight off his tears. Giles introduced him as well. "And this young man is Xander Harris."

Giles could hear the excited murmurs. The Slayer was here. Rupert's Slayer was here. Buffy looked down at the creature. "Are there more?"

"At least one, possibly more."

Celiane moved to stand in front of him. "You've been hurt."

Giles glanced down at his forearm. "It's nothing."

Celiane shook her head. "It's not nothing. You know that."

Buffy frowned. "What does she mean?"

"It doesn't matter. There's nothing to be done about it anyway."

Buffy didn't like the sound of that. Her voice got louder. "What does she mean?"

Celiane answered. "Their claws have some sort of toxin. We've had four die already."

Giles sent her an exasperated look. "They were much more badly cut than I. And many of those who were hurt by the creatures are still alive."

Celiane frowned. "They won't be much longer." She glanced at his sword. "And you've been fighting, making your heart pump faster. The toxin will be making its way through your system more quickly." She gestured to the car. "You should have someone drive you to the hospital."

Giles shook his head. "There are many more seriously wounded. Besides, we are still not safe and Buffy cannot fight these creatures alone."

Buffy scowled at him. "I did a pretty good job with that one."

"Only because I was distracting it by almost getting killed."

"I didn't come all the way up here just for you to die because of some stupid poison."

"And I'm not leaving until everyone is safe."

"Giles."

"Buffy."

They heard someone snicker and heard a softly spoken comment. "Boy, it's like they're married."

Giles let out a long breath and then he glanced at Buffy. He found himself grinning and he hugged her again. "I really am glad to see you, even if you are already arguing with me." He turned to Wendell. "Is there other help coming?"

"Yes, I called the Council. They're making arrangements."

Giles hated to ask this next question. "Did anyone else make it down?"

Wendell glanced at them all and hesitated. "I only saw Sarah and Doug."

Maddy stared at him. "No one else made it down?"

He shook his head. "Not since seven o'clock, which is when we headed up the mountain. And I heard one of the creatures hunting down below." He glanced again at the Watchers there. "You're looking at the Council of Watchers. With the exception of a precious few scattered in far away places throughout the world, and a few who might still be wandering the mountain, I'm afraid this is it."

Everyone fell silent. They had all talked about it and feared it, but having it confirmed made it all too horrifyingly real. Maddy shook her head. "They're all dead?"

Buffy tugged on Giles' arm. "There's a demon who's doing this."

Giles nodded. "We know."

"Have you seen him?"

Daniel answered. "He killed him."

Buffy looked up at Giles. "You killed him?"

Giles rolled his eyes at the expression on her face. "I did learn a few things fighting by your side."

Maddy moved to stand next to him. "We're all alive because of him."

Daniel nodded. "He kept us from running. He kept us going."

Buffy didn't like it that these people seemed to be defending Giles from her. "I didn't mean it like that. He's killed a kazillion demons."

Giles grinned at her. "A kazillion?"

She grinned back. "At least."

Maddy frowned at her. "How did you mean it, then?" She had no intention of letting Rupert be slurred, even if it was by his Slayer.

Buffy blushed. She grabbed Giles and dragged him away from everyone. She

didn't mind looking stupid in front of Giles but she had no intention of looking that way in front of everyone. "I just thought..." Buffy scrunched her face up.

Giles was baffled. "You just thought what?"

"I just thought that I'd be rescuing you more."

Giles barked out an astonished laugh, and then at the look on Buffy's face he pulled her in for another hug. "Oh, Buffy. If you hadn't shown up when you did, I'd be dead right now, and within a few minutes, all of these people would have been dead. You rescued us all, with your usual impeccable timing."

Buffy rested her head on his chest, listening to the reassuring beat of his heart. She found herself wishing she could just stay there forever. Finally she pulled away. "I didn't mean that I didn't think you could kill a demon."

"I know that, Buffy."

"I want you back." Buffy tried to pull the words back but they were out before she could stop them. The words were true but she hadn't meant to just spring it on him. She looked at him, worried that he'd turn away.

Giles smiled at her. "You do?" Then he frowned. "Are you sure? When I was last in Sunnydale..."

Buffy interrupted him. "Big mistake. I was mad." She grinned dryly at him. "I'm better now."

Giles stared at her for a moment. "We can discuss this later. Perhaps we had better first do some planning."

It wasn't the answer Buffy was hoping for but at least he didn't say no. She nodded and headed for the car to get the rest of the weapons.

A wave of dizziness came over Giles. He stood still for a moment, waiting for it to pass. When it did he walked over to the fire and sat down. Maria asked him if he wanted some tea. Giles grinned gratefully at her. "That sounds wonderful."

Buffy approached Giles just as Maria give him a brilliant smile in response to his grin. She found herself frowning at the interchange. She sat down next to Giles, sitting very close to him. She felt like putting a sign on him that said Buffy's Watcher.

Giles was relieved when he saw that Buffy had brought two additional

crossbows, and more bolts. She had also brought more swords. Giles had mixed feelings about putting swords in anyone's hands. He was afraid that with their inexperience, that they'd start lopping each other's body parts off in the confusion of an actual battle. Buffy toed one of the swords. "That's the only way you can kill them. Take their heads off."

Giles tilted his head at Buffy. "How do you know that?"

Buffy scowled. "Spike told me."

"Ah." Giles' lips tightened.

Buffy felt the chasm between them again, threatening to yawn open. She glanced up at him. She saw the tension on his face at the mention of the vampire. Buffy didn't know what to say to diffuse his tension, without talking about how her stupidity cost over 200 Watchers their lives. Instead she just lay her head on his shoulder, and heard him wince. Buffy pulled her head back up. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I forgot."

Giles shook his head. "That's all right, Buffy. It's just a scratch."

Buffy pulled away farther and insisted on seeing this scratch. "Let me see."

Giles resisted. "It's just a scratch." Buffy pointed to the gashes on his arm. They were already red and puffy. "Like those?"

"No, he just grazed me with a claw."

"Then let me see." Maria arrived then with his cup of tea. Grateful for the tea and the distraction Giles took the cup. He took a cautious sip. Giles smiled up at Maria. "Thank you. This is lovely."

Then Celiane was there. She gently took Giles wounded arm and began to wash it out. Her lips grew tight when she saw how infected it was already. She glanced at Buffy. "Do you have a first aid kit with more antibiotics?"

Buffy shook her head. "No, well, yes, I have a first aid kit, but no antibiotics. That was sort of Giles' bit. Knowing that stuff." She chewed on her lip. "How bad is it?" Celiane just shot her a look. Then Buffy pointed at his shoulder. "He got cut here too."

Giles glared at her but Buffy ignored him. Celiane made Giles unbutton his shirt so she could take a look. He lowered the shirt off his shoulders. Buffy tried to ignore the weird flush she felt at sitting next to her almost half naked Watcher. Celiane prodded his shoulder. Giles winced again. He glanced up at

the doctor. "Must you?"

"It's a deep wound."

"He only got me with a claw."

"Which punctured you." Celiane turned on her flashlight so she could see Giles' skin better.

Buffy gasped when she saw the red streaks shooting down his arm and back. "What is that?"

"The infection from the toxin." Celiane put her hand on Giles' forehead. "Do you feel all right? No chills, or bouts of dizziness?"

Giles shook his head. "I'm fine, Celiane." He allowed her to wash out the wound as best she could and dab the last little bit of antimicrobial cream they had. Then Giles pulled his shirt back on and buttoned it.

Celiane remained crouched in front of him. "You need to get treated."

"We all need to be treated." He pointed to the wounded. "And there are many who require treatment more than I do."

"Rupert."

"Celiane, I won't discuss this further, with you or anyone. I'm not leaving until everyone is safe."

Celiane and Buffy exchanged a look. Buffy glanced at Giles. "I could hit you."

Giles sent her an angry look. "Not if you want me back in Sunnydale. I won't have you knocking me unconscious every time you disagree with me."

Buffy heard the threat in his voice. "Fine then. I guess I better get these creatures dead so we can all go home." She stood up and reached for her sword.

Daniel cleared his throat. "There's one now." Buffy and Giles both looked up to see that the creature Maddy had harried away had returned. It still had a bolt sticking in one of its legs.

Giles got up. "Let's get this done, then."

Buffy glared up at him. "You are so not helping."

"The creature needs to be distracted so you can sneak around and kill it."

"I'm not arguing with that. But it needs to be someone else."

"Then who do you propose help, Buffy? I am the only one who knows how to use a sword in a real fight to the death. The one Watcher who tried to go after it with a spear is lying over there, torn open." He gestured at the remainder of the people there and hissed quietly at Buffy. "So, who? Who shall I pick to die next?"

Buffy prodded the crossbows with her feet. "No one. You shoot him with the crossbow and keep it distracted."

Giles let out a long breath. "We can try that, but I don't believe it will work. Once they determine something can't really hurt them, they seem to become unconcerned about any similar attacks."

Buffy glared at him. "We try this first."

"Fine." Giles reached for a crossbow. He glanced up at Maddy. "Little John to your Robin Hood?"

She grinned. "You're on."

Buffy frowned and picked up the last crossbow. She handed it to Xander. "Try really, really hard not to shoot me. Okay?" Buffy turned to leave but Giles stopped her. "Wait until we're shooting at it. It moves very quickly."

"Don't worry. I have no intention of being a late night snack." She headed off slowly to the edge of the clearing, starting to make her way around to get behind the creature.

Giles tried to stand up and found it difficult to do so. His legs felt a little shaky. Xander put a hand around his unhurt arm and helped hoist him up. "You all right there, G-man?"

Giles shook his head to try and clear the dizziness. "Yes, just a bit weary." He smiled at Xander. "I appreciate the assistance." Giles put his hand on Xander's shoulder. "And I appreciate your coming up here, more than I can say."

Xander waved him off, embarrassed. "And miss a chance to visit Weaverville? Not on your life. That bar alone was worth the trip."

Giles let out a silent chuckle. "Well, the delights of traveling aside, I'm still grateful." Giles started loading up his crossbow and went to stand next to Maddy, Xander on his other side. All three of them shot the beast.

It kept coming. They loaded up again, and shot again. Nothing. The beast let out its cry. Giles decided that after hearing it so many times, the effect of it was wearing off but he felt Xander tense beside him and grabbed his arm. "Steady."

Xander nervously nodded. "They left this out of the travel brochure."

Giles let out another laugh. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed the young man's quips. Then he noticed Buffy was in position. They sent another barrage of bolts into the creature. The creature bellowed again but kept heading their way. Which was just what Giles wanted, all of its attention on them, so Buffy could kill it.

Buffy crept closer, sword raised. She had to fight through the panic the beast's cries created in her. Just another few steps and she'd be close enough to lop its head off. Then she was throwing Giles in the car even if she did have to knock him out to do it.

The creature stopped moving. Giles watched it as it started to turn. He cursed and ran for his sword. Buffy let out a cry as she suddenly found herself face to face with the monster. Her speed and strength saved her as her sword came up and she began to block its attacks. Giles picked up his sword and ran quickly behind the creature. With one massive blow he separated its head from its body.

Before they'd even had a chance to talk there was a scream from near the fire. Buffy and Giles looked up to see another creature attacking. Several Watchers were fighting it with spears. Daniel held a sword and was trying to find an opening to take its head off. Giles looked at Buffy and after a second of silent communication she was running. She was almost there when the creature got lucky with one of its strikes. Its claws ripped open the side of one of the men. Intent on its victim, it raised its arm to open its prey for eating when Buffy yelled for the rest of them to get out of the way. They scattered and Buffy spun with the sword and the head went flying.

Buffy glanced around and made sure that there were no more creatures attacking. Celiane was already directing two men to carry the wounded Watcher to her area. Buffy glanced at Giles. He was still out in the clearing, talking to Maddy and Xander. Buffy looked at him more closely. He looked exhausted. He was leaning on the hilt of his sword, the point digging into the earth. Buffy headed over to him to bring him back to the fire.

Then she saw yet another creature, heading straight toward him. She yelled out his name. "Giles, in front of you."

Giles yanked his sword up and moved between Xander and the charging beast. His body had begun to ache and he could feel the chills signifying a rise in temperature. He couldn't seem to get his sword to move fast enough. He didn't. The creature raked its claws across his chest. Buffy screamed and in another second she was there, taking its head off.

Xander caught Giles before he could fall to his knees and helped him down. He was appalled at how hot he was. He glanced up at Buffy. "Jeez, Buffy, he's burning up."

Other people were running over to see how he was. Celiane had noticed the commotion but she was too busy trying to keep the other Watcher from bleeding to death. Buffy had ripped open the remaining shreds of his shirt to check the wound. Maddy ran off for a towel and some water, which she came running back with. She began to clean Giles off, a fact, which in a small part of Buffy's brain that she recognized as childish, Buffy hugely resented.

Daniel skidded up and pushed his way in. "Is he all right?" He winced when he saw the claw marks, and the angry red lines shooting out from Giles' two previous wounds. Celiane had just informed Daniel that two more Watchers had died. Slowly, all the Watchers who had been attacked by the creatures last night were dying.

There was another yell and Buffy looked up to see three more creatures approaching. Xander pointed out a fourth. He looked at Buffy. "We are so dead."

Buffy shook her head and jumped to her feet, grasping her sword. "Not yet we're not." She saw that several of the Watchers were throwing rocks at the creatures. Buffy looked at Maddy. "Maddy, crossbow. You too, Xander." Maddy glanced at Giles but then handed the towel to Maria. Then she and Xander were both running for their bows. Buffy registered an instant of not liking Maria taking care of Giles either before she was off and running herself.

End Part 6

Watchers Retreat 7

One more creature had stormed the site and now lay dead, although two

more Watchers had been hurt. The other three were being held off by bolts for the time being. Giles was still conscious but he was practically being sat on to keep him from trying to help. Buffy was a bit stunned at the loyalty these Watchers had toward Giles. The fact that it surprised her so much shamed her.

His being sick had rallied them even further and they were now determined to keep him safe after he had been keeping them safe for so long. She watched them with him; they couldn't do enough for him. He was currently arguing with a woman who was trying to spoon-feed him. Buffy couldn't help grinning. She didn't imagine the woman was going to win that fight.

Then the grin came off her face. At the rate she was going, she'd manage to get the rest of the Watchers killed all on her own. It made her appreciate Giles and his fighting skills all over again. She couldn't believe how inept most of the rest of them were. A few of them showed promise but it made her shiver trying to imagine taking any of them on patrol with her. All of these guys would be dead in a week. The only reason Wesley hadn't died that first week was because he'd had Giles. Her Watcher was different. And these people knew it.

Buffy walked around the circle, around the site, keeping her eye on the different battles, waiting to intervene if any of the beasts came too close. Maddy had told her that they'd been able to hold one off for quite a while with the rocks and bolts. Buffy hoped that was true. If they all charged at once she'd be in trouble.

She headed over to Giles and took the hot soup away from the woman. "I'll do this."

The woman looked disgruntled for a moment but she acquiesced and moved away. Giles glared at Buffy. "Don't even try it."

Buffy sat on the ground next to him. "I was rescuing you again. Stop grouching." She handed the soup to Giles. He grunted and took it, spooning some into his mouth. "Why was she trying to feed you anyway?"

"Celiane says I shouldn't use my arms." Buffy glared at him and tried to take the soup back. He moved it out of her reach. "Buffy, I'm fine. Now that I've rested for a while I feel much better."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Right. And that's why you're all sweaty, and your eyes are sort of glassy, and those cuts of yours look so gross."

Giles let out a long suffering sigh. "I'm sweating because the fever has

broken. And I've been awake for close to 48 hours without little sleep, half of that time fighting for my life. Excuse me if my eyes look tired."

"And the cuts?"

Giles shrugged. "Buffy, they're infected." He grabbed her arm. "Celiane is right about one thing. I will die, and so will everyone else who's been touched by these things if we don't get off this mountain. So, let's finish this."

"What?" Giles' stark comment about him dying threw her.

He kept going. "Sooner or later these three will attack. Maybe they're the last of them. Let's kill them. Let me help you now while I'm still conscious." He pointed at one of the creatures. "You know you can't do it on your own. And I know you haven't taken them on because you don't want any more Watchers to get hurt. I'm already hurt. I'm all you've got."

Buffy hated that he was making sense. "Can you even stand?"

It took a bit of effort but Giles did manage to stand. "You can take them on, you can take the beating, and I'll do the sneaking up behind them."

"Giles, if that's the plan, Daniel, or Steven could do your part."

"And if the creature turns on them? Like it turned on you?"

Buffy blew out a breath. No rebuttal came to mind.

Celiane saw that he was up and began to protest. Both Buffy and Giles turned to her, their hands up to stop her. Buffy considered Giles. She pointed her finger at him. "You fall down once, and we're done."

"Fine." He looked at the ground. "Would you pick my sword up?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Afraid you'll fall over?"

"Actually, yes." He held out his hand and she bent over and picked it up. He slowly turned to look at the three that currently held them at siege. "Pick one."

Buffy pursed her lips. "Eeny meeny miny mo." She pointed. "That one."

Giles noted someone moving up behind him. It was Daniel, sword in hand. "I'm backing you up."

Giles gave him a quick smile. "Just remember that I'm tired. You need to give

me some extra room so I don't hurt you."

"Got it." As Giles swayed a bit he frowned. "Are you sure you should be doing this?" Giles just looked at Daniel. Daniel nodded and repeated himself. "Got it."

The three of them headed for the creature Buffy had chosen. Giles waited for her to tell Maddy to stop firing. Maddy glared at Buffy as she saw Giles moving around. "What's he doing up?"

Buffy ignored her. She nodded at Giles and then she moved forward to engage the creature. When she was a few feet away it charged at her. She focused all her concentration on keeping those claws away from her. Buffy didn't even notice Giles until the creature's head went flying.

Daniel kept Giles from falling. Buffy saw the toll the exertion was taking on him. Buffy hated this but she pointed to the next one. Giles nodded but put up a finger to tell her to wait a minute. Hanging on to Daniel he tried to catch his breath. He couldn't seem to. He couldn't seem to draw in a breath at all.

Buffy took one look at him and screamed for Celiane. Running back to him she was suddenly blinded by a huge light that lit up the entire campsite. Shielding her eyes she looked for the source and as the wind whipped up she realized it was a helicopter. Buffy glanced at the creatures and saw them slinking off in response to the light.

When she looked back at Giles, Celiane was there. And then in a few seconds so were some men dressed in black, descending from the sky. Celiane ran to them. "Do you have intubation equipment?"

He pointed to the man behind him; he was carrying a kit. Celiane grabbed it from him. Buffy had Giles' head on her lap. He was gasping for air. Tears were running down her face. "Please don't die, please don't die." She said it over and over again, like a litany.

Celiane rushed back to his side and had Buffy move back. In less than a minute she had a tube down his throat attached to an ambu bag. She started giving him some breaths. She glanced up at Buffy. "He's going into circulatory collapse. This will only hold him so long." She looked up at one of the men. "We have wounded who must be taken out of here, immediately. Starting with him."

He nodded and pointed. Buffy turned and realized that an area was being cleared for the helicopter to land. She pointed up. "The light is keeping the demons away."

"The lights will work down here as well."

Buffy kept an eye on Giles while Daniel took over from Buffy and filled the Special Ops Commander in on what had been going on. Buffy was counting the minutes until the helicopter landed. As soon as it did another one took its place in the air. A team started loading up the sickest patients at Celiane's direction. She had given the ambu bag over to Buffy with instructions on how often and how hard to squeeze it to help Giles breathe. Buffy desperately paid attention. She was afraid she'd forget and use her Slayer strength and blow out one of his lungs.

The helicopter was able to take eight wounded on stretchers. When Giles was loaded, Celiane went with him so she could keep an eye on them all and continue to help Giles breathe. Xander was the one who remembered to ask where they were being taken. The pilot yelled at him. "Redding Medical Center." Xander nodded and the helicopter took off. The next one landed and the rest of the wounded were loaded on. When it had taken off and the final helicopter had landed, all its lights were turned on and it made the clearing light as day.

Buffy wished she could have gone with Giles but the work here wasn't done. Those creatures had to be killed. At least now she'd have some people to help her who knew how to use weapons. Xander sidled next to her. "Where were these guys when we were battling the Mayor, or Adam, or Glory?"

Buffy shook her head. "I have no idea." As Buffy joined the Watchers by the fire she tried not to notice the bodies of the dead Watchers. She slowly counted heads of those still remaining. Not counting the wounded that had been airlifted out, there were thirty-two of them. Almost ninety percent of their numbers dead or hurt, and these guys were still functioning. Buffy had to give them credit for that. She shook her head to push her thoughts away, especially her fears for Giles, and she moved to stand next to Daniel to make a plan.

##

Giles came in and out of consciousness. He tried to talk but the tube in his mouth prevented him. Often when he opened his eyes Celiane was there, and sometimes it was people he didn't know. It was never who he wanted to see. It was never Buffy.

Giles couldn't ever remember hurting more. There wasn't a part of him that didn't ache. He knew he was still having fevers. He wondered if he was going to die. Somehow it seemed so unfair, now that he and Buffy seemed to be patching things up.

Sometimes he wondered if he'd dreamed the whole thing. Maybe that creature had killed him. Maybe he was still in Bath, having a nightmare. Giles heard someone moving around in his room. He opened his eyes. A woman was standing there. She looked familiar and Giles tried to place her. Then he remembered. It was Sarah, the woman who'd left with her husband.

She smiled at him. "Hey Rupert."

He nodded tiredly, still unable to speak.

"They're just letting me stay a minute. You're still pretty sick." She cleared her throat, and tried to blink the sting of tears away. "They just called in from the site and Daniel wanted you to know that Buffy is fine. They've killed the last three creatures and no more showed up, so she'll be on her way here soon. Okay?"

Giles nodded, gratitude shining out of his eyes.

Sarah swallowed again. She gently touched his hand. "Well, I better go. I just wanted to let you know. You keep fighting." After a last nod from Giles she left the room. She walked over to her husband and gave him a hug.

Doug hugged her back. "How is he?" His own arm had been reset and cast.

"He looks bad."

"Celiane says he still might make it. All the others who got wounded last night are still alive, and most of them are doing great."

"But all the ones who got hurt the night before have died. Every one of them. And Celiane says because he kept moving around that he got as sick as they had." Sarah laid her head against his chest. "I just feel like we're alive because of him. I don't want him to die."

"We are alive because of him. And I'm just going to assume that he'll be fine."

Sarah lifted her head and wiped her tears away, blowing out a shaky breath. "Okay. Me too."

Doug chuckled her under her chin and smiled softly. "Let's go check on everyone else."

She nodded and wrapping her arm around his waist they headed down the hall. "Oh, Daniel said that when they all get down here that he wants to have

a meeting with all the Watchers."

"What for?"

"I imagine to figure out where we go from here."

"Did they say whether they've found anybody else?" The search and rescue teams had been scouring the mountain since dawn.

"Not anyone alive."

"Well, the first thing we'll need to figure out is who's going to be in charge."

Sarah gave her husband a look. "I don't think that will be too hard."

Doug nodded. "Assuming he lives."

"Which, according to you, we are assuming."

"Right, which we are assuming."

"Right." They both turned and looked back at the door to his room. Somehow it seemed even more essential that he make it. After exchanging another look at each other they turned the corner.

##

Xander had barely come to a complete stop in front of the hospital when Buffy was out of the truck and racing for the door. A Special Ops guard had been waiting for her and escorted her upstairs. The reports she'd been getting hadn't been reassuring. Of the eight that had been in that first helicopter, seven had died. Only Giles was still alive and he was in critical condition.

As she stood outside his door Buffy took a deep breath. Then she pushed it open and stepped inside. The first thing she saw was Celiane resting in a chair by his bed. Then she saw Giles and her eyes filled with tears. He was surrounded by equipment. There was a machine breathing for him, and one that was monitoring his heart. Even Buffy could tell that all those irregular beats couldn't be a good thing. There were countless numbers of IV drips, metal poles filled with them, like some sort of bizarre steel tree.

She took a step closer, not sure what to do, whether she should go any closer. Her mom had never had this many things attached to her. Buffy felt her heart start to shatter at the thought of losing him.

Celiane heard her and opened her eyes. At the look on Buffy's face she got up and gave the young girl a hug. "I think he'll be fine."

Buffy looked at her, trying to see the lie there. She didn't see one. "Really?" Her voice caught.

Celiane nodded. "He's stopped getting worse and he's holding his own. That's a good sign."

"Can I...?" Buffy pointed at him.

"Of course." Celiane walked Buffy to the bed. "He won't break. You can hold his hand if you'd like."

Buffy nodded and sat down in the chair Celiane had just vacated. She very gently took a hold of his hand. She glanced up at Celiane. "Can I talk to him?"

Celiane nodded. "Yes. He wakes up every now and then. I'm not always certain he's completely aware but he does wake up." She pointed to the door. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

Buffy smiled tightly and then turned all her attention on Giles. Buffy opened her mouth, intending to give this long speech about everything Giles meant to her but all that came out was that same prayer. "Please don't die." Then her throat tightened up and she didn't think she could say another thing without bursting into tears.

Giles thought he heard Buffy. And he knew someone was holding his hand. He struggled for a moment but he managed to pry his lids open. She was sitting there with her head bowed, so her hair was obscuring her face, but Giles was certain it was Buffy. He squeezed her hand.

Buffy looked up and saw him looking at her. She let out a sob. "Giles?"

He nodded, just the smallest bit, not wanting to set the ventilator off.

"You know it's me?"

He squeezed her hand again. Giles looked at her and saw a long scratch on her arm.

Buffy followed his eyes. "This? No, it wasn't one of those things. I did it, racing through the woods."

Giles looked at her again, his eyebrows lifted.

"How did we kill them?" At his slight nod she answered. "We shut off all the lights and just waited for them to come back. The ops guys distracted them and I chopped their heads off. Just like you and I did it."

Giles squeezed her hand again, wanting to convey how proud he was of her.

Buffy smiled back at him. She reached out her other hand and moved it towards his face. Then she pulled it back. "Is it...can I...?" Buffy wanted to touch him so badly. When he squeezed her hand again Buffy gently laid her hand on his face.

Giles wanted so much to hold her. Now that he was with her, and now that the danger had passed, the ache of having been without her for a year felt sharp and raw. He wished he could talk to her; tell her how he felt, tell her that he would never leave her again. Instead he turned his head the smallest amount and pressed more firmly against her hand.

Buffy thought her heart might break with loving him. "Giles, you have to live."

Giles closed his eyes, feeling the exhaustion of just this simple interaction.

Celiane peeked in. "Buffy, he needs to rest now."

Buffy nodded and pulled her hand away from his face. She tried to pull her other hand away from his hand but he wouldn't let her. With his eyes still closed he laced his fingers through hers. Buffy looked down at their hands and then up at Celiane. "He doesn't want me to go."

Celiane looked at their hands and nodded. "All right. But no more talking. He needs to rest."

Buffy agreed and curling up in her chair she held Giles' hand and watched him sleep.

End of Part 7

Watchers Retreat 8

All of the Watchers were there except for the three who were still bed bound. Daniel had already collected their votes. The rest were meeting in a conference room provided by the hospital. Daniel handed out a copy of the pertinent Council regulations to everyone and gave them a minute to read the

highlighted section.

Wendell looked up. "All we have to do is vote for someone?"

Daniel nodded. "Believe it or not, when the Council was set up, provisions were made for a disaster such as this, or at least one where all the directors were killed. We just need to nominate someone to be our new Head and then vote. Majority wins. Then that person appoints whom they want to fill any vacant slots."

Wendell snorted. "Which is all of them."

Daniel smiled tightly. "Which is all of them. But I don't think we'll need all of them right now. But that will be Rupert's..." Daniel bit his lips. He flashed them a rueful smile. "Sorry. Slip of the tongue."

Maddy laughed at him. "You're just speaking for us all. So, seeing as you've let the cat out of the bag so to speak, I'll nominate Rupert Giles."

Wendell's hand went up. "I second."

Daniel looked around the room. "Are there any other nominations?" Silence filled the room. "Fine. All those in favor?" The eyes swept the room. "Those opposed?" Another silence. Daniel grinned.

Celiane raised her hand. Daniel gave her the floor. "I don't believe Rupert will, in good conscience, be able to refuse this position. But, he's still ill and I don't want to present him with any further stress until he's stronger." She glanced at them with a warning glare. "They are extubating him today and if he does all right with that, he'll be able to start having visitors. I must insist that no one talk to him about this. I will alert Daniel when I think he's ready. Do I have your oaths on this?"

Everyone nodded at her. No one wanted him to have a setback. Things had still been touch and go through the night. Although Celiane was half convinced that he had started getting better the instant Buffy had shown up. It was as if with her at his side, safe and sound, that he could truly relax and let a healing sleep claim him. Buffy had barely left him all night long, other than to tend to necessities. Reassured by their nods and their faces Celiane nodded.

Daniel took the floor again. "Our psychologists are contacting the families of the Watchers who have died. And I have sent messages out to the few Watchers who did not attend the retreat, asking them to call in. I'll keep you updated on that." He looked around the room. "Any other business?"

Maria raised her hand. "How do we know that Tom was working on his own? How do we know that something's not still after us?"

"The Ops team is working on that. So far, nothing they've found implicates anyone else. It appears that he was working on his own. Again, I'll update you on any further reports I get. Anything else?" When he was met by another silence he nodded. "There's a bar in the hotel. I'll be there at 9:00 tonight. If anyone wants to join me I thought we could toast those of our friends who are no longer with us." He could hear his own voice thicken with emotion and he heard a few snuffles. Nodding at them he spoke one last time. "Meeting adjourned."

##

It had taken three days but now Buffy knew he was getting better. He was starting to get crabby. Giles hated hospitals and this one was no exception. Buffy grinned. She'd take him crabby any day. Crabby meant he was fine. Crabby meant they could go home soon.

She had gone to get him something to eat after listening to him complain about the hospital food for an hour. Buffy had found a Chinese restaurant down the block and picked up enough for both of them. Xander had gone back to Sunnydale, promising to come back and pick them both up the minute Giles was discharged. Buffy had checked in with Dawn and Willow every day, and had ended up quitting her job when they'd refused her any time off. As Buffy neared Giles' room she pushed that particular worry away and entered the room.

She frowned. Maddy was here. And looking very chummy. This was the third time today she'd gone away for a short while and come back to find some woman in Giles' room. First it had been Maria. Then some other woman Buffy hadn't known, and now Maddy. Plenty of the guys had been by too, but they showed up, talked for two minutes and left. The women stayed. They hovered. They fawned. Buffy hated it. She hated the look in their eyes when they looked at Giles. Like they wanted him. Like they were figuring out the best way to get him.

Buffy was having none of it. This whole crisis had made her look at her Watcher in a whole new way, and she had come to her own conclusion. No matter how you sliced it, he was hers. Plain and simple. She had first dibs, and she was keeping him. Now all she had to do was let him know, and let him know before he started getting any ideas about any of these women that Buffy couldn't seem to get rid of.

She pasted a smile onto her face. "Hey Maddy." Maddy grinned back at her. Buffy decided her smile was pasted on too. Clearly she knew who the competition was.

Giles smiled happily when he saw her. "Ah, Buffy, you've brought lunch."

"I have. Chinese."

"Lovely." He turned to Maddy. "Would you like to join us?"

"I'd love to."

Buffy unclenched her jaw. "Great." Her romantic visions of she and Giles eating out of the same containers flew out the window. "I'll go get some plates."

Giles had been allowed up this morning to actually take a shower. He felt almost human. It was amazing what a difference feeling really clean made. He smiled at Maddy. It had been lovely to have so much company all day. He was a little surprised they were all still there. Giles would have assumed they'd have all gone back to the Council or to wherever they were doing their work, but as far as he could tell, none of them had left.

Buffy came back in carrying plates and forks. She waved them in the air. "Success." Maddy looked for a second chair. Buffy waved her off. "I'll just sit on the bed."

Giles immediately shifted to the side to make room for her. Buffy smiled at him and got on the bed, crossing her legs, sitting as close to him as she dared. She didn't want him to back up any more, afraid he'd fall off the bed.

Giles didn't back up at all. He liked Buffy being near him. He still couldn't get enough of her. Her smiles, her silly slang, the touch of her hand. Hoping she wouldn't notice he shifted his leg until it was just touching hers.

Buffy felt him shifting and put her hand on his leg. "Do you have enough room?"

Giles nodded. "Plenty, thank you." He was absurdly disappointed when she removed her hand.

Maddy watched the two of them. She hadn't quite figured out what was going on between the two of them. It didn't seem to be romantic in nature, at least from Rupert's side. But Buffy clearly didn't like sharing. Maddy wasn't sure if that was part of their Watcher/Slayer relationship, or if Buffy had stronger

feelings for the man.

There was no doubt that the two of them were close. Very close. Close enough that if Rupert were interested in Buffy, Maddy wouldn't even bother. But she hadn't really seen it. He was always delighted to have Buffy around, but he didn't give her any signals. Maddy sighed. Of course, he didn't give her any either.

They ate in a fairly companionable silence. Maddy and Buffy occasionally eyeing one another. Wendell came in at one point and visited for a few minutes, snitching an egg roll.

After he left, Buffy tapped Giles' leg. "Xander sends his regards."

Giles smiled. "You spoke with him?"

"Early this morning. I forgot to tell you. And Willow and Dawn send their love. They all want to come up to get you."

He smiled again. "It will be lovely to see them." Then he scowled. "They want to keep me here for three more days. I think I should be able to go home tomorrow."

Buffy grinned at him. "Maybe we can get them to compromise on the day after tomorrow. It will be easier for Xander to get up here on a Saturday anyway. That way he won't have to take another day off of work."

Giles frowned but didn't argue. Buffy grinned again. She didn't tell Giles about the rest of her conversation with Xander. She'd thanked him for bringing her back. And she meant it. Somehow this whole adventure had snapped her back in place. It felt as if she had never died at all. Xander had started crying. So she'd started crying and the two of them had boohooed like babies on the phone for twenty minutes. And at the end of it, Buffy had felt all cleaned out.

Buffy was ready to have the same conversation with Willow except she was a little wary about it. Magic was not the easiest topic with Willow anymore and Buffy hated to bring it up. But she knew Willow still felt badly about bringing her back. Maybe Giles could be with her when she talked to Willow. Maybe he'd know what to say.

Giles prodded her with his knee. "Buffy?"

She glanced at him. "Hmm?"

"You seem very far away."

She let go of her thoughts. "Do I? Sorry." She grinned at him. "I'm back now."

He smiled at her. "Good." Then he spoke cautiously. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah." She glanced quickly at Maddy.

Giles understood and let it go. He'd get it out of her later when they were alone.

##

Buffy watched Giles sleeping. They hadn't had a moment alone. Watcher after Watcher came in to see him. And despite his recovery it had worn him out. As soon as the last one left, he'd fallen asleep.

Buffy carefully sat on the edge of the bed, not wanting to disturb him. Her eyes wandered over his face, drinking him in. She loved every line, every crinkle. Reaching out a hand she brushed a lock of his hair off his forehead.

Celiane quietly opened the door not wanting to wake Rupert if he was already asleep. Her husband had flown in that morning so she was actually planning on spending the night at the hotel. She wanted to say good night before she left for the evening. Celiane saw Buffy and assumed he was awake. She was about to speak when she noticed what Buffy was doing, and something in her movements stopped Celiane from speaking. She silently watched by the door.

Buffy ran her fingers down his arm, avoiding his IV site. He was still on antibiotics, even though most everything else had been discontinued. She still couldn't get over how close he'd come to dying. Even with her big rescue scene. He suddenly seemed so mortal to her. And infinitely more precious because of it. Buffy could hardly believe that she had survived a year without him. She couldn't even imagine being that person who had thought that was all right.

Now she didn't feel as if she ever wanted to let him out of her sight. Buffy traced his fingers with her own, finally wrapping her fingers around his. Lifting her other hand she touched his jaw. He was stubbly. She found herself having to fight the temptation to feel the texture with her tongue, to nibble along the line of his jaw.

She couldn't wait to get him home, get him alone and away from all these Watchers. How could she possibly hope to get his attention with all of them around? How could she compete with all these attractive, brainy women? Buffy softly traced his lips with her index finger. They were so soft. Feeling

quite daring she leaned forward and placed the softest of kisses on his lips. Then she pulled back with a sigh.

Watching him for another moment she finally laid her head down on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, allowing herself to be lulled by the rhythm of his breath. Giles shifted in his sleep and when he encountered an obstacle in his bed his eyes flickered open. When he saw it was Buffy he smiled and wrapped an arm around her. Then he drifted back off to sleep.

Celiane slowly backed out of the room. She thought about the job that was waiting for Rupert back in England. For the first time she began to wonder whether Rupert would take the job. She wasn't sure that anything would or should take him away from a young woman, that even in his sleep, he held on to so tightly, especially as that same young woman so clearly loved him.

##

Giles was pacing. He couldn't pace far because he was still hooked up to his IV, getting a last dose of antibiotics. He'd have to continue to receive them as an outpatient in Sunnydale for another week. Giles thought if he had to spend another two hours in this place that he'd go insane. He was grateful that they'd saved his life, but he was very ready to leave.

He looked at his watch. His transportation hadn't arrived yet, although based on the last phone call from Xander he should be here shortly. Then Daniel had asked to speak to him before he left. He was due here in thirty minutes.

It was the first time he'd been alone all day, practically the first time he'd been alone since he'd been awake and aware. Not that he'd minded. It had helped pass the time and it had been wonderful to have Buffy so close at hand. Two nights in a row he'd awakened to find her curled on his bed. He'd barely wanted to move; afraid she'd wake up and move away. Giles found her presence comforting. He couldn't imagine that he had lived without her for a year, that he hadn't tried harder, insisted on seeing her, made her accept him back. He could hardly believe that the last year had even happened.

Giles heard talking in the hallway. He grabbed his IV pole to drag it to the door when it pushed open. Before he could smile or say hello, Dawn was in his arms. "Giles." She hugged him so tightly he grunted.

When she finally pulled away he smiled at her and kissed her on the forehead. "It's wonderful to see you." He looked up and saw Willow. She looked so thin, and weary. Giles felt a moment of guilt that he hadn't been around to help her either. He spoke her name. "Willow."

And then she was in his arms. "I'm so glad you're alive."

Giles laughed his soft laugh. "As am I."

Willow lifted her head. "I missed you so much."

He frowned at her. "Is that why you kept refusing to talk to me? Because you missed me so much?" His tone was light, belying his frown.

She lightly punched him on the arm. "No, I was refusing to talk to you so I didn't get slayed."

Buffy let out an annoyed sound. "Hey, Slayer in the room. And I couldn't help it. I was temporarily deranged."

Giles smiled sadly at her. "For which I was partially responsible."

Buffy shook her head. "We are so past the blaming part it isn't even funny." She'd only been away from him for twenty minutes and all she wanted to do was touch him.

Giles glanced at Xander. Xander put his hands up. "I already did the hugging thing last time I was here."

Giles chuckled softly again. "Thank you for coming up again. I appreciate the chauffeur service."

Xander waved him off. "I'm starving. Where's the food?"

Buffy grinned. "Come on, we'll go pick up snacks for everyone."

He turned to follow her out. "Snacks? I didn't say anything about snacks. I want some manly food."

"They don't do manly food here. This is a hospital. Trust me, I've been listening to Giles complain about it for days."

As the door shut behind them, Giles looked down at Dawn and Willow. They were both grinning at him. He rolled his eyes and moved to sit on the bed. They flanked him and sat on either side of him.

##

By the time Daniel arrived ten minutes later, Buffy and Xander right behind him, Giles was leaning against the raised head of the bed, a girl tucked under

each arm as they chatted with him. Daniel took one look at him and shook his head. "What is it with you and beautiful women? Every time I come into your room you're surrounded by them."

Giles just sent him a look and refused to comment. Instead he introduced Willow and Dawn to Daniel. Daniel was happy to meet them both, especially Willow. "You're the one who helped Rupert research so much, aren't you?"

She nodded, delighted that Giles had been talking about her. "Do you do research too?"

He put a hand on his chest. "I'm a Watcher."

Willow grinned. "Right. Of course." She elbowed Giles lightly in the ribs. "Because that's what Watchers do."

Giles glared at Willow but she just grinned at him. She felt better just having him around again. She felt she could relax just a bit, let down her guard a little, knowing that if she made a wrong move that Giles would be there, that he'd help her. She didn't feel quite so alone. Giles glanced up at Daniel. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

Daniel glanced at his watch. "I'm expecting a couple of other people. Do you mind waiting?"

Giles shook his head. He had his family with him now. He didn't mind waiting a little bit longer.

Celiane was the first to arrive and she disconnected Giles' IV. Then Maddy entered the room. When Maddy saw Giles in bed with Willow and Dawn she put her hands on her hips. "I can't turn my back on you for a minute, can I?" Giles grinned but Buffy didn't. She didn't like the way that Maddy was talking as if Giles was already hers. Willow watched the emotions cross Buffy's face. She glanced up to see if Xander was catching them. He was. Xander raised his eyebrows, his eyes wide.

Next to arrive were Wendell, Steven, Sarah and Doug. Introductions were made again. In a few short minutes the room was bursting with Watchers. Giles furrowed his brow as he looked at them all. Buffy moved to sit on the bed, her legs drawn up to her chest. She wondered if they were going to present Giles with some sort of thank you gift.

Daniel started counting heads. Counting the ones standing in the hallway they were all there, all forty-six of them. The Council. Daniel handed Giles the regulation. Giles read it and then looked up at Daniel. "Are we here to vote?"

Daniel shook his head. "We already voted."

Giles took off his glasses. "I don't understand."

"We voted for you. You're the new Head of the Council of Watchers."

End of Part 8

Watchers Retreat 9

Giles put his glasses back on. "Excuse me?"

Daniel grinned. "It was a unanimous vote. You're in charge."

Willow let out a squeal. "Giles, that is so cool. Think of all the changes you can make, all that stuff we used to talk about. No more testing, no more withholding information, better training for Watchers. You could make it all so much better."

A cold feeling started coiling in Buffy's gut.

Wendell spoke first. "I know we're springing this on you, but who else could do it? You're the only Watcher who's had a Slayer, who knows how to fight, who's dealt with demons. You kept us all alive; you kept us sane. You took charge on that mountain, and, well, we don't want you to stop."

Maddy picked up the argument. "You know it's true. There's no one else we'd trust. There's no one else who can do it. The Council has been ripped apart and it won't ever be right again unless there's someone we trust at the head of it."

Giles was staring at them. "I...I don't know what to say."

Daniel shook his head. "You don't need to say anything. Well, other than yes."

Xander was the one who spoke Buffy's fear out loud. His voice was tight. "Isn't the Council in England?"

Daniel nodded and looked at Giles. "Yes. We know you'll need some time to wrap things up in Sunnydale, but then you can come back home to England."

Buffy tried to keep the fear off her face. They'd never had their conversation.

Buffy didn't even know if Giles had decided to stay in Sunnydale. She had thought they'd have plenty of time to talk. She glanced up at Giles. He was staring at Daniel, completely flummoxed.

Wendell spoke up again, taking Buffy in with a hand gesture. "Buffy, you can come too. We know Rupert's your Watcher. We don't mean to separate you." This had been Celiane's idea, and Wendell had thoroughly supported her. He grinned at her. "There are vampires in England too."

"I can't leave Sunnydale. The Hellmouth's there. My family is there." She was appalled that her voice was so shaky. Her whole life was there. Her mother's grave was there.

Giles looked at Buffy when he heard her speak. He took in the unhappy look on her face. "She's quite right. Buffy can't leave Sunnydale." Buffy wouldn't look up at him. He continued. "And I, of course, can't leave Buffy." She looked up then, her eyes bright. Giles smiled softly at her. "I am her Watcher."

An older man pushed forwards. "Rupert, we know you're Buffy's Watcher, but she's done fine without you for a year. If she wants a Watcher, another one can be assigned to her. There is a higher need here that must be met."

Giles sat up a little higher. He squeezed Willow and Dawn's arms and they got the message and got out of the bed. Giles moved to sit next to Buffy. "And exactly what is that higher need, James?" Giles knew them all by now. Every man and woman in the room had been by to visit him.

James flushed a little, finding himself the recipient of such attention from Giles. "Well, the Council. The Council must be strong. It must not be allowed to fall apart. It is imperative that it survive."

Giles' voice was soft. "And the Slayer? Is it imperative that she survive?"

James' eyes opened wide. "Of course. There must always be a Slayer."

Giles' voice grew even softer. "A Slayer?"

James finally began to understand that he had taken a wrong turn somewhere. "No, no, I didn't mean it like that." He looked around at everyone, wanting them to believe him.

Giles stood. "You did mean it that way. And I'm glad you said it." Giles heard Buffy's soft gasp and he placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. "It needed to be spoken out loud because it is everything that is wrong with the Council."

Giles glanced at James, took in his tortured expression. "Don't worry, James. I don't blame you. You are only repeating what you have been taught. I was with Buffy when Quentin Travers last came to town. He looked her in the face and told her the same thing. Slayers come and go, the Watchers remain. He told her that the Slayer is merely an instrument, easily replaceable, a pawn in this fight against evil." Giles shook his head, feeling a fresh spurt of anger as he remembered Travers' words.

Giles took them all in with his gaze. "The Council was set up to support the Slayer. All of its resources, all of its manpower should be directed toward the end of keeping her alive and assisting her in her fight. Somewhere along the way it got off track, and it became about perpetuating Watchers, and hoarding knowledge. It became a power struggle, a group of directors who for whatever reason, became threatened by the power of a young woman, and started doing everything it could to seize that power back by making her feel powerless."

He put a hand out to touch the IV pole, feeling the cold metal under his fingers. "I watched it play out in front of my eyes. I was never so humiliated in my life to know that I had been a willing part of something that thought that way. To know that, until I had a Slayer of my own, I had thought that way. The only reason I allowed myself to be reinstated that day was so that I could continue to help Buffy." He smiled down at her. "Buffy taught the Council a lesson that day about power. They weren't happy to learn it, but they did. She taught them that she had the power, not them."

Giles looked around at all the faces. "And she's right. She does have the power. The Slayer should be the heart of the Council. Each Slayer, each young woman that devotes her life to stopping evil should be celebrated, revered, valued. And the loss of a Slayer should be a time of mourning, not merely the replacing of one name for another, the shifting of Watchers as a new assignment gets made."

He paused, thinking. "You say you want me to lead you. But you expect me to do it at Buffy's expense. Either by leaving her, or by uprooting her. I cannot do it. I cannot belong to a Council that would think that behavior not only reasonable but expected."

Daniel interrupted. "Rupert..."

Giles put up his hand. "Let me finish. I will accept this position but with some conditions." Buffy looked up at him, worry evident in her eyes. He smiled down at her.

Wendell spoke first. "Whatever they are, they'll be all right with us."

Giles raised his eyebrows. "You might want to hear them first." He glanced around. "I am Buffy's Watcher and will remain so. And she must remain in Sunnydale. Therefore, Council headquarters must be relocated. Sunnydale is the front line of the battle between good and evil. No other Hellmouth in the world is as active. Its knights should reside there."

He continued. "In addition, the Special Ops teams should have the needs of the Slayer as their first priority. I was told what they accomplished when they landed on that mountaintop. It is inexcusable that the Council had resources like that, and they were never offered." Giles' hand tightened on Buffy's shoulder. "The prices we've paid have been too high and they will not be paid again, not if I'm put in charge."

His eyes swept the room again. "Those are my conditions. The Council on the front line. All resources directed towards and available to the Slayer. It will be a different life for you all. Certainly, a more dangerous one." He flashed them a wry smile. "I expect that living in Sunnydale will perhaps be extra incentive to lend all of your talents to the fight against evil." Giles glanced at Daniel. "I imagine that you want to talk this over. I will certainly understand if you wish to vote for someone else." He gestured toward the door. "It might be easier if I just left for a while."

Buffy stood as well. She needed to get out of that room. A part of her was thrilled that Giles was going to stay and be her Watcher. The other part of her was nervous that he'd have no time for her. Buffy wanted to get him alone, to talk to him, to have him hold her and reassure her.

Wendell shook his head. "I don't need you to leave. My vote is unchanged."

Maddy nodded. "As is mine."

The room was filled with voices as they all spoke of their still unconditional support of Giles. Maria raised her hand. Giles nodded at her, encouraging her to speak. "Will the Council move us?"

Giles nodded. "Yes, the Council will pick up all relocation expenses." He glanced at Daniel. "It can afford that, right?" Daniel seemed to be the person to ask. He'd been a fountain of information during Giles' stay at the hospital.

Daniel grinned back. He had already called the finance people, concerned about financial assistance for the families of the Watchers who had died. "Trust me. It can easily afford that."

Giles gave Daniel a brief grin. "Daniel, I think I shall appoint you as my

number two. Will you accept?"

Daniel beamed. "I will."

Giles looked at Willow. "Willow, how would you like to be in charge of the Council's Research Division?"

Willow's jaw dropped. "For real?"

Giles gave her a serious nod. "There's no one I'd trust more with it."

Willow couldn't believe it, that he would trust her so much. Her eyes bright, she felt this sense of purpose shoot through her. She just nodded at him, speechless.

Xander spoke up from the back of the room. "How 'bout me, Giles? What do you want me to do?"

Giles considered him. "I'm sure Daniel could use your assistance in securing a new Headquarters."

Dawn tugged on his arm. "How about me?"

"Let's have you finish high school before I put you to work. All right?" At her frown he smiled at her. "Perhaps you can help me find a home."

Dawn shook her head. "You'll stay with us." Buffy could have hugged her sister.

Giles smiled again. "Thank you, but I can only sleep on your sofa for so long. I'll need to find a new home."

Maddy waved her hand. "I can help you look. After all, I'll be looking too."

Maria nodded. "Most of us will be looking. We can help you find just what you're looking for."

Buffy felt something start to shrivel inside. She saw her future unfolding. Just when she'd gotten him back, she was still going to lose him. She'd never have him alone, just to herself again. They'd always be surrounded. He'd always have these women latching onto him. Women who were smart, who could talk about stuff with him. Buffy suddenly felt so young and stupid. She glanced around the room and felt that no one even knew she was there, not even Giles. Feeling more alone than she thought a person could feel in a room full of people, she quietly eased out of the room.

Giles watched her go. He could tell she was upset, he just wasn't sure why. Telling Daniel he'd be back in a few minutes, and suggesting that they do a revote just to be sure, he headed for the door. When he got to the hallway he found that Celiane had followed him out. Giles pointed down the hall. "I'm just going after Buffy. She seemed upset about something." He took a step in that direction.

Celiane stopped him by touching his arm. "She's afraid she's going to lose you."

"Why should she think that? I just turned the Council on its ear so I could stay with her."

"She's in love with you."

"Excuse me?" He barked out a short laugh at himself. "I seem to be saying that a lot today."

Celiane repeated herself. "She's in love with you."

"Buffy?"

Celiane nodded. "She thinks she will lose you to one of these women. She thinks she will lose you to the company of other Watchers. She may have power as a Slayer, but she is still a young woman, insecure, and unsure of her place in your heart."

"Perhaps I misunderstood. Are you saying that Buffy loves me? Because I, of course, love her too."

"No, I am saying she is in love with you."

"I don't...what...why?"

Celiane smiled. "A powerful Slayer, a powerful Watcher, and yet, both so unsure of themselves." She smiled at him. "Are you truly asking me why she might be in love with you?"

"I suppose I am."

"Rupert. You are handsome, brave, committed, resourceful, educated, passionate. What woman wouldn't love you?"

"I've made so many mistakes."

"And that just makes you human. And it makes you the perfect Watcher for a Slayer who is also very human." Celiane looked up at him. "Are you in love with her?"

Giles hesitated. "I've never...I've never really thought about it. There's never been a right moment. She was too young, and then she was in relationships, and then...and then she died." Celiane put her hand on his arm again in response to the pain in his voice. Giles continued. "Then she came back but she was so..." Giles shook his head, "...things were so different. And now, I haven't seen her in a year, and fully expected to never see her again."

Celiane cocked her head to the side. "I watched you with her one night. You were asleep. She was sitting on the bed and then she lay down and put her head on your chest. Even in your sleep you wrapped your arm around her and held her close. You belong together."

Giles smiled at Celiane. "Or perhaps you are a French woman who sees romance hiding behind every action."

Celiane laughed softly. "My husband says that about me all the time. Perhaps you're right. But go and find her and when you have, listen to your heart. She is special, and not just because she is the Slayer. If your heart truly does not love her that way, be very gentle with her. I think her heart is fragile right now."

Giles just nodded briefly. "Celiane?"
"Yes?"

"Will you move to Sunnydale as well? We could use a physician of your talents. And I could use a friend, as well."

She smiled at him. "Of course. My husband and I spoke about it last night."

Giles raised his eyebrows. "You knew that this is how things would end up?"

"I suspected. I knew you would not leave her. I knew we would settle for no one else. That only left one of two solutions, and I decided you would choose the solution that was easiest for Buffy." She grinned at Giles. "I was sure you would choose as a man in love would choose."

Giles rolled his eyes. Then he ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Maybe she could use some time alone."

Celiane laughed at him and gave him a push. "Go to her."

Giles hesitated and ran his hand through his hair again. Then he headed down the hallway. He didn't even notice the four men who quietly followed him down the hall.

End Part 9

Watchers Retreat 10

Xander listened to all the Watchers talk. Daniel had asked for another vote and it had again been unanimous. Xander almost had to laugh at them. They were like excited kids, with this big shiny adventure in front of them. He wondered how they'd feel after they'd seen their first vampire.

But then Xander realized that they'd probably do just fine. They had faced worse on that mountain and survived. And they had Giles leading them. And despite how easy it had been to tease Giles over the years, Xander knew that the only reason they'd survived high school with their sanity intact was because of him.

He was like the center. He was like the tree or the front step that got made the safe zone in a game of hide and go seek. If you made it home, you were safe. Giles was like that. Even with all his quirky bits, and stuffy British side, and his super brain, and his glares, Giles was still the safe zone. And these Watchers knew it. They'd figured it out in two days. It had taken Xander five years of being with Giles, and one year of being without him to figure it out. Everything had gone bad the minute he'd left. And now that he was back, Xander was ready for things to start getting better.

He glanced at Willow. She was talking to Daniel about ideas for the Research Division. She almost looked the way she used to, before the magic, before the badness. Her face was lit up, and she couldn't stop smiling. It made Xander grin as he watched her, even while it made his chest feel tight. Giles had made her better already. And Giles had made Buffy glad to be alive. Xander blinked against the sting of tears that thought caused.

Xander moved to the window. He looked down at the garden courtyard below. His brow furrowed. "Hey. Isn't that Buffy?" He glanced around the room. He hadn't even seen her leave but she clearly wasn't there anymore. He looked down again. She moved and he saw her face. She looked so...lonely. Xander was about to move away from the window to go down and join her when he saw Giles enter the garden. Xander smiled and stayed put.

He glanced up when he heard someone join him. It was Celiane. She smiled. "Ah, he has found her."

"Is she okay?"

"Let us watch and we shall see together."

Xander looked up as Maria and Wendell joined them. Wendell glanced outside. "What are we looking at?"

Xander pointed. "Buffy and Giles."

Maddy frowned and moved to the window. "Where are they?"

Celiane gestured. "In the Garden of Eden."

More Watchers came over to see what was going on. Soon Xander found himself surrounded. He muttered to himself. "Good thing this is a big window."

Celiane laughed. "I am afraid that you must make room in your life for 46 Watchers who will be clutching very tightly to your Giles."

Xander looked at them all, saw their faces as they pressed against the window, or strained to catch a peek of the man they all felt was so essential to their survival. He looked down at Giles as he approached Buffy. "Yeah, well I guess I can live with it, as long as you don't get between those two."

Celiane nodded. "Very wise advice, Xander. Very wise advice."

##

Giles slowly walked across the garden until he was standing next to Buffy. They both watched the small fountain. "I thought you might be here."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the four men spread out and stand in each corner of the courtyard. "Who are those guys?"

Giles followed her eyes and his brows rose when he saw them. "I have no idea." He approached one of them and Buffy followed. "Excuse me, but who are you?"

"Bodyguards, sir."

Giles smiled. "Ah, I see Daniel's already at work. You're here to keep an eye on Buffy?"

He shook his head. "You, sir."

Giles' eyes widened and he touched his chest with the flat of his hand. "Me? What on earth for?"

"You're Council Head, sir."

"Did Daniel set this up?"

The man shook his head. "The Head has always had four bodyguards."

Buffy scowled. "Didn't do him much good, did it? He's dead." As she heard her words she winced at her tactlessness.

The bodyguard looked at Buffy. "His guards died on that mountain, too."

Buffy winced again. "Sorry."

He continued looking at her. "That's our job."

Giles let out an exasperated noise. "Well, please go do your job somewhere else. I'm with Buffy right now and in perfectly good hands so you can go away."

He shook his head. "Sorry, sir."

"I don't get to order you away?"

The man shook his head again. "No, sir."

Giles looked at him in disbelief. "I'm the Head, but you don't have to do what I say?"

"That's right, sir."

Buffy bit her lips to keep from smiling at the disgruntled look on Giles' face. Giles glared at her. "I suppose you find this very amusing?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

Giles rolled his eyes. "Oh, please." Then he took Buffy's elbow and directed her back to the fountain, as far away from the four men as possible. Giles muttered. "Fine, they want to be my bodyguards, they can be my bodyguards. I might just have to start patrolling with you every night to give them

something to do."

Buffy smiled tightly at him, her amusement fading. Patrolling made her think of Spike. She sighed and looked away.

Giles watched the sad look come over her face again. "Buffy, what's wrong?"

She shook her head.

He tried again. "Was I wrong to make this decision?"

She shook her head again. It had been the right decision. They needed him. "No, they need you."

Giles had no idea what to say. He turned his head to look at her. Her face was so dear to him. Giles reached out a hand and with the back of his fingers he brushed her hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "Buffy, talk to me."

She glanced up at him, her eyes shadowed. "What do you want me to say?"

Giles sighed. He had no idea. "Things will work out, I promise."

Her voice was soft. "I'll never see you."

"You will. I'll see you every day. We'll continue to train. We can put a state of the art training room at the Council. I can give you pointers as you pummel my Watchers."

She smiled a bit at that. "My life long dream. Beating up Watchers."

"Yes, well, you've certainly beaten up this one long enough." Giles watched as tears sprang to Buffy's eyes at his comment. "Buffy, I didn't mean that in any way to make you sad."

Buffy shook her head. "I'm not sad." It was an absurd comment to make.

Giles gently touched her eyelashes and took away a tear. "Somehow I don't believe you." He looked down at her and thought of Celiane's words. Giles tried to put a label on his feelings for Buffy but found himself incapable of even beginning to define their relationship. He smiled softly. "From the moment I met you, you turned my life upside down."

She glanced quickly up at him. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"I believe it is a good thing."

Buffy let out a sigh. "So many bad things have happened to you because of me."

"No, Buffy, you mustn't say that."

"I could have stopped this."

"What do you mean?"

"I could have known about this retreat, about the Watchers dying, a week ago. They're all dead because of me."

Giles furrowed his brow. "I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Spike knew."

Giles' eyes grew dark. "Spike knew what was going to happen?"

Buffy nodded, her eyes miserable. Her voice was so soft he almost didn't hear her. "I'm so sorry."

"Spike knew that we were being sent here to die by that demon? That I was being sent here to die?" Buffy nodded again. Giles continued. "Almost 300 Watchers are dead, and he knew?" His voice was low and dangerous.

Buffy nodded again. She took a step away, the look on Giles' face almost frightening her.

Giles turned and kicked at one of the patio chairs and sent it flying. "Bloody hell." When he saw one of the men in the corner move in his direction he put his hand up to stop him. He turned back to Buffy, his voice now lethal. "I'm going to kill him."

"I know."

Something in Buffy's voice, or the stance of her body, alerted him. Anger surged through him. "He won't be there, will he?"

When she heard the anger in his voice her heart started to hurt. She shook her head. "No."

"Did you tell him to leave?"

"Yes, but..."

Giles interrupted, speaking to her in a voice she hadn't heard since he'd found out she'd been hiding Angel. "If Spike didn't tell you, how did you find out?"

"Willy."

Giles nodded. "So, you found out that we were being killed, that I was in danger, and yet you took the time to go to Spike, and warn him to leave town?"

"It wasn't..."

"Yes or no? Knowing the harm he'd done me, you still went to him?"

"I didn't go to him to warn him. I went to get information, I went to yell at him."

"And yet, you still warned him." He looked away from her. "This is the second time you've stolen my revenge from me, Buffy." He took a few more steps away from her. "Why? The same reason? Because Spike was your lover? Because you still have feelings for him?"

Buffy lifted her eyes to look at him, tears brimming over. "That's not why I kept you from killing Angel. I was afraid he'd kill you. I needed you, I couldn't just let you die."

"But you can't use the same excuse for Spike. You had already made it perfectly clear you didn't want anything to do with me. In fact, you used Spike to pass that message along to me. And Spike couldn't hurt me if I went after him." When she didn't answer he tightened his lips and turned his back on her.

Buffy moved behind him and put out a shaky hand to touch his back. Giles flinched away from her touch. "Please tell me why this shouldn't feel like a betrayal."

"Giles, I'm sorry. I didn't do it for him."

"Then explain it to me, Buffy. Explain to me why you chose to protect someone, once again, who has done me and mine some egregious harm."

The words burst out. "Because it was my fault. Because he tried to tell me and I didn't listen. I blew him off."

Giles spun to face her. "What?"

Buffy found herself taking a couple of steps backwards, away from him, away from the look on his face.

Giles' hand shot out and he grabbed her arm. "What do you mean he tried to tell you?"

"He came to me and asked me if I still hated you. If I cared if I ever saw you again."

Giles forced a breath out and let go of her arm. "What did you tell him?"
"I told him that I did still hate you, that I didn't care if I ever saw you again. That I didn't care if the Council vanished off the face of the earth. So, he didn't tell me." She lifted tormented eyes to his. "It's my fault. If I hadn't been so angry, and proud, and determined to keep acting like a stupid little girl he would have told me."

Giles shook his head. "He should have told you anyway. This doesn't make it any less his fault."

Buffy brushed some tears away. "It just makes it mine, too." She let out a bitter laugh. "How could I stake Spike when I was equally to blame? You should keep the Council in England, you should take them all and keep them away from me before I get them all killed."

Giles let out a long breath. "Those particular Watchers are alive because of you."

"No they're not. They're alive because of you. And all those dead Watchers, my fault." Her voice had grown painfully soft.

Giles saw the pain on her face, but he was in such pain himself he wasn't sure he had it in him to console her. He felt so conflicted. "Do you hate me, Buffy? Do you wish I would leave? Would you rather I went back to England?"

She turned frantic eyes to him. "No. No. I never hated you. I was just hurt, and I missed you so much. And I didn't know how to fix it so I just pretended that I didn't care. I felt so dead most of the time, just going through the motions of pretending to be alive, wishing I was still dead. It wasn't until I saw you on that mountain that I..."

"That you what?"

"...That I felt glad to be alive." She looked up at him. "For the first time since

they brought me back I was glad to be alive, because you were alive." She reached out a hand to touch his face and he took a step back, leaving her hand in mid-air. Buffy slowly dropped it to her side. She felt a crippling sense of loss. Her face crumpled and she started to cry, falling to her knees, her hands over her face.

A part of Giles wanted to take her in his arms and tell her it was all right, tell her that all was forgiven, but he couldn't yet. He'd be lying, and something inside of him knew that their relationship would never be right again if he was so untrue to himself. He couldn't just ignore the pain he was feeling, the sense of betrayal, the anger at how easily this might all have been avoided. Suddenly he had to get away. "I need some time to think. I'll be back later, and we'll talk then." With one last look at her he turned and left the garden, his four guards right behind him.

End Part 10

Watchers Retreat 11

Xander watched in disbelief as Giles left Buffy on her knees, crying. He placed his palm on the window. "Is it just me, or did that seem to go really, really badly?"

Celiane was totally bewildered. "It's not just you."

Wendell watched Giles leave. "What did she say to make him leave?" He couldn't imagine Giles ever leaving her.

Willow frowned. "What did he say to make her cry?" She couldn't imagine Giles ever saying anything to Buffy to make her cry like that. Buffy hadn't even cried like that when Giles had left.

Maddy pulled away from the window. "Maybe I should go find Rupert."

Celiane shook her head. "No, I think if he wants company he'll come and find it." Until she had a better idea of what was going on, Celiane didn't want Maddy anywhere near Rupert, especially now when he was so clearly upset about something. "Besides, he has his guards with him. He'll be fine."

Willow looked down again. "Well, I'm going to go talk to Buffy."

Xander nodded. "Me too."

Dawn followed them. "Me too."

The three of them headed down to the courtyard.

##

Giles cursed the fact that it was still light out. He wanted to go and kill some vampires. He wanted to pretend they were Spike. Giles knew he could have a Special Ops team find Spike and kill him. He could give the order to have Spike found and brought to him to kill. He chose not to do it, at least not right now. He could give that order anytime he wanted to, and at some point, he would. But, right now, he had Buffy on his mind.

He just started walking. He knew his guards were following him but Giles ignored them. For the first mile Giles actually tried not to think. He just walked fast, trying to blow off some steam. Then he began to sort through his feelings. He didn't really blame Buffy for what happened. Giles knew that Spike had played her. And he supposed he could understand why she warned Spike off. But it still felt like a betrayal. It still felt as if, once again, his feelings, as her Watcher, as her friend, came second to the needs of a vampire.

He had already forgiven her for so much. Not that he hadn't done some stupid things. Foremost among them, his leaving her a year ago. But now he was back, and it felt as if it was all happening again. What would Buffy do if Spike were still in Sunnydale? Would she try and stop Giles from killing him? Would she forever put him second, after her friends, after her boyfriends, after a demon?

Giles stopped walking. One of his guards almost ran into him but veered off at the last second. He was Buffy's Watcher. She wasn't required to put him first; he had never asked her to put him first. As her Watcher, he was supposed to put her first. He started walking again, thinking furiously. This was the crux of the matter. Giles could be that Watcher again. He supposed he could start putting up walls again, try to keep things professional, supporting her, but trying to keep a bit of distance so he wouldn't be any more vulnerable than necessary.

But that wasn't what he wanted. And he understood that was why he had walked away and left her in the courtyard garden. Because if he'd stayed right then, the man who stayed would have been her Watcher, and only her Watcher.

A few short days ago he had, in the space of a few moments, seen his death, and then, instead, had seen her. She had dropped everything to come and

save him, having no idea where he was, having no idea what she'd find. And, by some miracle, she had found him, and saved him, and helped keep them safe until help had arrived. She had done that for him. Then, for the past few days she'd barely left his side. She'd harassed him, and teased him, and doted on him, and exasperated him, and he'd loved every minute of it.

Then Celiane had told him that she loved him. No, that she was in love with him. He hadn't believed her, couldn't imagine it was true, and yet, Giles could see now, that a part of him wanted it so desperately to be true. He wanted her to be in love with him. He wanted to be the man she chose, the man she cared for. So, he'd gone out to that garden, not even aware, until right now, that in the deepest part of his heart, he had been full of longing for a declaration of love from her. And instead he'd been told something painful and it had felt as if he'd been sucker punched.

As the revelation of his feelings for her swept through him, a picture of Buffy on her knees, crying, filled his mind's eye. He needed to get back to her. And suddenly, all Giles wanted to know was if she did love him. If she was in love with him. He had to know. Compared to that, nothing else mattered. Giles turned around and started walking back to the hospital.

##

Buffy couldn't stop crying. Willow was hugging her, and Xander was telling stupid jokes, trying to make her laugh, and Dawn was holding her hand, but she couldn't stop. The only thing she'd managed to convey through shakes of her head and a few halting words was that Giles had done nothing. She had done it. This was her fault. She'd lost him. She'd done something unforgivable and he hated her now.

Willow tried to get more information. "Buffy, try and calm down. What did you do?" She'd never seen her friend more upset.

All Buffy could get out was Spike's name.

Xander grimaced. "He found out about Spike and you?" Xander could imagine that freaking Giles out.

Dawn shook her head. "No, he already knew."

Willow looked at Dawn, surprised. "He already knew? How did he know?"

Dawn looked embarrassed. "I told him."

Xander's eyes widened. "You told Giles about Buffy and Spike?" He looked

alarmed. "What else did you tell him?"

Dawn got a defiant look on her face. "I told him everything." She rushed into her defense. "He was the only one who would just let me talk." Her voice got sulky. "Everything just got so bad after he left."

Buffy started to cry harder. Willow glared at Dawn. "You're not helping."

Xander ran a hand down his face. "But he's back now. I mean, right? I mean, he's still staying, isn't he?" Xander didn't even want to think about Giles leaving again. Not now.

Giles answered him. "Yes, he's still staying."

Xander spun around. Then he took in the four men. "What's with the goons?"

Giles rolled his eyes. "Don't ask." He took in Xander, Willow, and Dawn with his gaze. "Could you leave us alone? Would you mind?"

Willow glanced at Buffy, worried. But then she glanced up at Giles and saw the loving look on his face and she nodded. She let go of Buffy and stood, pulling Dawn up with her. Willow glanced up at the window where she thought she could still see all the Watchers crowded against it. She exchanged a look with Xander and Dawn, and then they ran for the door, wanting to get upstairs before anything happened.

Giles sat down next to Buffy and he pulled her into his arms. Buffy just buried her head against his chest and sobbed. Giles gently stroked her hair, speaking softly to her, not saying anything in particular, just wanting to calm her.

##

Willow, Xander, and Dawn skidded into the room. Xander pushed his way toward the window. "Did we miss anything?"

Celiane shook her head. "No, he's just holding her."

Xander let Dawn and Willow squeeze in front of him. "Good."

##

Finally Buffy started trying to talk. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Buffy, it's all right."

"It's not."

Giles kissed the top of her head. "It is. I've known you for a long time. I know how your mind works. You take the blame for everything. But you cannot take the blame for this."

Buffy's words were punctuated with hiccupy sobs. "I could have stopped it."

"Buffy, you know better than most the danger of playing what if. It can drive you insane. The truth of the matter is that Spike knew and he chose not to tell you. He chose to play games. He chose to use your weakness against you. You never would have done anything intentional to hurt me or to hurt all those Watchers. I know that."

"But..."

Giles squeezed her more tightly. "No, don't. If you persist then I'll have to tell you how it's also my fault."

Buffy pulled away for a moment to look at his face. "How is it your fault?"

"I left you. I hurt you badly and made you angry. It was because of what I'd done that you told Spike the things you did."

"That doesn't make it your fault."

"No, it doesn't. And it doesn't make it your fault either. It was just..." Giles wasn't sure how to finish that sentence without minimizing the depth of the loss of all those men and women.

"It was just what?"

Giles thought for a minute. "It was Angelus, and the Mayor. It was Glory, and Adam. It was evil. It was an evil that spawned suffering and death. It's what we fight against, what we've fought against for years. And this time, just like every time, we fought back. And while the toll was horrific, the evil didn't win. The Council remains. And, while we are a small group now, I hope that we will be even more true to its purpose, and because of it the fight against evil will continue, perhaps more strongly than before."

Buffy's hands, which had been fisted against Giles' chest, began to unclench and she snuck her arms around him. She laid her head back down. "So you don't hate me?"

He held her even more tightly. "No, Buffy, I don't hate you. I even understand

why you didn't kill Spike. I don't like it, but I understand."

"I punched him really, really hard."

Giles let out a short laugh. "Did you?"

She nodded. "And I told him that if you were dead, no matter where he was, that I'd hunt him down and kill him."

"And you don't...you don't still have..." Giles couldn't seem to get the rest of that question out.

She pulled back again. "I don't what?"

"You and...and Spike."

Buffy gave him a horrified look. "No, no." She shook her head. "Not at all. God, no." She shivered. "I can't even...I don't even like to think about it."

Giles let out his breath, but then found himself holding another. "And do you...do you have feelings like that for anyone else?"

Buffy was a little lost. "Feelings like what?"

Giles pushed past his nervousness. "Romantic feelings. Are you in love with anyone?"

Buffy stared at him for the longest time. She reached up her hand again to touch his face and this time he didn't move away. Buffy slowly traced the lines on his forehead, and the crinkles around his eyes. She ran her finger down his nose and touched the cleft in his chin. Trying to quell the butterflies in her stomach she softly ran her finger over his lips, and then she nodded. "Yes."

"Who, Buffy? Who are you in love with?"

"You."

Giles closed his eyes and smiled.

##

Willow squealed. "Oh my God, I think he's going to kiss her."

Celiane flashed her a grin. "I think you're right."

Maddy swallowed her disappointment, conceding defeat. She gave Daniel a considering look as he gazed out the window.

Xander found himself mentally spurring Giles on.

Dawn couldn't stop grinning. This meant Giles was here to stay.

##

Giles felt Buffy's finger on his lips again, tracing his smile. He opened his eyes. She was gazing at him. "Is that a good smile?"

Giles nodded. "Yes."

"So you love me too?"

"So very much."

"So you wouldn't mind kissing me?"

"I would consider myself quite remiss if I didn't."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Giles, shut up and kiss me."

Giles obliged her. Moving forward he pressed his lips against hers. Running his hand through her hair he cradled the back of her head, turning his own so he could capture her lips more fully. He felt her tongue run along the part of his lips. With his other hand at her back he held her tightly against him and he opened his lips and met her tongue with his own. His lips slanted over hers. Through the haze of his desire, Giles thought he heard several people cheer. He pulled his head back, smiling a little when she let out a moan of disappointment. "Do you get the feeling that we're not alone?"

She gave him a lopsided smile. "Gee, what gave it away? The four guys in the corner?"

Giles' eyes widened. "Good Lord, I forgot all about them." He glanced up, trying to locate the window to his room. "No, I thought I heard people cheering. I'm afraid that we have quite an audience." He pointed up to his room and Buffy watched as more hands than she could count waved at them.

"God." Buffy blushed and rested her forehead against his chest. "We're never going to be alone."

Giles cupped her cheek, pushing her head back so he could see her. He

placed a quick kiss on her lips. "Trust me. Nothing will keep me from getting you alone."

Buffy gave him one of her brilliant smiles. "Yeah?"

Giles nodded. "In fact, let's go home."

Buffy's smile turned into a frown. "Are you still going to buy a house?"

He nodded again. "Yes. One that's big enough for the woman I love and her teenage sister. And perhaps the Director of my Research Division."

She smiled at him again. "That's all right then." Then she frowned again. "But I get to help you, right? I mean, you don't need Maddy to help you, right?"

Giles looked at her, his brow furrowed. "Why would I have Maddy help us find a home?"

Buffy shook her head. "Never mind." She grinned in delight at his confusion. She stood and pulled him up. "So, come on, Mr. Important Head of the Council Guy. Let's get everyone home." Buffy watched the guards fall into place behind them and she rolled her eyes. "Now, explain to me why you get bodyguards, and I don't."

"Because I'm Mr. Important Head of the Council Guy. You said it yourself." He kissed her. "I get them, you get me."

Buffy grinned. "I think I'm getting the best part of that deal." She threw her arms around him and held him very tightly. "I love you so much."

Giles closed his eyes again at her words. He couldn't believe what they did to him. "I don't believe I'll ever get tired of hearing you say that."

"Good, because I kind of like saying it."

Giles cupped her face with his hands. "Have I thanked you for saving my life?" He meant that in so many ways. His eyes were filled with love as he looked at her.

Buffy put her hands over his, her eyes bright, her love for him shining through a sheen of tears. "Have I thanked you for giving mine back to me?"

Giles let out a groan. "I cannot get you alone soon enough."

Buffy laughed. "That makes two of us." She tugged on his hand. "Let's go

home."

Giles laced his fingers through hers and hand in hand they headed inside.

The End

May 16, 2002