

my father wasn't around

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my father wasn't around

by [TheGoodDoctor](#)

Summary

"Is that your dad?"

Dawn frowns, waving a hand dismissively. "No, he's just... Giles."

Good Grief

When it is done, there is quiet. Everything is so still, the world hanging by a thread like a bauble - too bright, too still, too ready to shatter into sharp, colourful shards. Even a breath might prove too much for the tenuous peace and Dawn's lungs are burning.

The quiet pervades the hospital corridor, cancelling out the footsteps and voices and beeps. It swirls under her squeaky sneakers and cushions the frantic tapping of her toes. The silence smothers the squeaking of the horrid plastic chairs.

Dawn's vision is starting to go static, to fuzz and fade, blood rushing in her ears. Her chest hurts under the neat white dressings.

There is a light touch on her knee and she gasps, sucking in breath after breath as the noise rushes back into her world. Everything is suddenly so *loud* and in desperation Dawn stares at Giles, crouched before her.

He offers her a sad smile and his hand. Neither are like her mom's, or Buffy's, but their fingers tangle and the noise - equalises. Not too loud, not too quiet; warm and large and comforting. He tugs her up onto her feet and guides her gently to the door. Dawn's mind makes a half-hearted effort to think of the questions she will later want answers to, but as she stumbles over her own exhausted feet Giles' hold tightens on her, holding her upright, and she decides to let him deal with - everything.

The drive is long-short, both interminable and ephemeral, and ends at Giles' complex. It's not home, and it takes Dawn a moment to realise that she is really, really grateful about this. Giles is silent as he unlocks his door, seats her at the table and makes her a drink: hot chocolate with cream but without marshmallows. The liquid is hot enough to scald her throat but she drinks it down anyway, desperate to feel something that is not the leaden weight pooling in her chest.

He makes up a bed on his sofa and tucks her into it, smoothing her hair from her forehead with eyes full of something she cannot name and the heavy weight of memory.

His step is slow and ponderous, climbing the stairs as if he doesn't really want to reach the top, and Dawn listens to him prepare for bed in the twilight. One of the lamps is on, casting amber puddles over the table at which they have all sat so often. She remembers doing her homework there while the others pored over demonic texts, scratching her fury at her exclusion into her algebra with thick, dark, shiny lines of pencil. She remembers eating dinner at this table, explaining the intricacies of middle-school gossip to a confused, definitely-not-laughing Giles while her mother worked and Buffy patrolled, and correcting the diagram of allegiances he drew of her classmates. She remembers not coming here for two months in their second year at Sunnydale and remembers that no-one would tell her why, remembers that Giles got sad and silent every time she asked until she gave up, remembers that it was because Miss Calendar had died here. Then she remembers that she doesn't

remember that at all, not really, because she is not real and that was before she, Dawn Summers, even existed.

Then she remembers why she's here, and not at home.

Ghosts, she thinks, and shivers.

Dawn gets up and pads to the table, watches the light play over hands that are not real, illuminating veins full of blood that is poison, making skin that is only borrowed shine like she apparently used to, only blue and green. She's always liked blue and green, but she hasn't actually always been anything.

Her hand-that-is-not-her-hand shoots out and shuts off the light, and her eyes-that-are-not-her-eyes are blind. If only she were made of light now. But her-feet-that-are-not-her-feet remember with memories that she does not have and walk her to the stairs. They carry her to the landing, to where she has never been, and into Giles' room.

His eyes are closed, chest moving softly. This house, her life, the town; they may all be full of ghosts, but he is not one.

Dawn edges around the bed and crouches, gazing over an expanse of empty sheets dyed blue by the moon that shines through the half-open curtains. Here, Giles is close but far away and she longs to be invited closer. She longs for the feeling of protection she used to derive from crawling into her mother's bed after a nightmare, and she wishes her memories were not tainted by loss and unreality.

Dawn looks at Giles and feels herself fall away from him. The cloth beneath her hands loses its vividness and she sees him as if on a screen. None of this is real - none of this can be real. Buffy cannot be -

- gone.

Not Buffy. Never her. All her life (*all year*) Buffy has been there and for her to just *die* -

Dawn's fingers clench in the sheet, pulling it taut, and Giles opens his eyes, turning to her. Her eyes meet his, squinting without his glasses and adequate light, and she is just a girl. Not a key, not light, just Dawn. Just a girl who is missing her family and grieving for something that is not her fault, never her fault, just something that is horrible and heartbreaking and *hurts*.

Giles pats the bed and opens his arms, catching her easily as she leaps to him, burrowing into his chest. The weight and shape of him is not like her mom, not like Buffy, but his arms wrap around her and her brain just - stops. For a little while she stops thinking about that which is real and that which isn't and holds on to someone who is warm and solid and real, and crying quietly into her hair.

They do move back into the Summers family home, in the end. Familiarity will help, according to her grief counsellor, and Giles will do backflips if he thinks it will help. For a

week, they walk on eggshells during the day and Dawn sneaks into his bed at night.

Giles makes her breakfasts in the mornings; often just cereal, but sometimes pancakes, which he can never get quite right. It occupies them for a whole morning, making pancakes that they have no desire to eat. He makes crepes, and is as confused as she is that this is not what she was expecting. Then he makes Scotch pancakes, thick cakes the size of his palm which he spreads with jelly which he calls jam. Eventually they manage something resembling the kind of pancakes Dawn usually makes with Buffy, but there's something not quite right about them anyway-

Made. Made with Buffy.

Dawn pushes a piece of Scotch pancake through a puddle of maple syrup on her plate, before suddenly leaping from her chair and escaping upstairs. Later there is no trace of the plates and plates of pancakes and she knows that Giles had no intention of eating them.

School is rough. Everyone knows about her mom, but for the Buffybot ruse to work no-one can know about her sister. Consequently, her grades drop and her friendships deteriorate and she can never ever explain *why*.

Dawn knows she's no fun anymore, but it hurts when the invitations slowly stop coming. She doesn't mention it to Giles or anyone but she sees the concerned glances that are shot in her direction over meals. Each mouthful is torture, trapped in the net of concern. Only the thought of making it worse stops her from skipping meals altogether.

When Janice invites her over a sleepover she leaps at the chance. Giles seems pleased though somewhat apprehensive; he keeps reminding her that she can call at any time and he will pick her up.

"Any time," he says as they pull up outside Janice's house in Giles' dumb car.

Dawn rolls her eyes, secretly pleased. "I heard you the first, like, three million times."

Giles offers her a soft, small smile and reaches across to squeeze her shoulder. "Have fun," he says, also for the three-millionth time, and she huffs in mock-irritation as she gets out.

"See you tomorrow," she says as she trots up the path and he waves as he drives back home. Dawn tries her best not to feel suddenly cut adrift, disconnected from any kind of safety, and squares her shoulders. This is Janice. This is not new. *Except it is, because you aren't real.*

Janice opens the door, squeals, and wraps skinny arms around Dawn. It surprises a smile from her, and as she returns the hug, Dawn considers how real this feels and decides to stop caring.

It's harder at three in the morning.

Dawn is awake, staring at an unfamiliar ceiling from an unfamiliar sleeping bag. Janice is snoring gently from the bed beside her and the sodium glare of the streetlamps is casting

black and orange tiger stripes across Janice's perfect pink bedroom. Dawn sits up and silently pads out into the hall and stops.

She's not quite sure where she was intending to go, until she realises: Giles. Whenever Dawn feels this way in the middle of the night - alone, scared, unreal - she goes to Giles.

But this is a house with no Giles in it.

Dawn sneaks downstairs with practised grace. She remembers *doesn't remember* that the third step squeaks and the seventh stair can only be touched at the very very edges if one is to get into the kitchen at midnight for a snack with Janice. They've been doing it since they were kids *since never*.

She treads carefully across the half-lit hall, to the small table of dark wood where a houseplant that's at least as old as she is *as she thinks she is* hides a telephone. The dial tone echoes in her ear, deafening in the silence of the sleeping household. Dawn sinks down against the wall, clutching the receiver to her ear. She doesn't want to wake Giles, but there is no way she can go back to sleep now. If she even sleeps at all. She isn't real.

Dawn enters the number quickly with shaking fingers, pressing the phone back against her head before she can chicken out and hang up. It rings once before clicking.

"Dawn?" Giles says, voice slightly husky with sleep. It's the most welcome thing in the world. "Is that you? Are you alright?"

Dawn smiles shakily. "Hey. Just checking in."

Giles relaxes almost audibly. "Ah. Right. Having fun?"

"All the fun of sleeping," she says, flicking the long, emerald leaves of the plant.

"I meant earlier," Giles says, voice warm with amusement. She hears him shift and guesses he must be in bed.

"Yeah. Hey, Giles, did you put the phone next to your bed?"

There is a suspiciously long pause. "No," he eventually settles on.

"Uh huh," Dawn says, half-laughing.

"You might have needed me. You did, actually," he points out. Dawn hums in concession.

"Are you sure you're alright? I can come and pick you up if you want-" he begins, anxious and gentle.

"No," Dawn cuts him off. "I want to stay."

"Really? It's no trouble."

"Really." Dawn leans her head back into the wall and smiles at the window. "I am of the good. Just needed to check in." She feels much better saying it than she has in a while,

knowing that every syllable is true.

“Alright,” Giles says, warm and pleased. “Get some sleep now, you have school in the morning.”

“Fine. Nerd.” Giles laughs and Dawn grins to herself. “Bye.”

“Sleep well.”

Dawn replaces the receiver and creeps back into her bed. A phone call and Janice’s snoring is a poor substitute for secure hugs, but Dawn is pleased to note that it will do. She might even sleep well.

God Only Knows

“We listened to aggressively cheerful music sung by people chosen for their ability to dance, then we ate cookie dough and talked about boys.”

“You cannot enjoy this,” Giles says, looking up from under his palm and tapping the pen against the table. “No-one can possibly enjoy this - this *noise*.”

Dawn spins and shoots a triumphant look at the pen which is matching the rhythm of her teenage-dream-pop perfectly. She giggles as he drops it as if burnt and continues her dancing. “This is fun, Giles. People have it sometimes.” She mock-gasps. “You should try it!”

Giles rolls his eyes and pushes his crossword away from him, leaning back in his chair. He steeples his fingers over his chest and looks over his glasses at her. Dawn bounces and dances with an energy that, he cannot help but note, would be better applied to her homework. “You’ve learned far too much from your sister.”

“No, the teasing you was also learned from Xander and Spike.”

“Making it considerably worse.” Giles removes his glasses, rubbing his forehead tiredly. Dawn keeps dancing and Giles does his best to hide his amusement. Standing, he heads into the kitchen and begins to start preparation for dinner. In here, the music is much muted and he takes a moment, eyes closed, to appreciate it.

“What’s for dinner?” Dawn says, much closer than expected, and Giles’ eyes startle open. Dawn tilts her head curiously. “Were you going to sleep?”

“I was looking within myself for patience.” He rummages in the freezer and fetches out a cardboard box and a plastic bag. “Fish fingers and chips sound all right?”

Dawn brightens. “We can have chips? As a major meal component?”

Giles considers for a moment. “I fear we may be mistranslating.” He shakes the bag of frozen fries at her. “These.”

“Oh. You call those chips?” She hops up onto the breakfast bar as he puts their dinner into the oven. “We call them fries. What do you call chi- what I would call chips?”

“Crisps.”

“Huh.” Dawn swings her legs gently in time with the song that’s just come on. Giles hums a couple of bars, and then hurriedly cuts himself off.

“It’s a good song,” he protests at her shark-like grin. “This is just a terrible cover.”

“Like you could do better.”

He can, it turns out, and she forces him to sing *God Only Knows* twice more while she dances and slides in her socked feet on the kitchen tiles.

Giles is finishing the washing-up and Dawn is doodling on her math homework.

“The answer isn’t a small drawing of a daisy, by the way,” he says, drying his hands and peering over her shoulder.

“Ugh,” Dawn says emphatically, and lies on the page. Giles huffs his amusement and sits down next to her. “Can we do something else?”

He looks at her, amused. “Why on earth did you think I’d let you get away with not doing homework?” She gives him her strongest, most ruthless puppy-dog eyes - faint lip tremble and all. He shifts in his seat. “That’s cheating.”

Dawn sits up, struck by inspiration. “We could make cookies! There’s measuring, and that’s all math-y, and reading the instructions is literacy-y and the whole thing is home ec-”

Giles rolls his eyes and wanders back into the kitchen. Dawn sighs and adds another petal to her flower. She listens as he moves about in the kitchen, pots and pans clanking.

“Well?” he calls. “These cookies won’t make themselves.”

Dawn scrambles from her seat before he can change her mind, thundering feet almost drowning out his laughter.

“I’m sure we’ve missed part of the process.”

Dawn pauses mid-mouthful of dough and shakes her head emphatically. “The baking part of baking is very much optional.”

“If you get salmonella, Buffy will kill me,” Giles says thoughtfully, breaking off some dough and eating it.

Dawn shrugs. “Meh.”

Giles snorts. “Oh, cheers.”

They eat in companionable silence for a moment. “This is a good cookie dough,” Dawn pronounces.

“And here I was, thinking you were eating it out of obligation.” Dawn sticks her tongue out at him. “It was my mum’s recipe. I used to make it with her when I was your age, although we did actually *bake* them.”

She tries to imagine a fourteen-year-old Giles and her mind blanks. “What were you like?”

“At fourteen?” She nods, and he thinks about it. “Well, it was before university so I hadn’t gone off the rails and tried to summon any demons yet...” He sees the look of confusion on her face. “Long story. Very much a cautionary tale. I was fairly normal, I suppose. Went to school, mostly behaved myself, did my homework.” Dawn rolls her eyes and Giles smiles.

“Did school kinda...suck for you?” She says, looking down at the cookie dough and fidgeting with a chocolate chip.

“It wasn’t the *best* period of my life, but it certainly wasn’t the worst.” He looks intently at her, curious and concerned. “Does it...suck...for you?”

Dawn sighs and leans back, looking away. “There’s a guy I like, but I can’t just be cool around him, and he’s being really weird.”

“Weird?”

“Not mystical weird - at least, I don’t think so. He’s really nice to me in person, and then he’s really rude in front of his friends.” Dawn frowns. “Is he possessed?”

Giles sighs. “No, he’s a teenage boy.” She looks at him curiously. “They tend to behave oddly as a matter of course. I dare say I never understood them, even when I was one.”

“Why is he doing it though?” Dawn says, leaning her chin in her hand and morosely eating dough.

“He’s an idiot. It’s a fairly safe assumption with teenage boys.” Dawn smiles reluctantly and Giles visibly relaxes.

“He’s really cute though. Like, Joseph Gordon-Levitt cute.” She sighs. “What I wouldn’t give for him to come to school and fall in love with me. Him or Orlando Bloom, I’m not picky.”

“A school-age version, I hope.”

Dawn pulls a face. “Duh. As long as they aren’t spotty or gross or anything.”

“But you’re not picky,” Giles says dryly, mouth twisting into a barely-suppressed smile.

She rolls her eyes and laughs. “*Duh.*”

He ducks his head, grinning fully, and hides it with another mouthful of cookie dough.

“Who were the kids into when you were my age?” she says, pushing the bowl towards him as encouragement.

“Harrison Ford,” Giles says through a mouthful of cookie dough without a shred of hesitation. He swallows and pauses, as if to make up for his previous urgency, and Dawn hides a smile behind her hand. “Uh, Carrie Fisher, too. And Mark Hamill - *Star Wars* was a big thing when I was young.”

She shrugs. "Ewan McGregor's not bad-looking." Giles pulls a face. "Please don't go on another prequels rant."

He rolls his eyes. "It wasn't nearly as good-" he begins truculently, but Dawn cuts him off.

"Hey. This was harmless boy-appreciation. Don't spoil it."

No-one's back yet, and it's getting late. Giles is slumped on the sofa, occasionally checking the clock absently and summoning the energy to fight Dawn into her bed. She is lounging on the floor at his feet, watching cartoons flicker before her eyes as bright, primary colours play and wash over her face.

"Time for bed, Dawnie," Giles says eventually, but making no move.

Dawn huffs and rolls over to look up at him. The silent battle of wills ends in Giles' favour and she sits up, crossing her legs and sweeping her hair behind her. She straightens her back so that the soft, dark locks fall flat and long behind her and she partitions them into three before slumping, sighing, and giving up.

Giles raises an eyebrow at her and she curls her lip in an exaggerated grimace of boredom with the task of tying her hair back for the night. He gives her a small, half-smile and leans forward, gesturing her to come closer. Curious, Dawn scoots nearer to sit at his feet with her back to his shins. The cartoons continue to play as Giles runs his fingers through her hair gently, teasing knots apart with care.

Dawn's eyes grow heavy, the sensation of soft brushing soothing her. Giles plaits her hair carefully and not extremely well through lack of practice - Dawn could easily do better, and much faster, too - but he is gentle and it is so nice to let someone else do something for her. Her father never learnt anything about hair, but this feels good. Paternal.

"Have you got a hair tie?" Giles says softly, almost a whisper. "Dawn?" He leans forward to look at her and smiles. She's slumped back against his legs, eyes closed and breaths deep and slow. He plucks the tie from her limp fingers and ties the end of the plait securely.

Careful not to disturb her, he slides out from behind her to kneel at her side, scooping her into his arms. The journey is not an altogether easy one, since the stairs are rather narrow and her door is closed, but he manages to get her into bed without too much difficulty and without her stirring.

She looks much younger asleep than she does running around the house, bossing her friends and family about. Giles smooths an errant strand of hair from her face, silently bemoaning his lack of plaiting prowess, and tugs the covers more securely around her. Dawn is too young for the life that has become her own - was Buffy ever this young? Giles feels the all-too-familiar guilt of watching as a childhood became a battleground and silently promises to do better by this girl.

Buffy comes back very, very late. Sticking her head in on Giles doesn't wake him, so she just rescues his glasses from where they threaten to fall off the table and leaves him to sleep. Dawn, though, seems unnaturally aware of her sister's presence and her eyes flutter open to blink blearily through the gloom at Buffy.

"Hey," Buffy smiles, smoothing Dawn's hair and noting the plait. "Not your best work."

"Hmm?" Dawn contemplates the plait. "I think Giles did it."

Buffy raises an eyebrow. "He's hiding a secret past as a hair stylist?"

Dawn rolls her eyes. "Uh, clearly no. Look at it." She runs her fingers along the crooked plait gently, almost reverent, and makes no move to redo it.

She laughs, stroking her thumb across Dawn's cheek. "You have fun?"

Her little sister smiles. "Yeah. It was kinda cool. You okay?"

"Uh huh. Tell me all the gossip from your slumber party tomorrow, yeah?"

Dawn nods and yawns. Buffy gets up and heads to the door. Just as she is closing it, Dawn stops her. "Before I forget though, Giles totally had a crush on Harrison Ford, secretly likes my music and is responsible if I get salmonella."

Buffy shakes her head, amazed. "What did you make the poor man do?"

Miss Atomic Bomb

Dawn stares in bewilderment at the mystical array before her. All the items are familiar from her home, but she's never been expected to use them before. She'd never appreciated how many there were, each with a different purpose, each somehow involved in things that had always happened around her without Dawn needing to pay attention.

"And what's that?"

"A spatula," Giles says. He's behind her, leaning on the kitchen counter with his arms folded, but she can hear his amusement, can feel it radiating from him in waves.

Dawn sighs and slumps. "Giles," she whines, drawing out his name. "This is *ha-ard*."

"Only because you don't know what to do yet. Thus, you must learn."

"Must is a strong word. I could get by without this, right?" Dawn turns to him, pouting.

Giles raises a finger, face solemn. "You cannot escape this, Dawn. You are the one girl in all the world. You alone will wield the spatula and the spoon to stand against the hob, and the oven, and the radiation of the microwave; to feed the hungry and stop the swell of their numbers. You," he pauses for dramatic effect, eyes sparkling, "are the fryer."

Dawn applauds dutifully, trying not to laugh. "Very good."

Giles smiles smugly. "Yes, I rather thought so. Now, what are you going to cook for us as your culinary debut?"

Dawn pulls a face, turning back to the cupboards full of utensils, pans and food. "Pasta?" she says hesitantly.

Giles stands beside her and nods. "And what do you suppose you will do first?"

Dawn picks up the bag of pasta and immediately looks to Giles for approval. He suppresses a smile and nods again.

"Are...you guys okay?" Xander asks hesitantly from the doorway. "I was just passing through - has something happened?"

Dawn shakes her head, eyes streaming with tears. "Onions," Giles chokes out, nudging the frying veg in the pan carefully.

The sound of his laughter can be heard throughout the house, even as he wanders off.

"Is there a way to avoid that?" Dawn asks, wiping at her eyes.

“Xander’s mockery, or crying over onions?” Giles rubs his face with his sleeve and Dawn huffs in amusement. “Not that I’ve found - for both problems. A Watcher from the sixties-fifties spends at least one paragraph per month complaining about onions, and Xander is *incorrigible*.”

“Hey! Or possibly thanks,” Xander calls from upstairs and Giles rolls his eyes.

Dawn smirks and stirs the sauce idly. The smile slips from her face slowly, fading into a frown, and Giles watches it with concern.

“You’re doing well,” he says rather hopefully. Dawn looks up and flashes him a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Dawn?”

She waves a hand dismissively. “I’m good.” Giles tilts his head and folds his arm, gentle in his disbelief. Dawn rolls her eyes and folds her own arms in return, facing him and staring him down. “It’s not a big deal. I’m *good*.”

Giles says nothing.

“Is this whole staring thing part of the Watcher training schtick?” she says, trying for levity and landing on defensive.

“Dawn, please,” Giles says softly.

She sighs. “I wish you’d never found out that was my weakness.”

He offers her a tiny, sad half-smile. “I feel much the same about your ‘puppy-dog eyes’, as Buffy puts it.”

Dawn struggles to raise a return smile and turns back to the sauce, stirring it to avoid looking into Giles’ eyes. “Lots of girls at school are dieting, you know.”

She says it so conversationally that it momentarily throws Giles. “Really,” he says eventually.

“Hmm.” Dawn pauses, but Giles is patient. “It’s a big thing. To lose weight.”

Giles nods slowly. “It can be, for some people. But weight isn’t everything, you know.”

“Isn’t it?” Dawn says quietly.

“Dawn?” Giles steps closer and matches her volume. “Is everything...alright?”

She tilts her head as if thinking. “It’s really popular,” she whispers.

“You mustn’t do things just because they’re popular, Dawn.”

She rolls her eyes and drops the spoon into the pan. “But maybe I should. Giles, *I’m* not popular. I don’t have loads of friends like the other girls at school do. And maybe, if I didn’t eat so much, if I wasn’t so fat-”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Giles says, cutting her off firmly.

“I’m not!” Dawn snaps, and he looks at her in concern and confusion. “I’m getting chubby and no-one likes me and I can’t take it anymore.” Giles gapes and she sighs heavily. The pasta boils over suddenly, hissing and bubbling on the hot stove and Dawn turns it off and steps back. “I’m not eating this,” she says, and walks calmly away.

Giles does not follow her.

Dawn lies back on her bed, staring blankly at the dark ceiling, unmoved for the past hour at least. She’s been resolutely not thinking and not crying.

There is a knock at the door. “No,” she says, pre-empting the request for entry.

A pause, and then various shuffling and clinking sounds. “Dawn, you know I worry about you,” Giles begins, hesitant and gentle. “I don’t want to see you do things you don’t want to do because of what other people are doing and saying.”

“Why, ‘cause you read some crappy parenting manual?” Dawn snaps and can practically feel Giles flinch. Guilt pools, hot and heavy, in her stomach and she blinks at the tears framing her eyes. He’s not her dad and her dad’s not here and Dawn has never been sure which part upsets Giles more.

“No,” he says slowly, with a small and reluctant sigh. “Because when I was young I dropped out of university, got a tattoo and summoned a murderous demon because someone I thought was *cool* said it was a good idea.”

“Oh,” Dawn says in a small voice. She knew something had happened when Giles was young, but when he said he’d gone off the rails she had anticipated flunking some tests and maybe denting his car. Not this.

“Yes, *oh*.” Giles breathes out heavily, as if the effort of telling her had been exhausting.

Dawn crawls off her bed to sit beside the door, pressed against the wood that divides her from Giles. “I didn’t know,” she whispers.

“It’s not exactly small talk.”

They sit together in silence for a moment, heads resting on the door. The streetlights cast dull light into the room, shading the usually bright colours navy and silver.

“Dawn,” Giles begins, “this isn’t something I know much about. And I struggle to talk about it because I don’t know how to tell you that you are so much more important to me than every person in your school put together. I don’t know how to say that-” Giles’ voice cracks, and he swallows before carrying on. “-that I love you, just the way you are, and will love you whatever you do and however you look. I don’t know how to help you, Dawn, but I want to.”

Hot, heavy tears course down Dawn’s cheeks. She swipes them away quickly, breathing deeply through pursed lips. “Whatever I do, huh?” Giles hums an affirmative. “Even if I

summon a demon and drop out of school?”

“Well, I can’t guarantee that I’ll approve. You certainly won’t get points for originality.” Dawn laughs wetly and scrubs at her face. “But yes,” he finishes softly. “Whatever you do.”

She moves back and opens the door gently. Giles isn’t crying, but something in the set of his jaw and the shine of his eyes says that he’s close to it. Beside him is a tray with two bowls of pasta, slowly going cold. Dawn looks into his worried, sad eyes and silently picks up a bowl.

Giles doesn’t smile, or pretend that this is over, solved, done; and for that she is grateful. He just breathes out, relaxing into the wall, and picks up his own bowl.

Somebody To Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dawn crosses her arms, huffing irritably. Her fingers tap in obvious agitation against her forearm as she looks about her impatiently. She taps her foot and uncrosses her arms again, swinging them by her side. Footsteps beat quickly behind her and her arms come up as she turns angrily to the newcomer.

“Buffy! You’re late - and also you’re Giles.” Dawn frowns as Giles holds out a hand and catches his breath.

“Something - came up,” he huffs. “The sheer weight of vampires out tonight - is actually rather worrying.”

He does sound concerned, and Dawn resigns herself to a night of research instead. “Fine. Didn’t want to go to this stupid parent-teacher conference thing anyways. Not like it’s important.”

“Not going? Not important?” Giles says, confused. “You are. It is. That’s why I’m here.”

“Really? Thought you’d be all research-y,” Dawn says, waving a hand vaguely, and Giles shrugs. “But - you’re not a parent.”

“Neither is Buffy,” Giles says, almost annoyed - as if his proxy-parent qualifications had somehow been called into question.

Dawn rolls her eyes as Giles places a hand on her shoulder and guides her towards the school building. “Buffy is my guardian, and my sister. Oh!” Dawn turns to him with an idea. “You could tell them you and mom had a thing and-”

He looks scandalised, awkward and guilty all at once and Dawn wonders why. “I most certainly will not!” he splutters. Giles fishes in an inside pocket and brandishes an envelope. “I have a note.”

“This just says ‘tell him everything, signed Buffy’,” the teacher says, glaring over the brow of his glasses.

Giles looks to the heavens for guidance, or patience, or quite possibly both, as Dawn stifles a laugh. “We were somewhat pressed for time,” he says dryly. “Something unexpectedly arose.”

“From the graaaave,” Dawn whispers dramatically and Giles’ mouth twitches. Mr Thomas sends them a curious look and Dawn sobers, rolling her eyes in typical teenage exasperation. “Buffy says it’s fine, I say it’s fine, *it’s fine*. He’s not going to steal my identity or anything.”

“Can’t imagine why that wouldn’t work,” Giles murmurs dryly, before settling the weight of his gaze upon Dawn’s math teacher. She can’t resist a wicked grin as he immediately caves.

Giles has been very quiet and non-judgemental all evening. Dawn is on edge.

“What did you think?” she says as they stroll homewards in the dark, keeping to the islands of light created by the streetlamps despite the stakes which Dawn knows line Giles’ jacket. She can’t stop wringing her hands nervously. “My french teacher said I’d really improved, a- and I never was very good at geography, but I promise I’ll listen more - and even go to all the lessons. Most of the lessons. And I know I can do better at math; I’ll try harder, promise-” Dawn realises that she’s babbling and makes an effort to stop, tangling her fingers behind her back.

Giles looks down at her with a half-smile and she colours, noting that he’s made her talk far more effectively about her schooling than her mother or Buffy ever managed. “A fair self-evaluation,” he says, and Dawn breathes out hard in relief, jamming her hands into her pockets in unconscious imitation of Giles. “If you needed help with literature, you could have come to me; I was a librarian, after all, and do know a thing or two about books. Willow can help you with maths, but you’ll have to ask Xander about geography: the boy has a mind for maps, loathe though he is to admit it.”

Dawn tilts her head up at him. “Really?”

“He pleads the Hallowe’en soldier defence, but Willow tells me it’s always been a natural affinity of his.” Giles shakes his head, frowning in confusion. “I don’t see why he would hide it.”

“It could damage his street cred?” Dawn offers. Giles continues frowning in clear rejection of that idea. She giggles and he treats her to another *I’m-not-laughing-you’re-laughing* lip twitch.

“You did well, Dawn,” Giles says, soft and serious. “I’m proud of you.”

They walk along in contented silence through empty streets. Dawn looks up the tall librarian who, despite his much longer legs, is keeping pace with her easily. He looks quietly pleased and Dawn basks in the glow of his contentment. He’s less interrogating than her mother, less intense than Buffy, more present than her father. The evening has been weird and new, wrongfooted by the presence of Giles, an unknown variable. She could certainly have done without the weirdness of introducing him to her teachers - this is Giles, he’s my (sister’s old librarian/sister’s Yoda-type/not-dad/friend) guardian for the evening. Eventually she settled on “this is Giles”, but she suspects that most of her teachers were thinking step-dad, or possibly just dad. Dawn analyses this thought, and realises that she doesn’t mind too much.

Giles steps easily over a large puddle, offering a hand to Dawn naturally to support her half-step-half-jump over the muddy water.

She holds it all the way home.

“How was your return to academia?” Xander asks Giles as he opens the door.

“A refreshing change,” he returns easily, and Xander claps a hand to his chest, mouth an exaggerated o.

“You wound me,” he says with mock-hurt. Giles rolls his eyes and allows himself to be dragged into the kitchen by Willow and Buffy, both bombarding him with questions about the gang of vamps and Dawn’s teachers in equal measure. Dawn grins at Xander and sits with him at the table. “How’d it go for you, Dawn Chorus?” he asks, sliding her a colouring sheet and some pencils.

She sends him an *I’m-not-a-child* look and he shrugs, grabbing his own sheet and pencils. Dawn gives in to the temptation and begins to shade the trees in autumnal reds and oranges. Xander twirls a lime green highlighter in his fingers. “It was okay, I guess,” she says, shrugging. “Geography was the worst, but apparently you can help with that.”

Xander groans. “Noo, my reputation for being generally academically useless is ruined.”

Dawn grins, then shakes her head. “The sea is definitely not that shade, Xander.”

“Ah,” he says, pointing the highlighter at her, “but this is after the horrible nuclear accident scheduled for next week. See, a demon’s gonna pop up right in the middle of a reactor and boom.” He makes dramatic hand gestures to emphasise his point, before giving up at the look on Dawn’s face and shrugging. “I flunked art.”

They colour quietly for a while. “I liked having Giles there,” Dawn says softly. “Like, a real grown-up.”

Xander nods easily. “Giles is cool. Well, not cool, obviously, look at him. You know. Good guy.” He shuts up for a minute. “I used to wish - sometimes. When I was in high school. I used to wish Giles was my dad.” Dawn looks up at him, but he keeps his eyes fixed on the paper, colouring harder and faster. “I wanted him to take me to parent-teacher stuff, and I’d have someone who took an interest my schoolwork, and maybe even have a home-cooked meal in my own home.” Xander presses harder into the page and the lead breaks off, a shower of orange shards and dust coating the half-coloured cloud below. He leans back and huffs in amusement at himself. “What’d the crayon ever do to me, huh?” Xander offers Dawn a half-smile.

There is a small, sad noise from behind Xander and he spins in his seat to face it fast enough to give himself whiplash. Giles is standing in the doorway, looking rather tragically sympathetic.

Xander stands up quickly, rubbing his hands on his jeans with a nervous grin. “Hey! G-man. We were just-” he cuts himself off, gesturing at the table with a frantic stabbing gesture.

Giles pushes himself off the wall, striding quickly and purposefully to Xander, wrapping him in a firm hug. After half a second of surprise Xander’s arms come up to hold the older man close to him. Giles whispers something that sounds like “I always cared,” and a minute later they let each other go, clearing their throats and patting shoulders awkwardly. Xander holds

his shoulders slightly more proudly, though, and Giles seems quietly content as he passes through into the hall.

Xander sits again and offers Dawn an embarrassed grin. “We held hands on the way home,” she tells him, almost proud, and Xander relaxes into this new world, in which everyone is allowed to show Giles affection.

“He’s a pretty good extra dad, huh,” he says with a laugh in his voice but entirely serious eyes. “Best and only male role model I had as a kid.”

“He’s one of my best,” Dawn says, colouring with feigned nonchalance. “I mean, you’re both up there.”

Xander looks surprised, looks away, grins at her and ducks his head. “That so,” he says, and if his voice is suspiciously thick Dawn doesn’t mention it.

The next evening, Giles makes risotto from scratch and grills Xander on his career prospects as they all sit around the dining table. Xander huffs and whinges and pretends that he’s not secretly loving it.

Chapter End Notes

eyy bet you thought that this was only about giles being a summers dad
he is everyone's dad
he is your dad

Runaways

Chapter Notes

This story is somewhat ambiguous as far as chronology is concerned, unless otherwise stated; this chapter, for instance, would take place at some point during Season One.

When Dawn is eleven she runs away.

She's seen all the movies so she knows how to do it; checkered blanket on a pole containing a bread roll, a lump of cheese and an apple - check - resolute expression - check - cheery whistle - check. Well, more or less check. In reality the blanket is a polka-dot pillow-case and she couldn't find a pole so the bag bounces against her back where she carries it like some kind of tweenage Santa. The roll had to be substituted for sliced bread and there weren't any charmingly misshapen lumps of cheese in the house, just the handful of Kraft singles in their regular plastic packaging which will make the pillow-case smell like feet quite possibly forever.

Dawn doesn't mind, though. She doesn't even mind that she can't really whistle, just blowing air through pursed, glittery-lip-gloss lips. Because she is Running Away.

The sun is hot on her back as she strides purposefully down the street. It's late afternoon on a Saturday, and there's a dog-walker on the other side of the road who returns her wave with a bemused smile as she jumps off the curb and runs through the crossing, giggling at her new-found freedom. Dawn's never been allowed to jump off curbs and run across roads, but now that she has Run Away she is free and doesn't need to listen to her mom or Buffy ever again.

She passes the corner shop where she buys candy with her pocket money and decides to stop in. Dawn will need to say goodbye, after all.

Mr Nowak looks up as the bell rings and adjusts his gaze downwards until he sees the girl before him. "Miss Summers!" he exclaims in his funny but familiar voice. "Dzien dobry."

"Dzien dobry," she returns in her best imitation of the Polish he's been teaching her off and on - mostly she can say hello, goodbye, and name various sweets. "I came to say goodbye."

"But, little girl, you have only just said hello!" Mr Nowak says, eyes widening comically. "How come you are to say goodbye so soon?"

Dawn leans her skinny elbows on his long glass counter and gestures for Mr Nowak to lean in conspiratorially. "I'm Running Away," she tells him proudly.

The shopkeeper looks astonished, then concerned. "But Miss Summers, will you be gone long?"

“Forever,” Dawn says, sighing happily.

“Where will you go?” Mr Nowak says, face creasing in consternation.

Dawn shrugs. “I figure I could go to New York. I want to see the Statue of Liberty and go shopping. Then I’m going to Poland - you taught me enough to get by. Afterwards I’m going to live in Paris.”

Mr Nowak looks pained. “On your own?” he says weakly. “How will you get there?”

“I’m going to my dad’s,” Dawn says, proud of her forethought. “He lives near the airport in LA. Then I’ll fly all over the world.” She tilts her head to examine him. “Why are you sad, Mr Nowak?”

He tries to smile and manages a rictus grin. “You are too young to run away just yet, Miss Summers. Wait a little, no?”

Dawn frowns. “No! I want to go now. I can be grown-up. No-one lets me do anything at home.”

Mr Nowak’s hand hovers over the telephone. “Let me call your mother,” he pleads. “Let me tell them, and then take you home.”

Dawn gives in to temptation and stomps her foot. “No! I’m going and you can’t stop me.” She steps back just as he tries to reach her, his fingers brushing her bare arm. Dawn grabs her pillow-case and sprints from the shop, bell ringing hard enough to echo in her ears.

She puts the incident behind her. She’s Running Away, and no-one’s going to ruin it for her - not even nice Mr Nowak.

Dawn heads for the mall. She hasn’t got any money, but she’s sure that the cool kids who would do things like Run Away are the same cool kids who hang out by the mall. Her bag bounces on her back less now, her step less light than those first skipping leaps of freedom.

Dawn squares her shoulders and, determined to recapture her happiness, springs off the curb into the road.

Into the path of a car.

The brakes scream, shrill and sharp, and so does Dawn as both parties attempt to avoid the other. The car swerves wildly and screeches to a halt within the side of a parked car; as horns blare Dawn, trapped in the middle, overwhelmed and afraid, does the only thing she can think to do: she puts her head down, tightens her grip on her bag, and runs.

Dawn doesn’t stop until her legs feel as if they will give out and her lungs are burning. She’s lost now, in some part of Sunnydale she’s never visited in her year here, and her feet slow to a stop. A streetlamp flickers on at the intersection and she realises that it’s not as bright

anymore. Night is encroaching upon her perfect Running Away fantasy and Dawn shivers in her tiny strappy top.

She wanders down to the park she can see over the road, feeling better the more that she moves, speeding into a run as she sees the light she wants. Dawn ensconces herself in the warm light of the public telephone, scrambling in her pockets for loose change.

Receiver pressed to her ear, she waits as the dial tone rings and rings until-

“Hello?”

“Dad! It’s me, Dawn.”

“Dawnie?” Hank Summers says, confused and slightly distracted. “What’s wrong?”

Dawn rolls her eyes. “Nothing, silly. I just need you to come and pick me up.”

“Pick you up?” he says, bewildered. “But Dawn...why can’t your mother? I’m too far away, you know that.”

“No,” Dawn protests. “I - I mean, I know, but I need you to pick me up and take me to LA.”

“LA?”

“Yes!” She huffs. Why were grown-ups just not getting it? “I need to go to LA so that I can get a flight to Poland.”

“What on earth do you want with Poland?” her dad asks. It sounds like he’s only half-paying attention.

“I’m Running Away,” Dawn announces.

“You are not!” her father fairly shouts and Dawn cringes away from the receiver. “You are going back home right now - tell me where you are and your mother can pick you up.”

“No,” she whispers.

“Dawn,” he says, voice a warning.

“I’m Running Away,” she repeats, quiet and plaintive.

“No, you aren’t, young lady. Now, where ar-” He keeps speaking as Dawn lowers the phone back into its cradle.

Numbly she turns and walks into the park, rubbing her upper arms against the cold. She sinks onto a bench and hugs herself, finally allowing herself the luxury of sobbing about the injustice of life as she knows it.

Buffy gets to do what she wants. Buffy goes out late at night, even though no-one’s supposed to know. Buffy would be allowed to go to LA and Poland and Paris.

Dawn is just as mature as Buffy.

Over her sobs she hears a branch crack behind her and her spine shoots up straight. She glances around her, smudging tears against her chubby cheeks, but can't see anything. Dawn pulls her arms further around herself, shivering hard in the dark of the night.

There is a more definite noise behind her and Dawn suddenly thinks of all the things that live in the dark of her nightmares and eat little girls. She can't quite make herself turn around, eyes screwed shut and breath shaky, even as she hears odd thumps and grunts and a strange rushing of air.

There is a touch on her shoulder and she screams, jumping out of her skin. The hand starts back as well with an alarmed noise and she follows the arm up to the face of her sister's librarian, Mr Giles. Dawn scrubs at her face and sniffs, looking up at him challengingly.

He doesn't shout at her though, once he's recovered from the surprise, or even say anything; just sits calmly beside her and begins to polish his glasses. Dawn looks away to stare into the dark.

"Did you ever want to run away?" Dawn blurts out, words losing their semi-mythical emphasis.

"Yes," Giles says matter-of-factly. She looks at him curiously and he goes back to polishing himself a new prescription. "I was a little older than you though. It didn't end well." Dawn swings her legs on the bench and folds her arms against the cold, hunching in on herself. Something warm and heavy drops over her shoulders, smelling of wool and old paper, and she shoots Giles a thankful smile as she tugs the tweed tighter about her skinny frame. He smiles back, soft and oddly fond, for all that they don't really know each other.

"Why did you go?"

"I think everyone wants to run away at some point," Giles says, leaning back to look up at the stars. "From something or someone or just themselves. I'm not sure it ever really works."

Dawn rankles at this. "It'll work for me," she announces, and Giles looks at her; part curious, part assessing.

"What's your plan?" he says and Dawn accepts his challenge.

"Go to LA. Flight to Poland. Travel to Paris." She ticks the items off on her fingers.

"How are you getting to LA?"

Dawn frowns. "Dad was supposed to take me." At his raised eyebrow she explains quickly - something in his eyes had gone hard and flinty and a tiny bit scary, despite his general librarian-ness. "He wouldn't, though. So...I'll walk."

"It's a long way," Giles says.

Dawn shrugs. "I don't mind."

This makes Giles duck his head and smile to himself. “You may change your mind later,” he says lightly. “How will you pay for your flight to Poland?”

Dawn pauses, thinks, and deflates. “I don’t know,” she says in a small voice, swiping angrily at her burning eyes.

Giles sighs and looks about him, then back at Dawn. He frowns and reaches out to brush some ash or dust from his jacket, allowing his hand to rest on her shoulder. “It’s too late for you to be out,” he sighs.

“I don’t want to go home,” she sniffs. “Mom’s gonna be mad.”

Giles nods in concession. “Yes, I think she might just be. We were worried about you.” Dawn wipes her face on the tweed sleeve and sees him wince. “Let’s start walking, and we can drop in on Mr Nowak and let him know you aren’t going just yet.”

“You know him?” Dawn stands and Giles joins her, guiding her to the park’s entrance.

“I buy the paper there. He’s terribly worried that he won’t see you again.”

Dawn frowns. “I’d be in Poland. He could visit.”

Giles nods, but with a look on his face that Dawn can’t quite explain. “He’s the reason for Poland, then, I suppose?”

She nods proudly. “He’s been teaching me Polish.”

“Ah,” Giles says, sounding pleased. “Bardzo imponujące.”

Dawn looks up at him, astonished. His accent wasn’t much better than hers, but it was definitely Polish. “Do you speak lots of languages?”

He nods slightly, checking the road carefully before crossing it. “A fair few.”

“Will you teach me French?” she says eagerly.

Giles stuffs his hands in his pockets, long stride slow to keep pace with her, and looks down in bemused surprise. “If you like.”

“Then I’ll be ready for Paris, too.” Dawn slides her arms through the jacket’s sleeves properly, letting the tips fall low over her hands. Then she remembers what he said earlier. “What did you mean, ‘not going just yet’?”

“Everyone goes somewhere at some point. You might yet go to Poland and Paris, but perhaps later, with more money and planning.”

Dawn considers this. She might run away - but not yet. “You have to teach me French first,” she says certainly.

Giles huffs in amusement. "I suppose I do. But only if you promise to run your escape plans by me first."

Dawn nods and yawns enormously until her jaw cracks and Giles winces on her behalf. Her eyes flutter and she stumbles. He catches her with a hand on her shoulder and stops them both. With gentle hands he guides her onto a nearby low wall and easily takes her up on his back.

They move much faster on Giles' long legs and it's warmer pressed against his broad back with her arms around his neck. Dawn rests her head on his shoulder and watches as they pass the scene of her earlier road-crossing attempt. The cars have been moved from the middle of the road, but the skid marks are still on the tarmac like dark scars and one of the cars looks like it's been almost bent in half. Dawn shifts slightly in Giles' grip and his hold on her legs tightens, as if keeping her still, or perhaps checking that she's alright.

"Was anyone hurt?" she whispers.

"Just shaken," he replies softly, and makes something of a production of checking for traffic.

"How did you find me?" she yawns into his collar.

"Mr Nowak pointed me in your direction, and some people who saw the crash said you'd run towards the park." Giles adjusts his grip on her and Dawn lets her eyes slip shut.

"Dawn?" The word is said almost before the door is open.

"Mrs Summers," Giles replies with a small smile.

Joyce spots her youngest drooling on his shoulder, wrapped in his coat, and breathes out, visibly relaxing. "Thank God," she says emphatically and Giles grins briefly.

"Rather," he agrees. "Where would you like her?"

She gestures behind her up the stairs. "Her room - you don't mind?"

He shakes his head. "It's no trouble."

Dawn settles easily to sleep in her bed, stirring only slightly as he lays her down. Giles stretches out his hand, and retracts it just before it grazes her hair.

Joyce shakes her head, leaning on the doorway as he turns away. "I just don't understand why she would do this."

Giles offers her a sad smile. "Everyone wants to run away sometimes."

She shrugs her incomprehension and moves on. "Thank you for finding her. After Mr Nowak called, and then her father-" she cuts herself off.

“I understand,” he says, wondering to himself why he does. “I’ll find Buffy, call her off.” *Let her know that the supernatural is, for once, not responsible.*

“Thank you.” Joyce laughs lightly as they head back downstairs, heady with relief. “You seem to be doing a lot of finding my daughters tonight.” Giles shoots her another brief grin. “Will she do it again?” she asks as Giles is leaving.

“Not until I’ve taught her French, apparently,” he says with a small smile and heads away from the warm lights of home into the dark of the night, leaving his jacket wrapped around Dawn’s dreaming form.

Banana Pancakes

Chapter Notes

This chapter is sort of a companion piece to my other Buffy work, *Straight Talking*, but they function independently too.

Willow's hair is soft where it tickles lightly on Tara's cheek. If she looks to her left, she will get a perfect view of the witch's profile wreathed in red hair - and Tara does look, revelling in the luxury of doing so, of simply being allowed to gaze upon the most beautiful thing in all of Tara's world.

Tara smiles, soft and warm and wholly unintentional, and Willow glances across, grinning. "Morning," she says.

"Morning yourself," Tara replies quietly.

Willow stretches like a cat and curls into Tara, faces little more than three inches apart. "Fancy enchanting today so that it's the weekend and we don't have to get up?"

Tara pulls an exaggerated face of concentration, then smiles. "Done."

Willow smiles, tongue caught in her teeth, and Tara chases it lazily. "We don't have plans today?" Willow murmurs against her lips.

Tara shrugs. "We did," she says. "But listen." Willow does, and picks out the sound of rain drumming hard against the glass behind their curtains. "No outdoorsy work for us today."

"Thank God," Willow says, rolling her eyes. "I really don't want to teach Anya any more about gardening."

"I'm sure she didn't mean to weed up your whole patch of wolfsbane," Tara protests gently and Willow makes a *stop-being-reasonable-I'm-complaining-here* face that makes her smile. "No need to go outside."

They kiss a little longer, waking up slowly as the other occupants of the house start their days. Tara can hear Buffy prodding Dawn out of bed, the latter complaining all the way, and the shower start up, pipes rattling and almost drowning out Giles singing to himself.

"We should get up," Willow sighs, and Tara pouts. "I'll make you banana pancakes." Her pout switches swiftly to a grin and Willow laughs.

"Mmm. Best girlfriend."

“Darn tootin’.”

The light in the kitchen is muted and grey with cloud and rain. Buffy is nursing a coffee as Dawn digs into a mountain of cereal and both offer smiles as the witches enter hand-in-hand. Tara sits beside Dawn and receives an affectionate nudge in greeting. Willow fusses about with a frying pan and bowl, whisking the batter together with practised ease.

Dawn pouts. “I want pancakes. Don’t wanna go to school.”

Tara gives her a sympathetic lop-sided smile. “Sorry.”

“I want someone to make me banana pancakes for no reason,” Buffy says. “You gosh darn lesbians, giving me unrealistic expectations for things men will do for me.”

The girls laugh, Tara sending Willow a particularly grateful smile. “You guys are too cute, though,” Dawn says, pointing her spoon at Willow and Tara in turn. “Way not fair.”

Willow shrugs. “What can I say, girls are the bomb.”

“Would have saved you a load of mooning over Xander if you’d figured that out in high school,” Buffy says with a grin.

Willow nods easily. “I was dumb,” she concedes happily. “And I’m glad I figured it all out in the end.”

“You’re happier now, I think,” Dawn says, and the others look at her in surprise. “What, I’m not allowed to be perceptive?”

“No,” Buffy says dryly. “It’s weird.”

“I am,” Willow says. “Happy, I mean.” She grins at Tara and blows her a kiss, which Tara catches and presses to her heart. “But also just knowing who I am. Talking to Giles about it helped loads.”

Dawn tilts her head curiously as Willow pours batter into the pan. “You talked to Giles about it?”

Willow nods. “First person - other than her parents - that she told,” Tara says.

“How was that, anyway?” Buffy says, sipping her coffee and hopping up to sit on the counter.

Willow shrugs. “You know. Did some crying, some telling, some hugging, slept on his sofa. Good times.”

“He’s a good guy to talk to about that kind of thing,” Buffy says, looking at Dawn. “If you ever need to-”

Dawn holds up a hand. “Got it. Why Giles though? I mean, particularly.”

“He’s been there, done that, kicked his ex-boyfriend in the ribs,” Buffy says, knocking back the remainder of her coffee as Willow presents Tara with a banana pancake and a kiss.

“Really?” Dawn says. “Why the rib-kicking?”

“Giles is my best and only queer role model, and makes mooning after Xander look like a paragon of relationship decisions,” Willow says with a wry smile.

“Is it better or worse than Xander can-only-date-bugs-and-demons Harris if the guy is evil and also human?” Buffy says thoughtfully. Willow snorts inelegantly and Tara giggles behind her hand.

“Who did you talk to, Tara?” Dawn says, and Tara’s grin freezes.

“Oh, well, I - uh - I didn’t really, um, have anyone to go to with, um, all of that...stuff...” She ducks her head and pushes some pancake through the syrup on her plate.

“Not even your parents?” Willow says, all concern, pancakes forgotten.

Tara manages an unhappy smile for a second. “My d-dad wasn’t - well. No.”

“You could talk to Giles about it,” Dawn suggests. “He’s like a dad, but better.”

“N-no. I don’t want to b-bother him.”

“Baby,” Willow begins, but Tara stops her.

“Don’t. I’m okay.” She smiles shakily. “Dawn, you’ll be late.”

Willow and Buffy exchange concerned looks, and let it slide.

“How is Tara?” Willow looks up, slightly surprised, but Giles is genuinely interested. She forgets, sometimes, that Tara is other people’s friend too, and not exclusively her own. “I haven’t seen her in a few days, what with your studies.”

“She’s good,” Willow says happily. “College is going well for us both and we’re going slow with the magics, just the way you like it.” He gives her a look over his glasses that is secretly amused and she sticks her tongue out at him. Giles and Dawn laugh and turn back to the bookshelf they’re organising. “She’s trying to figure out some tax return thing though - that’s bothering her.”

Giles frowns, gazing into space. “Hmm. Are there people at your university - counsellors or - or advisors or something - who can help? I’d suggest her father for advice, but I wouldn’t suggest her father for *anything*.” He slams a book into the shelf with slightly more force than necessary. Dawn flinches at the noise and he shoots her an apologetic glance.

“Is it hard?” Willow says. “I mean, yeah, there’s probably someone who can help, but, like, effort.”

Giles rolls his eyes. "No, it isn't exactly rocket science. But I find it helps to have an experienced assistant in such matters as the American bureaucracy."

"You could help," Dawn suggests, and Giles looks up, eyes wide behind his glasses. "I-I mean, you've done it before, and you're all about the paperwork - you could help Tara instead of her dad."

"Yes!" Willow says, brightening. "I'll tell Tara - she'll be super grateful."

Giles looks interested and pleased, and then suddenly his ears go red at the tips and he clears his throat. "No, no - I'm sure someone else... I shouldn't like to intrude. Perhaps Anya - she knows the taxation system better than anyone."

Dawn furrows her brow. "Didn't you catch her trying tax evasion last week?"

Giles gestures vaguely with the book. "I'm sure she's not doing that...any more..."

Willow and Dawn roll their eyes at each other behind his back. "You won't be intruding," Dawn says, prodding Giles' arm none too gently. "She wants help."

Giles mutters something mostly unintelligible about the importance of independence and wanders into the kitchen, leaving the bookshelf just as disorganised as before.

Dawn has been up for at least an hour by the time Giles comes downstairs. He stretches widely, yawning, and makes it halfway to the kettle before he realises that there are other people in the kitchen at nine on a Sunday.

Buffy hands him a mug with a smile, which he accepts on autopilot, blinking away sleep with astonished eyes. "Morning," he says eventually.

Willow grins. "Morning Giles. We made you breakfast."

He looks down at the counter which is laden with food - pancakes and fruit and fried breakfast. "So you have," he says. Dawn giggles - this may have been a bit much for a half-asleep librarian, still in his slippers.

"Even a full English," Xander says proudly.

"Something I fully intend to be," Giles says mildly, sipping his tea. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" His eyes narrow suspiciously. "What have you done?"

Dawn slides off the worktop and wraps her arms around him. "Happy Father's Day, Giles."

He is silent for a long time. "It's a thing humans do, apparently," Anya explains helpfully. "To celebrate fathers. You are not our father, but Xander has pointed out that you do father-type jobs." She gives him a blinding smile. "So thank you."

"Right," Giles manages at last. "I see."

Dawn looks up at him. "This is okay, right?"

Giles smiles down at her in bemused wonderment before putting down his mug, pressing a kiss to her forehead and hugging her tightly. With one hand he takes off his glasses and wipes his eyes on his dressing-gown sleeve. "Yes," he says, laughing slightly at himself. "Thank you, all of you."

"Can we eat the pancakes now?" Anya asks eagerly.

Giles nods, smiling, and releases Dawn to the food she helped prepare. Xander grins at him and begins to help himself; Buffy and Willow tuck themselves under his arms and he gives them a small squeeze before reclaiming his mug.

There is a noise behind him and he turns. Tara is sneaking away towards the door, but her bag had bumped the wall and given her away. "Tara?" She turns, guilty. Giles gestures back towards the mountain of food. "Did you...do this too?"

Tara twists her fingers together until her knuckles are white and bloodless. "I just helped. I - I didn't mean to interrupt - you enjoy your day." The smile she gives him is weak and short-lived.

"You're welcome to stay," he says. "If - if you want to. I know I'm not - but you can. You don't have to."

"Oh, honestly," Willow says from the kitchen and they both turn to look at her in surprise. "You two are terrible! Tara, baby, Giles is totally willing to be your replacement dad and would actually kinda love it." Giles opens his mouth but Willow shushes him. "You can't deny it."

"I can deny it if I like," Giles says indignantly. "I can deny anything if I like." He takes off his glasses and begins to clean them, not looking at either girl. "I shan't, though," he murmurs.

"Giles, Tara definitely wants an extra dad on account of the suckiness of her other one, so infringing on that role is not a problem. She even suggested we make English food for you today."

Giles looks up at her and she shuffles awkwardly. "I just thought it'd be nice."

Willow folds her arms. "So stop fussing and get in on the weird family-ness already. I'm tired of your nonsense." Her words are blunted by her smile but Giles rolls his eyes anyway.

"What did you want me to do, casually ask if I could replace her father?"

Willow nods. "Tactless, but preferable."

"You can," Tara murmurs, and Giles looks at her. "Replace him, I mean." She smiles at him, short and tight. "I don't ever see him anyway."

Giles gives in and strides over, bridging the gap between them, and hugs her tightly. "I'm sorry," he whispers.

When he pulls back, Tara shrugs. "G-guess it could be worse."

"Come on," Dawn calls. "You're missing out on the food, and we've got to eat it before Willow has to go and have lunch with her other dad."

"Her real dad," Giles corrects as they join the others.

Buffy pulls an exaggerated face of confusion. "You're not real?"

Xander snaps his fingers. "I knew we were all in some kind of collective hallucination - like that other one with the cheese. How else can you explain Willow's taste?"

Willow looks up from where she is adding ketchup, cheese and grapes to her pancakes. "Hey! I have excellent taste."

"Y-yeah, I'm great," Tara says with a nervous grin.

Dawn gives her a high-five around Giles. "Beware of major self-burn, Xander, she had a crush on you too."

"And you can't be mean to Giles on Father's Day," Buffy adds, ruthlessly stealing bacon from her Watcher's plate.

"May we never mention that in the same breath as the word *father* ever again?" Giles says, frowning. "And give me back my bacon or you're grounded for a week."

Willow laughs as Buffy makes loud and exaggerated protestations and Tara relaxes. She's never done this before - her father was not much for overt displays of affection, or for gentle teasing, or easy contact. Giles sometimes brushes against her, passes her things she asks for, is genuinely interested in her studies and her magic and never, *ever* makes her feel less than human. She's never done this before, but nothing has ever felt so natural and right as sitting beside her girlfriend on a lazy Sunday morning, surrounded by those who call her *family*.

Rockstar

Chapter Notes

Set during the summer between seasons three and four.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It is mid-afternoon on a Thursday, Californian summer sun soaking into the carpet around the prone forms of lazy teenagers. Everything is more or less quiet aside the quiet plucking of Oz's guitar and Giles leans his forehead against his upper kitchen cupboards, eyes closed, content.

The kettle boils and he steps back, pouring out his own tea, four coffees and a hot chocolate - no marshmallows. He's learning.

Giles carries the tray into the living room, stepping over Xander to place it on the coffee table. Buffy takes her feet off it, having the grace to look slightly guilty, and Dawn immediately leans forward to grab her mug - and it is hers, apparently; no matter that he bought it easily fifteen years ago from a National Trust gift shop, Dawn has claimed the mug with its foxglove motif for her own.

"How can you drink chocolate in this heat?" Buffy says, poking her sister's thigh with a bare foot stretched between the sofa and armchair.

Dawn sniffs imperiously as only a thirteen-year-old can and shifts further back in the armchair until she is out of reach. "You're drinking a hot drink too."

"The sugar, though." Buffy sips her coffee, looking superior, and Willow shoots Giles a grin as he rolls his eyes.

Xander sticks an arm up from his position flat on his back on the floor. "Hey! Sugar is king."

"In your drink, certainly," Giles says dryly. "You put so much in that it hardly qualifies as coffee."

His arm flops back to the floor. "Yup," Xander says, with no small amount of pride. Giles steps back over him, digging a toe into the boy's ribs in passing, and Xander shrieks and twists. "Evil! Evil tickle man!"

Giles assumes an innocent expression over the rim of his mug to make the others laugh. "The evil tickle man. Probably the worst foe we've faced yet," Oz says solemnly and Willow ruffles his hair where he leans on her knees.

"How's the song going?" she asks and Oz frowns. "That well?" Willow says, concerned.

“Yeah, I think that was almost an emotion,” Dawn says, ignoring Buffy’s look.

He scrubs a hand through his hair, currently between dye jobs. “Every so often, I think I’m getting somewhere - and then I lose it.” Oz shrugs. “It’s just snatches.”

Willow pats his shoulder consolingly. “You’ll get there.”

He nods, non-committal, and plucks through the bars he has, letting the sound reverberate in Giles’ small apartment. Oz tries some new notes, then cuts himself off, slapping his fingers against the frets to kill the noise.

“Try an A minor,” Giles murmurs absently, sipping his tea and skimming through a book on his desk.

Xander tilts his head back awkwardly. “Huh?”

“Hmm?” Giles looks up. “Oh, nothing.” The teenagers look at him expectantly and he huffs, giving in. “Try an A minor, not major.”

Oz plays through it again with the alteration and nods. “Huh. Thanks, man.”

“You play?” Dawn says, nearly spilling her drink in her eagerness to kneel on her chair.

Giles tilts his head from side to side. “Now and then. Not this sort of music anymore.”

“Yeah, he only plays sad old man music nowadays,” Buffy laughs.

Giles glares without much venom. “Yes, thank you.”

“But you used to?” Oz asks.

“Back in my misspent youth.”

Dawn scoffs, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, because *you* had a misspent youth.” The others shift awkwardly but she continues regardless. “You probably played guitar instead of doing your homework in the summer vacation, like, once.”

Giles rolls his eyes. “Yes, that was my one big rebellion.”

Oz unloops the strap from around his neck and offers the instrument to Giles. “You want to play guitar instead of us doing our homework in the summer vacation?”

The kids look at him expectantly, but Giles is watching the way the light shines and moves on the polished wood and clean strings, the way the instrument has been religiously cared-for all its life, the way his fingers itch to take it. “No, I think not.” He puts his mug down and ignores the moans and pouts.

“Pleeease, Giles,” Willow begs. “We’ll be good an-and stuff.”

Xander scoffs. “C’mon, Will, we’re not seven.” He rolls onto his stomach and grabs Giles’ leg as it passes towards the coat closet. “Pleaaaaase.”

“You’re welcome to,” Oz presses. “It’s not like you can break it or anything.”

Giles snorts, shaking himself free of Xander. “You can the way I used to play.”

Oz, prickled, becomes slightly defensive. “Dingoes play pretty hard.”

The ex-librarian sends the boy an *oh-really* look as he opens the closet and steps in. “Uh, Giles?” Buffy says. “I know we’re annoying, but I don’t think you can escape that way.”

“You could if Narnia was in there,” Dawn says happily. “Is Narnia real?” Even now, she’s not quite over the possibility of fictional worlds being part of her own.

“No, it’s a big Christian allegory,” Giles’ voice returns, muffled by coats. “Ah.”

He emerges carrying a large, mostly-black guitar case. The cheap coating has greyed somewhat with age, and one corner has set into butter-coloured bubbles like caramelising sugar. Giles brushes it off and smiles at it.

“Giles, did you set your guitar on fire?” Buffy says after a pause. Oz brings his own back to his chest.

“Of course not,” he says, insulted. “Everything else was on fire; this, almost entirely not.” He gazes upwards, smiling wistfully. “That was a good gig.”

“No-one’s ever set the Bronze on fire,” Willow says uncertainly. “I mean, not yet.”

“You and I frequented rather different establishments.” Giles places the case carefully on his desk and begins to open it.

Xander holds out a hand, the other propping up his chin, flicking his legs up and down idly. “See, you say that, but you also say it *like that*: ‘frequented different-’ oh God, Oz, don’t look.”

Oz seems to be holding back a dangerous display of emotion and Giles smirks. In his hands is an old, extremely battered guitar, every inch scuffed and scarred until almost no paint or varnish is left. The strings are rather grimy and the frets have gone copper in the shape of fingerprints. Oz cradles his own guitar tighter to his chest.

Giles tunes up quickly, with practised ease, and knocks out a couple of riffs that are familiar from his records. “Cool,” Xander says, like he can’t quite help it, and the older man snorts. Xander turns to the others in obvious distress. “I just said Giles was cool.”

“Well, heaven knows no-one’s called me that before.” He plays a couple of notes and adjusts the strap on his shoulder. Buffy shares Xander’s concerned look, but Willow and Oz just grin.

Dawn bounces excitedly in her seat. “Now play some Backstreet Boys,” she demands.

Giles glares at her over the rim of his glasses. “No.” She pouts, ignoring Buffy and Willow choking on their own laughter at the idea.

Instead he plays them Eric Clapton and Pink Floyd and Cream; some they know, some they don’t, all with a looseness and ease not often associated with their stuffy librarian. The songs he picks are more Wish You Were Here than Another Brick In The Wall, but it’s clear that this guitar has not seen much of the *sad old man music* Buffy accused him of. He plays them something slower, lets it get to the chorus before he starts to sing and laughs as they groan, realising too late that they’ve been enjoying Elton John.

Oz plays some of the riffs that Dingoes favour and Giles plays them back, twisting them until they sound furious and snarling. “Going to take hints?” Xander asks Oz.

He shrugs. “Maybe. We could probably get some Floyd in our next set.”

“Don’t invest in good strings, then.” Giles smiles, plays a scale with fingers which cannot seem to settle. “I went through a set every gig - spent more on them than we did on anything else.”

“Did you play a lot?” Buffy asks, lazing on the sofa and tapping her toes in time with the quiet tune Giles is playing.

“Yes, often. It payed for rent, food - and other things,” he finishes lamely, shooting a look at Dawn.

She rolls her eyes. “It’s okay, you can say alcohol. See - mere mention hasn’t made me into a drunkard.”

“Yes,” Giles says dryly. “Drink was the only other thing.” He ignores Dawn’s confusion as the older kids stifle their amusement.

“How old’s the guitar?” Oz asks.

Giles smiles to himself, watching the way the boy’s fingers run reverentially up and down his own shiny silver strings. Oz cannot bear the way Giles’ instrument looks, that much is clear from his protective hunch over the newer model, but he looks hungrily at the old one; a small part of him will always want the scars, scuffs and scrapes that come from having played with such force and abandon - from having played *properly*.

He runs his fingers across the familiar damage. “Oh, must be...twenty-odd. I bought her the day I left Oxford from some disreputable corner of Soho.”

Willow raises an eyebrow with a teasing smile. “Her? Giles, did you personify your guitar?”

He laughs at his own expense, running a hand through his hair. “Somewhat. Ethan used to say-” - *you love that guitar more than me*, and Ripper is almost twenty, all leather and denim, lounging on a cheap mattress in a cheaper flat as Ethan crawls towards him, keeping the other boy away with a socked foot on his shoulder. Ethan presses against the barrier, relentless in his pursuit, eyes hungry and pupils so enlarged with drugs and magic and desire that his eyes

look black and demonic and Ripper shivers. The movement dislodges his foot, sliding his heel down Ethan's back as the boy keeps going. Their lips are inches apart, Ripper's leg awkwardly folded between them but pressing their hips together in a way that makes a growl rumble deep in his chest.

"Used to say what?" Dawn asks impatiently.

Giles' eyes close hard, nails pressing tiny half-moons into the heels of his palm almost hard enough to break the skin. "A great many things. None of them worth repeating." He gives them a tiny, hard smile and unloops the strap from his shoulders, swapping the instrument for lukewarm tea.

He curses his own foolishness, as he so often has before, as an awkward silence descends upon the room. The wind blows gently through the open window, disturbing the pages of an open book on his desk. When the rustling stops, quiet humming is discernible.

"Xander, are you singing Rocket Man?" Buffy says.

"No!" he says, entirely too quickly and at the same time as the humming stops.

"Humming, then," Willow adds helpfully.

"I - but - it's Giles' fault," he manages.

"I'm sorry, Xander," he begins, sounding sympathetic, and Xander relaxes. "If I'd known you liked Elton so much I would have played more of it."

"Hey!" Xander sits up, turning on the traitor who is chuckling into his tea. Buffy cackles in triumph as Willow and Dawn giggle; even Oz is grinning.

"Do we get to play you our music now?" Dawn asks with an all-too-evil grin.

"Certainly not," Giles says, hiding his amusement as Buffy's smile becomes a carbon copy of her little sister's.

Xander gets up on his knees, throws a hand in the air and in his most breathy, dramatic voice begins to sing. "You are my fire, the one desire..."

"Believe," Dawn joins. "When I say, that-"

Collectively now the teens on his sofa sing at top volume. "I want it that way - tell me why!"

Giles rolls his eyes in fond exasperation, wandering into the kitchen as they continue to sing with varying degrees of skill. "Don't want to hear you-" he mumbles as he puts his mug in the sink, just quiet enough to be inaudible to the standard human ear in the next room.

"Yes Giles!" Buffy calls, triumphant, and he closes his eyes, groaning. "I knew you liked the Backstreet Boys really!" The others are struggling to sing and laugh at the same time.

He leans on the counter division to glare at them. "Using your Slayer hearing in everyday life is - is cheating."

Buffy leans her head back to hang upside-down over the back of the sofa and sticks her tongue out at him. "And using your Watcher nerdery in everyday life when you could be some kind of rockstar is boring," Xander says. "So I guess it works out."

He narrows his eyes at them. "Thank you, Xander," he says dryly.

Xander spreads his arms. "I'm here all summer. No, seriously, I am, my mom has the worst taste in daytime TV."

"You'd rather be with books than TV?" Willow says, a paragon of mock-concern. "It must be bad." She holds a hand to his forehead. "Are you sick?"

Xander rolls his eyes at her. "Funny girl."

Willow nods, grinning. "I think so," Oz says, giving her an affectionate half-smile.

Buffy checks her watch and groans. "Ugh. We're going to have to go soon - Mom's working late and now she's all 'you have to cook Dawn dinner' and I'm like 'but what about training and patrol and like, my life,' and she says-"

"Buffy," Giles cuts her off gently, before Dawn can get anymore cross about being described like a burden. "Would you like to stay for dinner before training?"

Buffy and Dawn both pause in the process of getting up and, as one, slump back into the cushions. "Yup," she says, grinning.

He rolls his eyes and starts to get ingredients for lasagna out of the cupboards. "You're welcome, I'm sure."

"Sorry. Thanks."

"Sounds better than what I'll get," Xander says. "Reheated curry, the last word in poor digestion."

"My parents are on a health kick," Oz says. "I've really discovered the limits of the human capacity to eat lettuce."

"The recipe can be adapted to serve five," Giles calls and Xander cheers.

Willow pouts. "I don't wanna go home if you guys are going to have a dinner party."

Giles sighs loudly and gets out another plate.

"Thank you Giles!" Willow calls. "Also, thanks for having us around all summer."

"Yeah," Xander says. "It's been strangely not-boring."

“High praise indeed,” Giles says dryly. “Buffy, come and chop these onions. Xander, carrots.”

“I take back my thanks,” Xander says, pouting, but gets up anyway.

“Careful,” Giles says mildly. “I might decide there’s only enough for five after all.”

Xander sends him a bright grin. “Very much back onboard the grateful train.”

“Can I play your guitar?” Oz calls. “Promise not to polish it or anything.”

“And can I borrow this book?” Willow says from somewhere half-inside his bookshelves.

“Yes, and - maybe.” Giles runs a hand through his hair. “Dawn, can you find the table and then lay it?”

“Agh, onion tears,” Buffy says, swiping at her streaming eyes.

Dawn laughs as she gets up. “Bet you just can’t wait until September, huh?”

Giles huffs in amusement, looking about at his apartment. The small mountain of trainers and heels by the door, the CD player that somehow made it beside his turntable, the books scattered around the room to make space for mugs and feet and relaxing. Five extra mugs in his sink, five extra places laid at his table, five people who would rather be here than at home - not just tonight, but all the long, long summer. Even without the usual demonic activity, what with the rubble covering the Hellmouth, even without the ties of school and library, even with the whole world at their feet, they have been here: lazing in the summer sun that puddles even now on his rug, reading his books, playing his guitar.

He runs a hand through his hair and grins, bright and bold. “I can be patient.”

Chapter End Notes

Someday, I'll turn the songs that are chapter titles or mentioned in this fic into some kind of playlist, and it will be nonsensical.

This Road is Long

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Did you ever want kids, Giles?” Buffy asks quietly, lazing on his armchair.

Giles looks over from his pacing behind the couch. “Hmm?”

“You know. Kids. Find a nice sort of someone, settle down, pop out a mini-Giles or two - although I suppose you might get someone else to do the actual popping-out part - and dress ‘em in tweed. You ever want that?”

Giles adjusts the baby on his chest thoughtfully. Of all the myriad Hellmouth-y phenomena with which he had been forced to deal, this was not the worst. Sure, they were up one six-month-old Dawn and a pair of four-year-old witches, but the spell would wear off in a day or so and there was a certain ingrained something to tiny babies that had always appealed to Giles. And Dawn really was tiny: Giles’ hand was wider than her back. “I’m not sure, really. I suppose if I’d found the right person I’d have thought about it more.” Dawn blinks up at him and he nods seriously at her. “Yes, I would. But I don’t feel that I’ve missed out,” he says, turning again to Buffy.

She snorts. “Certainly not on the teenager part.”

Giles huffs a laugh. “Just my luck, only getting children when they’ve stopped being cute.”

“We don’t drool, though.” Buffy thinks about this for a moment. “Well, Xander does sometimes, but... I actually don’t have a good excuse for that.”

He looks down at his shirt and sighs. When confronted with baby Dawn, Buffy had made a comment about having not held any baby since Dawn really was this age. Xander had scoffed, having never held a baby, but he had been dropped when he was one, if that helped - and then Anya had gained a *my-biological-clock-is-ticking-and-I-want-babies-now* look in her eyes and Xander had hurried her away from the threat before she could get any ideas. Willow and Tara were in no position to hold her and so Giles - rather symbolically, he thought - was left to deal with the latest remotely grown-up problem. Which is why Dawn was curled up against his chest, head tucked into the crook of his neck, drooling onto his collar with more enthusiasm than any child had right to. “This I really did *not* miss out on.”

Buffy laughs. “Nah, it’s a good look for you.” He glares at her without much venom or focus, having long since removed the shiny temptation usually referred to as *glasses* from the reach of any of the children. She makes a small cross over her heart. “Serious. Babies are the latest in fall fashion and you wear the paternal look well.”

“Yes, catch Dawn and I on the catwalk any day now.” Buffy slaps a hand over her mouth to avoid waking the kids. Giles holds it together until they make eye contact and then has to walk away, mouth clamped shut and shoulders shaking as he rocks Dawn.

Their silent giggling distracts Buffy long enough for Willow to drag Tara into the middle of the room and pout at them both. "Hey, munchkins," Buffy says, sobering slightly. "Whatcha doin' out of bed so late?"

Tara tugs Willow's hand, trying to pull them back towards the guest room where they had both been tucked in a few hours before, but Willow stands firm. "Tara had a bad dream."

"Oh, baby," Buffy says softly. Giles comes back to sit on the sofa. "Want to talk about it?"

Tara shakes her head enthusiastically. Willow pouts again, but to no avail. Taking more direct action, she pulls the bigger girl up onto the couch with her to sit with Giles.

"Ah, Buffy?" he says, and she uncurls from her armchair to carefully extricate Dawn, cradling her to her chest and sitting back down. Giles pulls each girl up to sit on his lap where he can wrap his long arms around them both. "We'll have a little cuddle, then, until you feel better."

Willow nods, immediately satisfied, and it occurs to Buffy that Willow's parents weren't the physical affection type. She doesn't much want to think about Tara's parents, but the girl relaxes against Giles' broad chest easily. They sit quietly for a few minutes, just holding and being held.

"I'm not a monster, am I?" Tara says very, very quietly.

"No," Giles says, immediate and soft and certain.

Tara breathes out. "I dreamed I was a monster an' I et people."

"Did you have lots of legs?" Tara nods. "Scales?"

"Fur," she whispers.

"Ah." Giles nods, and makes an exaggerated show of checking her over, counting her legs and lifting her arms, tickling as he goes until she's nearly squirmed off his lap, breathless and giggling. "Well, you seem to look pretty much like a girl to me. What do you think, Buffy?"

Buffy nods. "One hundred per cent Tara; accept no substitutes." Dawn yawns widely and Buffy makes a face at Giles.

"Bedtime for girls, I think," Giles says, noting with a fond smile Willow's soft, sleepy snores. Tara nods and Giles adjusts his grip on them both until he can stand and carry them both to bed.

Buffy stretches carefully, listening to Giles murmur the girls to sleep in the other room, and strokes Dawn's hair. Her face screws up in sleep and Buffy's eyes widen in fear.

Giles re-enters and Buffy's face makes him come over and take Dawn back. Before she can stir, Giles starts to sing, gentle and slow, and Dawn calms again. Buffy sighs in relief.

"Look at you, dealing with bad dreams left, right and centre."

Giles smiles down at her. "Bedtime for all girls, I think," he says as she yawns. She leans her head against his upper arm and gazes at her baby sister, then kisses his cheek and heads upstairs. Giles stretches himself out on his couch, Dawn on his chest and sings them both to sleep.

Xander's never seemed keen on going home, Giles reminds himself. He hasn't been sleeping well either. So, it's out of care for the boy that Giles leaves him, head pillowed on two ancient texts, asleep on the library table.

Not because Angelus -

Since Jenny -

Giles just wants to keep them all *safe*.

He shrugs off his jacket and takes off the jumper beneath, carefully lifting Xander's head and letting it rest on soft burgundy cashmere rather than dry, dusty parchment. Xander barely stirs and he smiles a funny little half-smile in remembrance of being Xander's age, always hungry from growing almost six inches a year and falling asleep in the apple tree in the garden. Giles reaches out, fingers barely skimming the dark, untamed hair.

Xander moves suddenly and Giles snatches his hand back, ready to stammer out apologies, but as Xander makes small distressed noises it becomes clear that he hasn't actually woken up. Giles sits down next to him, peering at his face which is screwed up in imagined pain or fear. "Xander?" he says softly.

"No..." Xander moans. "Not - not him...me...not Giles...me!"

Giles can only stare at him in surprise for a moment. Then he reaches out again, this time letting his fingers card gently through his hair, teasing at knots. "I'm here, Xander. It's alright. I'm here. You're dreaming. You're safe."

It takes a few minutes of these murmured platitudes before he quietens, brow smoothing out as he returns to sleep. Giles just keeps stroking through his hair, research forgotten.

"You're safe. I'm here."

Giles doesn't ever get sick, which is why, when he does, it is somewhat akin to the end of the world.

"You are, without doubt or exception, the worst patient anyone has ever had the misfortune of treating," Willow says, hands on hips, glaring down at a mutinous, blanket-swaddled Watcher.

"Ah, but you have treated him," Xander says with a smirk. He nods in concession to the confused looks of his friends. "Weak. Sounded better in the film. Continue arguing."

“Then feel free to leave me alone,” Giles says, sniffing in a way that was probably supposed to be imperious but ended up more...wet. “To die,” he adds, morosely.

“No,” Willow says, brooking no argument. “Xander and Buffy have to work and Anya’s running the shop, but me and Tara will get you some medicine and Dawn can stay here and get you some tea.”

Giles glares at her. “Dawn doesn’t want to be here. I don’t need someone to make me tea. I just need to be left alone to rest.” He shivers and pulls his blankets closer around him.

“You’re running a fever of one hundred and four, Giles,” Tara says gently.

He blinks at her. “Fahrenheit. Right. I don’t know what that means.”

“Which is, in itself, a sign that you’re sick.” Dawn thinks for a minute. “That’s like...forty? In European weirdness?” Giles grimaces. “Besides, I don’t mind staying. I’d only be revising for a French test at home.”

He turns back to Willow in a last-ditch appeal. “Who better to help her with it?” Willow smirks, triumphant. He groans and flops back into the sofa, glaring at their retreating backs.

Dawn grins at him. “Tea?”

“S’il vous plait,” he sniffs. She rolls her eyes and heads into the kitchen, making the honey and lemon tea he’d made her last time her throat was sore. “Qu’est-ce que tu etudies?”

“Amour,” she says in her best dramatic, sultry French voice and he laughs, though it quickly devolves into coughing.

“Vraiment?” he manages eventually as she hands him his mug.

“Non. Les environnement, maintenant.”

“Ah.” Giles sips his tea and places it on the coffee table, stretching his legs out on the sofa. “Que penses-tu de les environnement?”

Dawn is half-way through telling Giles about her great plans for wind and solar energy when she realises he’s fast asleep.

She sits with him the rest of the day, working quietly while he alternates between mumbling and fidgeting and a sleep so still she has to check he’s still breathing. He wakes up for some toast and water at lunch and staggers to the bathroom under his own steam, but Dawn listens out for crashes and has to help him back to the sofa. Giles takes the medicine Willow and Tara had left without too much complaint but he looks furious about the situation, which Dawn kinda gets; he’s pretty independent and now he can’t even go to and from the bathroom on his own.

He looks miserable, sitting up on the couch in three blankets, staring into his tea. Dawn moves to sit beside him and flicks the TV on, curling into his side. He lets her surf without comment until she reaches her destination.

“Really? Cartoons?”

She shrugs. “I always watch them when I’m sick. It’s an important part of the healing process.”

Giles, too tired to argue, leans his head on hers and lets the bright colours flicker before his eyes.

This lasts them - with some napping on Giles’ part - until Anya and Xander arrive with dinner and to stay with Giles overnight. He is, as expected, very unhappy about this invasion of his home and the suggestion that he can’t look after himself.

He can’t, of course, but that really isn’t the point.

He does his best to eat, but can’t manage more than a few mouthfuls and can only just sit at the table, so after a few minutes Xander slings Giles’ arm over his shoulders and hauls him upstairs to bed.

Dawn, Anya and Xander discuss the various merits of swords vs stakes vs axes through the rest of the meal and the washing up. Stakes loses, so Dawn has to take Giles his medicine and a glass of water. *It wouldn’t be a chore*, she thinks as she heads upstairs, *if Giles weren’t being a chore*.

The world’s worst patient is not sleeping all that soundly when Dawn enters, tossing and turning, which makes her feel quite bad about calling him a chore. Giles is clearly enjoying this even less than she is. He moans and mutters something indistinct. This is a bad dream, and Dawn really doesn’t want to think about the things that give Giles bad dreams.

“Giles?” she calls from the doorway, hoping that Xander or Anya will hear and maybe come and help. She knows he’d hate the attention right now, but knows even more that she is not prepared to deal with this.

Before they have the chance, though, Giles shoots up, eyes wide and wild. He spots her and scrambles back, pressed against the headboard and breathing hard. He looks...afraid. Of her.

Xander bursts in and Giles tries to press further into the wall, eyes flicking between them. Hands held out before him, Xander starts to step forwards. “Hey, big guy. We okay over there?”

Giles shuts his eyes and breathes hard. “You’re not real,” he pronounces, voice slightly shaky. “They’re making me see things I want to. This isn’t real.”

“Open your eyes, buddy. It’s only me, and I’m all too real.” Giles cracks open his eyes and Xander gives him an encouraging smile, reaching out a hand. “You can poke me, see, I’m real.”

Giles hesitantly taps the proffered hand, then grasps it tightly. “Xander,” he breathes with palpable relief.

Xander grins and Giles relaxes away from the wall slightly. "The one and only. Making people wish I wasn't real so they wouldn't have to deal with me since 1981."

Giles huffs a shaky laugh. He looks up again, squinting into the gloom. "Dawn?"

She takes a stilted step forward, places his pills and his glass on the bedside table, forcing her white knuckles to let each go. She offers him a weak smile.

His fingers creep across the sheets and wrap around her pinky finger. He releases a long, tremulous breath. "Dawn."

"Some dream, huh?" she says, awkward and unsure.

"Some fever," Xander says, fingers tapping the back of Giles' hand.

"Hmm," Giles agrees, slumping down into his pillows but maintaining his grip on their hands.

"I'm real too," Anya offers from the doorway. She trots in and sits by his feet to place a hand on his shin. "See? I'm real."

Giles smiles at her. "I am very glad to hear it."

Buffy is vaguely aware of someone else in her room and wakes up enough to look at it. "Hey, Giles," she murmurs to the shape leaning in her doorway.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he says softly.

"Ugh. Stupid Slayer senses." She blinks blearily at him and sits up slightly. "Besides, I'm kinda used to having older men sneak into my room at night now."

Giles' eyes widen in horror. "Oh, God, Buffy; I'm so sorry, I'll go--"

She throws a pillow at him with deadly accuracy. "Stop it, silly. You're okay." She frowns. "At least, I assume you are. What's up?"

He picks up the pillow, brushing it off and avoiding eye contact. "I, uh. I had a dream."

"Prophecy dream? Do you even get those?"

"Watchers don't, no. And I certainly hope it wasn't prophetic." He clears his throat and looks at his feet, hands twisting and mangling the pillow. Buffy spares a moment to be glad she hadn't thrown anything breakable at him.

"Just a nightmare, then."

He smiles shortly at her, embarrassed. "Yes. I was just...checking. That you were--"

"Alive?"

“Here,” he says. Buffy reaches out an arm and he wanders over, handing her the pillow back. She dumps it beside her and grabs his hand, tugging him to sit next to her. He sighs. “In my dream, you stayed dead. And - and I knew you weren’t in heaven this time.” He smiles self-deprecatingly at his lap when she frowns. “Dream logic. And Willow shouldn’t have used her magic like she did, but gods, Buffy, I missed you. I missed you so much.” His grip on her hand tightens.

Buffy leans on his shoulder. “I missed you too, I think. Heaven was great and all-” He snorts. “-but I think I missed you guys too. And, you know.” She shrugs. “What’s done is done. I’m here.”

Giles presses a kiss to the crown of her messy hair. “You’re here,” he says. “Just a dream.”

“Why does Buffy have this weird thing about cheese slices since you guys fought Adam?” Dawn asks him.

Giles tips back his head and laughs. “Bad dream,” he says finally, and will explain no further.

Giles, flat on his back, cannot sleep. He’s tried, too, for about five hours, so he should know. Every time he shuts his eyes, all he can see is broken bodies - Buffy, Xander, Willow, Dawn. Any and all of the people he loves and has ever loved: Jenny, Ethan and Randall are all there too, his brain too eager for horror and pain.

So here he lies, staring at the ceiling and wishing his brain would just *shut up* for half a damn second.

The door opens and Buffy enters, confidence doing its best to cover real fear. He can’t even stammer out a greeting before she’s laid out beside him. “Hey,” she says conversationally.

“Hello,” he replies by default. He’s still working through being glad that he’s wearing decent pajamas.

“Bad dreams,” she tells him by way of explanation and he nods.

“Prophetic?” She shakes her head.

“Been and gone - just, not in my head.”

He runs a hand through his hair. “Me too.”

She sends him a smile of commiseration, then shares his look of surprise as the door opens again. Willow and Xander stick their heads around the door in a way that they probably think is stealthy and may even have worked, were the occupants not already awake. “Giles! And-Buffy!” Willow says in surprise. “You’re awake! And here!”

“As are you,” Giles replies. “Think about saying something inappropriate, Alexander Harris, and I shall eviscerate you.”

Obediently Xander closes his mouth, but doesn't stop grinning.

"Whatcha doin' out of bed so late?" Buffy says and Willow goes as red as her hair.

"Will had a bad dream and wanted to check up on everyone," Xander explains, smiling softly at his oldest friend. "I couldn't sleep either."

"Join the club," Buffy says. Willow and Xander take this as invitation enough and join them on Giles' other side. Willow tucks herself into his side, head pillowed on his shoulder, with Xander spooned up to her back. "This is a cuddly club."

"I like it," Willow says, muffled slightly by Giles' shirt.

Xander yawns widely and Giles rubs his back with the hand that has wrapped around them both. "We should get matching pajamas."

"Hmm," Giles says. "Veto."

Willow giggles and he looks at her curiously. "Your chest is all rumibly when you talk."

He smiles at her in bemused affection, and then he and Buffy wheeze in unison as Dawn finishes sneaking into the room by wriggling into the space between Slayer and Watcher. The fact that there hadn't really been much of a space between them does not deter her sharp elbows.

"Slumber party, huh?" Dawn says with feigned casualness.

"Can't sleep either?" Xander replies with a smile.

Dawn makes a face. Giles wrangles his arm out from beneath her and she mirrors Willow's pose. He reaches around to squeeze Buffy's shoulder and she smiles at him, extending her own arm to meet Xander and Willow's hands on Giles' stomach.

Giles yawns and blinks at them all. Xander, face pressed into Willow's hair, is already asleep and Dawn is looking increasingly dozy. Buffy's eyes are closed, but he suspects she'll only really sleep when the rest of them have nodded off. Willow is smiling at him.

He raises an eyebrow and she shifts to kiss his cheek. "Huh, prickly Giles."

"If I'd known you all be here in the middle of the night, I'd have shaved," he says dryly.

She grins, tongue stuck in her teeth, and he lets his head fall back on his pillows. "Thanks. For having us." She says it quiet enough that he almost misses it, sleepy as he is.

"You're welcome," he murmurs, meaning it in every sense, and sleeps, dreamless and peaceful.

chronology? i don't know her

Don't Threaten Me With A Good Time

Chapter Notes

this chapter talks about homophobia and violence towards queer people. if this bothers you, give it a miss.

“Giles won’t mind that we’re gone,” Buffy says, as bright and bold as the rainbow shirt she’s wearing. She bounces down the street, tugging a giggling Willow along behind her. “We can play hooky for a day or two.”

Anya frowns. “But what if we miss out on making sales because I’m not there?”

Xander points at them in nervous agreement. “Yes! What if he *fires* you for not being there, hmm?”

Anya’s jaw drops and Willow rolls her eyes, interrupting before Xander can escape. “No, he won’t. One day off won’t kill you. And Xander, stop it. You *promised*.”

Xander folds under Willow’s big-eyed reproach. He tugs awkwardly at his own shirt, the other hand clinging to Anya’s with an almost too strong grip. “It’s just a bit much,” he mumbles.

“No going back, huh?” Buffy says. She runs an eye over them all and grins. “Isn’t it exciting? Tara, the shirts are super duper excellent.”

Tara blushes, rubbing the back of her neck and grinning at her handiwork. All the shirts are slightly different and more than slightly glittery, all of them emblazoned with the slogan “Bi Brigade.” Her own and Dawn’s have an addition each: Tara’s reads “The Token Lesbian,” Dawn’s “The Token I Don’t Even Know What Day It Is How Can You Expect Me To Know Any Of This Stuff.”

Dawn bounces on her toes, dancing down the street. “I can see them!” she says happily, pointing to the mass of banners and people. “Come on!”

The Summers girls start running, Buffy pulling Willow along with her. Tara laughs at Willow’s expression and runs to catch up and tangle their fingers. Xander and Anya give each other looks, shrug, and jog after them all.

Sunnydale Pride is not huge by any stretch of the imagination, but it’s certainly buzzing. The university dedicates a weekend each year to it, having gained a reputation for being one of the more accepting institutions in the country, and flocks of students march, play music and

celebrate their own existence on the grass in front of the campus. More and more Sunnydale residents get involved each year, though this is the first time any of the Scoobies have been.

Dawn, Buffy and Willow are all wide eyes and near-hysterical excitement. Tara, Anya and Xander are experiencing slightly more fear.

Buffy grabs Willow on one side and Xander on the other, pulling them into the crush. The others scramble to follow, wandering in wonderment through the brightly-coloured crowd. There are so many more people than any of them had expected, ranged about on the grass in the sun. Flags of all different colours wave in the gentle breeze that's keeping the day from being unbearably hot. An androgynous person winks at Xander and Anya.

"Still want to go home?" Willow teases.

"We could stay a bit longer," Xander manages.

"Or we could leave now with them," Anya suggests. "I mean - hey!"

The others laugh as Xander drags her onwards.

In just under an hour, Xander and Anya have rainbow face paint on every bare patch of skin, Willow and Tara have twenty badges between them and are getting plenty fired up about each and every flier they've been given, Dawn is wearing a huge flag covered in question marks like a cape and Buffy has a healthy amount of new contacts in her phone.

Dawn dances ahead of them to the pop music blaring from the multitude of speakers. They get into a slightly clearer area where some activists are hectoring the crowd and stand about to listen.

"We could totally help these guys!" Willow says excitedly. "Get the Magic Box on the list of LGBT-friendly employers, talk to the new Mayor about doing more for them-"

"But we don't want to employ more people," Anya interjects, frowning.

"It'll make more people come to the store," Tara says gently. "I-if they know you're friendly. You don't have to hire anyone."

"Oh." Anya smiles, mollified. "Then yes, we should."

The others try and fail to suppress grins. "Don't see why Giles wouldn't be up for it, either," Xander adds.

Anya waves a hand dismissively. "Oh, don't mind him anyway. I never do."

Dawn rolls her eyes and changes the subject. "Why are the police here?"

"Oh, it's for in case anyone gets a bit funny about the political stuff," Willow explains. "No-one has for the past few years, though."

There is a commotion behind them and Buffy sighs. “You,” she says, pointing at Willow. “You know you did this.”

They all turn, Buffy subtly shifting into a defensive stance. The crowd parts with difficulty and spits out-

“Giles?” Willow says. “What are you doing here? I - I mean, not that you can’t be, obviously, but-”

He strides over to them. He’s drawing a significant amount of attention - agitated older men in a primarily young person Pride event do that easily. And he is agitated; Buffy can’t quite figure out whether he’s furious or scared before his hand is clamped around her upper arm and he’s trying to tug her away. “What the *hell* are you all doing here?” he hisses.

Buffy pulls her arm back but he doesn’t let go. “Giles, what - what’s going on? We’re here because we’re queer-”

Giles’ grip on her becomes uncomfortable. “Keep your voice *down*, you silly girl! You all came here - the police - you even brought Dawn!”

“Hey!” Dawn objects, making no attempt to be quiet. “I wasn’t *brought*, I *came*.”

A lot of people are staring at them now and the activists are trailing off. Giles looks about him, looking hunted. “Please, let’s just go,” he says, almost begging.

“What’s going on here?” One of the activists, candyfloss blue hair trailing behind him, jumps off the stage and strides over, attempting to break into the group.

Immediately Giles pushes Dawn behind him, shielding as many of the kids with his body as he can. “Nothing,” he bites out. “We’re just going.”

“Giles, what’s-” Buffy begins.

“This guy bothering you?” a voice cuts in. The police officer has a hand on his belt and a frown.

Buffy watches Giles clock the belt’s radio, badge and gun and he simultaneously cringes away, rounding his shoulders in defence, and gets battle-ready, his hands coming up in loose fists. He bares his teeth, looking for all the world like a trapped animal.

Buffy wraps her fingers around Giles’ forearm. “No, officer, we’re just going.”

Willow manages a false smile. “That’s us, going, right now.” She grabs Tara and begins to walk, sending desperate glances back for the others to follow.

Xander tucks Dawn under one arm, wrapping the other around Anya, and follows Buffy as she drags Giles away from the dirty looks they are receiving from the march.

Giles quickly takes the lead and pulls the gaggle into an alley a couple of streets away. “Take all of that off, now,” he says, gesturing urgently to the badges, flags and paint.

Dawn pulls the flag a little tighter around her shoulders. "Giles, what the hell?" Buffy says angrily.

He turns on her, furious. "What the hell?" he parrots mockingly. "What were you thinking? Or were you even thinking at all?"

"What's going on?" Willow says, tears collecting in her eyes. Tara squeezes her hand.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous this was?" Giles erupts. "To tell everyone - to be so out there - you could have been killed!"

That shuts them all up.

He runs a hand through his hair, eyes wide with fear in a way they so rarely are. "You went out on the streets, dressed like *this*, and you thought - what?" His voice is quiet now, and that deadly-calm they've learned to fear. "People like - us, it isn't safe. I didn't even know where you were."

"Giles, the police were there. They stop-" Xander begins.

Giles laughs, harsh and incredulous. "The police? You think they'll keep you safe?"

Buffy frowns. "Well, not from demons, but people? Yeah, actually."

Giles pushes up the sleeve of his baggy jumper, baring the underside of his forearm. A long, jagged scar runs the length of it. Besides it are smaller, thinner scars of the same age. They've seen them before, but always assumed demon. "The small ones are from coins," he says. "The police didn't do anything, except break a bottle and give me the big one." The children stare at him in wide-eyed astonishment. He replaces the sleeve. "You were extremely bloody lucky. Magic Box - *now*."

Giles has rearranged the entire back room of the Magic Box and cleaned the equipment until it all fairly shines. He's attacking the swords with soapy water, polish, and vicious, nervous energy when Dawn summons the courage to join him.

She kneels beside him and picks up a knife to fiddle with. The only acknowledgement he gives her is to remove the blade from her grip and replace it with a pencil.

"Things change," she says.

He snorts. "Believe me, I know."

"Pride is safe now."

"It will never be safe," he says forcefully.

"The police protect us here," Dawn says.

"The police have *guns* here. What if one of them had decided he didn't like the look of you?"

“Giles-” she says, but he interrupts.

“What if the mob decided they didn’t like the look of you? You remember the witch-hunt we had a few years ago.” Giles presses, white-knuckled, on the blade, still not looking at her.

“That was only ‘cause of demons, though.”

“Hell is empty, Dawn, and all the devils are here. They don’t need a reason; they hate us, and they hurt us.” He throws down the sword and cloth and presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. “God, Dawn,” he chokes out. “They could have hurt you, and I didn’t know where you were. They could have lynched you and *I didn’t know where you were.*”

Dawn drops the pencil and wraps her arms around his waist. “We’re okay,” she says, softly, and his shoulders hitch. “We’re all safe. It’s safe now.”

“It wasn’t,” he says, shuddering.

“Tell us,” Willow says from the doorway. They look up through red-rimmed eyes at the others, collected by the entrance. “Tell us what it was like.”

“1972,” Giles says. “London.” They are all seated around the table in the shop, door and shop both closed. The lamps offer warm half-light and it is easy to ignore the outside world. “It was the first Pride march in London, and Ethan and Philip wanted to go.” He scratches his jaw, turns his mug of tea two to the left and one to the right, clears his throat. “I, uh, I let them. Let them persuade Randall and Deirdre and me, let them go. I hadn’t been in London long. Didn’t know the laws. *Stupid.*”

Willow, one hand entwined with Tara’s, offers him her other. He squeezes her fingers, rests their hands on the table.

“We weren’t old enough. You had to be over twenty-one, then, and we were all nineteen. But we marched anyway, because it was some form of rebellion and we took all we could get.”

“You were all-” Xander makes a vague hand gesture.

Giles shrugs. “I suppose. We didn’t have the words for it then. Ethan, Deirdre and I - we were - are - bisexual. Philip and Randall left Deirdre alone, so I suppose they were gay.” He snorts. “We used to call ourselves queer and have done with it. It’s what everyone else yelled at us.”

Buffy’s hand joins her friend’s and her Watchers. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Well.” Giles takes a sip of his tea. “So; we marched. We yelled and sang and drew attention to ourselves and then the crowds gathered. The majority, I’m told, were either confused or accepting. I suppose we found the rough third.”

“They threw coins at you,” Tara says softly.

He nods. “We should have collected them, donated to Stonewall,” Giles huffs weakly. “When they threw bottles, that was worse.” Dawn makes a sad little noise and leans on Giles. “Then,

ah, the police got involved. No guns, of course, just batons and rage - and whatever the crowd was throwing. Ethan and I - we lost the others in the crush. They made it back to our digs, barricaded themselves in, and washed the paint off the door the next morning.”

“Paint?” Anya says in a small voice.

“It was traditional to mark out the queers, that they might be better avoided,” he tells them dryly. “It’s infectious, you know.” Giles shoots an amused calm-down look at Xander, who looks just about ready to punch a hole in time, space and bigots from the early seventies.

“What about you?” Dawn says, voice slightly muffled by Giles’ arm.

“Ethan and I were arrested, of course. Even if we hadn’t been underage, we were certainly causing a disruption. Holding cell overnight, discharged in the morning - they couldn’t charge us without proof, and even we weren’t stupid enough to give them that. The police let the drunks know what we were, though. We left in the morning and took ourselves to hospital to set Ethan’s arm, check my first concussion and give us both something to stop our ribs screaming bloody murder when we tried to breathe.” Giles drinks his tea, grimacing at the temperature.

“The police did *nothing*?” Buffy exclaims.

He looks up at their horrified faces and winces. “They’d, ah, have done it themselves, if, if they could be bothered. A lot of our friends got arrested and-” he makes quotation marks “-*fell down the stairs*.”

“Giles, that’s horrible,” Willow says, astonished.

He offers them a tight, humourless smile. “Isn’t it. There’d been several murders and the like - of queer people - and the police did very little. I was - I was *lucky*.”

Dawn wraps her arms around Giles and he rubs her back with his free hand. “It isn’t like that anymore,” she mumbles. “It isn’t.”

He presses a kiss to her hair. “But it scared me. Not knowing where you were this morning, and then seeing you were *there* - I was frightened.”

“It had to have looked different, though,” Buffy says.

“Very. I’m afraid I wasn’t thinking much, and when I was, I thought: trap.” Giles stares at the table before him.

Willow looks at the others and they make a decision. “We’re going again tomorrow,” she says certainly.

His head rears up, that fear back in his eyes, and then he makes an effort to relax. “Right.”

“You could come too,” she continues.

“Then you’d know where we are,” Tara says gently when he doesn’t respond.

“Keep us safe,” Dawn adds.

Giles sighs deeply, squeezes Willow and Buffy’s hands, and closes his eyes. “Fine.”

“You have to match us, Giles. Ple-ase,” Buffy says, drawing out the plea.

He sets his shoulders and steels himself, before leaning down to allow Buffy access to his neck. She drapes the scarf around his shoulders so that the glittery “Bi Brigade” slogan is visible.

“See? Easy as,” Xander grins, rocking onto his toes and back.

“A-and you can take it off if you really hate it,” Tara adds, and Giles musters up a weak smile for her.

Dawn winds her thin fingers into his hand and pulls him gently towards the parade. “Come on, then.”

Giles sighs unhappily and hunches his shoulders, making himself a smaller target as they hit the crowds. They end up back where he’d found them the day before and Giles begins to relax in the sun. His grip tightens on Dawn when the police look over, but they pay no mind to them and Giles breathes out.

They chat easily in the shade of a tree, watching and half-listening to the speakers. Giles, Anya, Tara and Willow debate the crossover between the queer community and magic while Buffy and Dawn throw grapes for Xander to fail to catch.

Eventually they listen properly long enough to hear the same call for LGBT-friendly employers. Willow stands to better join in. “The Magic Box is,” she says brightly.

Giles takes a deep breath and Buffy squeezes his ankle in encouragement.

The guy on stage is the same candyfloss-haired man as the day before and he frowns. “The Magic Box? You sure?”

Willow rolls her eyes. “Uh, yeah.”

Giles pushes away Buffy’s hand and stands as well. “I own the establishment. I vouch for it.”

“Hello, England,” Xander says. “I thought he’d grown out of the fussy vocab.”

“Defence mechanism, I think,” Tara says, then blushes at the attention. “I - I mean, if I thought I was going to get arrested, I’d try to sound clever too.”

“Huh,” Xander says.

Bubblegum-boy is squinting at Giles. “Hey, weren’t you here yesterday?”

Giles shifts his weight from one foot to two and Buffy taps two chiding fingers on his shoe. He makes an effort to be less defensive. "Yes."

The boy's eyes narrow. "You were disruptive. How can we trust you?"

"How old are you?" the Watcher returns.

Thrown, the boy is likely more truthful than usual. "Eighteen."

"Bloody hell," Giles mutters. "Then you can trust me, because I've been in a cell for being queer more nights than you've had years on this planet."

The boy blinks. "Giles was at the first London Pride," Buffy says from her position by his feet with no small amount of - well, pride.

"Police make him antsy," Xander adds.

"But he's, like, the friendliest," Dawn says, certain and sure.

"I also work there," Anya says, holding up one hand, and Tara hides her smile behind a hand.

Giles smiles down at them all, and then at Willow. Together they raise a challenging eyebrow at the young man.

They walk back in the early evening, shadows long on the floor. The young people have accumulated similar amounts of decoration and detritus as yesterday; Giles, in deference to peer pressure, has acquired a flower crown, a tiny rainbow flag pin and a small sticker for the Magic Box window, proof of its place on the list of friendly employers. He keeps rubbing it between his fingers thoughtfully.

Dawn tugs it out of his hands and places it in his pocket. "Stop thinking," she says in response to his querying look.

He gives her a half-smile. "Alright."

Anya swings her and Xander's connected hands happily. "I have a warm sense of community," she says happily.

Giles grins properly at that, rubbing his neck. "Me too," Buffy says, beaming.

"Me three," Xander adds. "But can we assume we all are - seven is too far to take this joke."

"We seven," Willow pronounces, and grins, kissing Tara.

"It was nice," Tara says. "We should go again next year."

Dawn nods. "It's a date."

Giles watches their elongated shadows, seven in a line, so close together that it looks like all the shadows are holding hands. He takes this image of shadows holding hands, wraps it in his own feeling of togetherness and feels, more than anything, *proud*.

Wolves - Law of the Jungle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Giles has a headache. Buffy can see it in the way he rubs at his temples and the funny line on his forehead, the way he keeps taking off his glasses and squinting at his books until that seems to hurt him more, the way his hands clench and very deliberately unclench every time Oz snarls and rattles his cage.

“Why are we all here, again?” Xander says, lying full-length on three chairs with his head hanging to watch Buffy train upside-down. “It *is* all quiet on the Hellmouth front, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Giles bites out. The headache must be bad - brevity is so rarely the soul of Giles’ sarcasm. “You’re dropping your shoulder,” he says, revenge for the concerned glance she sends him.

“I can’t go home without Buffy,” Dawn whines, clicking her pen repeatedly in a way which is probably definitely driving Giles to distraction. Buffy takes another look at his face. Distraction or homicide, one or the other.

Willow shrugs and glances semi-apologetically at Oz. “I feel bad about leaving him here. Besides, I think he’s calming down around us - you know, ‘cause we’re all here so much, and not a threat, unless we shoot him - but not in a proper shooting way-”

Giles is holding his glasses tight enough that Buffy has visions of broken glass and bleeding palms, not ten feet away from a werewolf. “We get it, Will,” she says gently, stemming the flow of babble.

It is more or less quiet, then - Buffy keeps up a steady rhythm of punches, Oz shuffles in the book cage, Dawn’s pen scratches on the page. Giles visibly relaxes slightly, reading with Willow in the fresh peace.

Buffy stops at a gesture from her Watcher, padding over with that special silent step he taught her last week. This earns her an amused look, a bottle of water and a towel, all of which she accepts with grace and a grin. She drinks, wiping the back of her neck with the towel, and then sits between him and Willow to look at the books they’re studying. He points her to a paragraph and leaves her to it - mentally she raises headache severity to *really* bad, if he’s missing opportunities to lecture.

The paragraph is, as expected, dry, dull and full of some nasty or other with whom she will have to grapple as the fate of the world as we know it hangs in the balance, yadda yadda - wait, head of a *what*-

With an almighty crash, both peace and book cage are broken. Willow, Xander and Dawn shriek in unison and Buffy spares a thought for Giles’ poor head before she slams her chair back and shoves Willow towards Xander and Dawn. The wolf bounds forwards and slavers at

the end of the table by Giles and she's half-way through springing onto the table in his defence when another loud noise distracts her.

"*Bloody hell!*" Giles snaps, slamming his book closed and kicking his chair over as he stands, glaring down at Oz as if he were a puppy with his head in the bin.

Buffy blinks, but the image remains: Oz, frozen in place, cowering apologetically under Giles' wrath. Her fighting pose deflates slowly in awe as Giles rounds the table.

"Five *bloody* minutes of peace, that's all I ask, when my head is splitting and Snyder's calling staff meetings left, right and bloody centre so he can be *insufferable*-" Giles leans down to the wolf, who rolls onto his back and bares his soft underbelly, whining. He grabs the scruff of thick fur at the base of Oz's neck and hauls. "-and I don't know how to find paracetamol in this awful country because you can't just call it paracetamol, *no*, it has to be *Tylenol* or some such nonsense-" Oz yelps pitifully as Giles drags him into his office and dumps him unceremoniously under the desk. "Oh, don't fuss, you aren't hurt," Giles tells him irritably. Oz makes big reproachful eyes at him and the Watcher swats his nose with the newspaper on his desk. "Wuss. Break anything else-" Giles leaves the threat hanging in the air and the wolf whines, showing his neck again. The others watch in astonishment as Giles locks his office door, picks up his chair and sits back at the table.

There is a long moment of inactivity.

"You can probably get down, now," he says mildly without looking up.

Buffy blinks and turns to hop off the table. She offers her hand to Willow, supporting her climb back down the bookshelves as Xander does the same for Dawn.

They return to the table, sitting, shellshocked, around it. "Acetaminophen," Willow says eventually.

"Hmm?" Giles says, not looking up.

"Acetaminophen. I'm about ninety percent sure that's paracetamol, because I take it for headaches, sometimes."

"Oh," he says. "Thank you."

There is another long pause. "Hey, Giles," Xander says eventually, wringing his hands. "When'd you become the wolf whisperer then? Not the wolf-whistler, obviously, but - shutting up now," he finishes lamely under Giles' glare.

Giles takes off his glasses and fiddles with them awkwardly. "I don't - I've never - It seemed like a good idea at the time," he offers hopefully.

"Why did it work? Oz isn't usually especially well-trained," Dawn says curiously.

Giles shrugs helplessly. "Maybe he's recognising us better," Willow suggests.

"He did kind of want to kill us all for a little bit there, Will," Buffy says dryly.

“Yeah, but in a...recognise-y way...” Willow trails off.

Buffy raises an eyebrow at her friend and shakes her head. “Not better. Pretty sure that’s actually worse.”

“Yes, well.” Giles fusses with his books and clears his throat. “That’s quite enough excitement for one night, I think. You - you all run along now, and I - I’ll see you all tomorrow.” He looks around as if hunting for an occupation and then trots up the stairs and heads for the stacks.

The kids look at each other, shrug and stuff books and possessions into their bags. Buffy’s eye catches on the paragraph she was supposed to be reading. “Oh! Giles!” she calls, slinging her bag onto her back. He appears over the bannister, eyebrow raised. “This guy. Asbestos.”

He blinks, translating. “Abraxas.”

“Yeah. Head of a - what?”

He frowns. “It says, doesn’t it? Cockerel.”

“Right,” Buffy squeaks with forced brightness.

He folds his arms, leaning on the barrier, eyes narrowed. “Why, what did you think-”

“Bye Giles!” she says, grabbing Dawn and Xander and dragging them out with her. Willow appears to be hiding a smile and Dawn sends him a helplessly confused look as she vanishes through the doors which swing as if a small hurricane had just passed through - which, as descriptions go, is not wholly inaccurate.

Speaking of descriptions - Giles takes a moment to consider the workings of his Slayer’s mind and how it could have interpreted Abraxas.

His snort breaks the now silent library abruptly and he giggles all the way to the back of the stacks.

Oz deals with all things with a healthy amount of sang froid, but Giles does expect him to have some questions about waking up under the desk in his office. Instead he just offers Giles a half-smile, swapping clothes for a cup of tea.

Giles accepts with a smile. “You can stay in here more often.”

“I’m going to have to, aren’t I?” Oz says, pulling his boxers on. “Didn’t hear you going all B A Baracus on the book cage.”

Giles blinks at him in incomprehension as Oz buttons his shirt. “The, ah, the book cage remains - out of action. You - you remember?”

He shrugs, yawning and following Giles into the library proper. “Bits. Hey, all.” Buffy and Xander wave and Willow kisses his cheek as he sits beside her. Giles pushes a plate stacked

with toast at Oz.

“Remember your great escape?” Xander says, reaching out a hand to pinch some of Oz’s breakfast. Giles swats it away.

“Hmm,” Oz confirms, chewing. “Sorry about that,” he says to Giles.

“No harm done,” he says, ducking his head over a book and waving it away.

“Yeah, but only ‘cause Giles went totally spark,” Buffy says excitedly.

Giles looks up but straight ahead, not at them, and frowns. “*Spare*, Buffy. And I didn’t go spare, anyway.”

Oz raises an eyebrow. “Hate to see you when you do, then.”

He huffs and rubs the back of his neck. “How come you - I mean, wolf-you - listened?” Willow asks. “Can you recognise us now?” she adds excitedly.

Oz frowns and pushes his plate away. Xander looks imploringly at Giles, who rolls his eyes and gestures for him to go ahead and eat Oz’s leftovers. “Kinda? It’s getting better. I recognised Giles when he yelled at me. Or something about him, anyway.”

Buffy notes with amusement the flush rising up the back of Giles’ neck. “Whatcha recognise?”

“He’s the alpha,” Xander says around a mouthful of toast. Willow, Buffy and Giles look at him in astonishment, but Oz just nods. “When I was a hyena, I always kinda wanted to do whatever Giles said.”

“Ah, yes, the hyena incident,” Giles says dryly. “About which you famously remember nothing.”

Xander swallows. “Yup,” he says weakly. “That’s the one.”

“He’s right, though,” Oz says, rescuing Xander from Giles’ amusement and the girls’ confusion. “Wolf-me last night was way big on the submit-to-the-pack-hierarchy thing.”

“And Giles sits pride of place, huh?” Buffy says, folding her arms.

Oz shrugs. “Sorry, Buff,” Xander says.

She slumps back in her chair and pouts. “But I’m the strongest fighter! And we, like, *never* do what Giles says.” Giles snorts and she narrows her eyes. “Is this a patriarchy thing?” Willow folds her arms too in solidarity.

Oz fights a grin. “No, it’s a Giles-does-all-the-planning-and-care-taking thing.” Willow’s arms unfold, satisfied. “Alpha’s not just about fighting, alpha’s about who cares for the pack, who provides and teaches.”

Buffy considers Oz's speech. "Sounds like work." She looks up at Giles, hiding behind a book by the desk. "You can keep it."

"Do we still have to lock you up on full moons?" Willow asks eagerly.

Oz shrugs. "Probably best."

"Tonight, though - Giles can try just, you know-"

"Telling him to be a good dog and stop chewing our legs off?" Xander suggests and Willow swats his arm.

Then pauses. "Well, kinda."

Buffy looks to Giles. "Whatcha think, Watcher-man?"

Giles cleans his glasses awkwardly. "Well, I-I suppose - we could try." He fidgets for a moment. "Sorry for shouting. Last night, I mean."

Buffy wrinkles her nose. "We could have been way better about your headache."

Xander shrugs, grins, nudges Oz. "And, hey. Alpha's gotta lay down the law sometime."

Giles looks down at them all in amused amazement. "Now this is the Law of the Jungle - as old and as true as the sky."

"And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die," Oz intones solemnly back.

"Yes, well, let's not go *that* far," Giles says, returning his book to its proper place. The bell rings to begin the day, but the children do not move. He rolls his eyes. "I suppose, if I ask about your classes, you shall lie to me."

Willow raises a sheepish hand. "I really do have a free period right now."

Giles sighs. "Will you at least do some homework?" He gazes down on the tableau of inactivity. "The word of your Head Wolf is *not* Law, then."

"Wesley will probably want to train with me," Buffy says morosely.

"I sent him away for the full moon," Giles says, and the others look up with surprise and pleasure. "Ostensibly for his own safety."

Xander's mouth curves into a wicked grin. "And really?"

"The Lair of the Wolf is his refuge, and where he has made him his home. Not even the Head Wolf may enter, not even the Council may come," Giles recites, voice dancing over the verse with amusement. Willow grins and Buffy fairly cackles in triumphant delight.

They chat for a while before eventually falling silent to work with varying degrees of focus and productivity. After half an hour, Oz gets up to stretch his legs and wanders over to Giles in his office. "Hey."

Giles looks up. "Alright?"

Oz nods. "Done with homework," he says, gesturing behind him to the table.

The boy stands before him and Giles really looks, since asking will get one little to nothing from Oz. His posture is both deliberate and natural, almost too subtle: hands where Giles can see them, looking slightly down and away from the older man, head tilted to bare his neck. Giles stops thinking about it, lets himself *feel* - and understands.

He stands, placing a hand on the join of Oz's shoulder and bared neck. The boy shivers slightly and relaxes into the contact. Giles offers him a half smile and squeezes. "Fancy helping me with some shelving?"

Oz nods and cracks a tiny, blink-and-miss-it smile of thanks. "Sure."

They head back to the table and its piles of books and Xander looks up. "Hey, Giles, got any more toast?"

"Go forth and get food of thine own," Giles tells him.

Xander pouts childishly in a way that makes Willow smile. "Man, whatever you're quoting really has something for every occasion."

"As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk the Law runneth forward and back," Willow says, grinning.

Giles gives Oz an armful of books and drops a hand on Buffy's shoulder. "Want help?" she asks.

"For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack," Giles says with a small smile, finishing Willow's lines. Then he ducks his head, laughing a little at himself. "Sorry. Yes, please, i-if you aren't going to get in trouble for leaving your work."

She shrugs and stands. "Wasn't getting anywhere."

"Then you help me now, and I'll help you later," he says and Buffy flashes him a bright grin.

Xander frowns at his sheet. "I'm not going to get this *ever*."

Willow rolls her eyes and shifts to the other side of the table to sit with him. "Yes, you will, I'll help."

They work together on various tasks in the quiet of the morning, golden light filtering through the skylight and making dust motes dance. Giles grins at Oz when they hear Xander's whoop of delight when he finally grasps the intricacies of algebra, and at Buffy when she catches the priceless work that slides off the top of his pile. Oz always looks

happiest when Giles gives him something to do and Willow's sweet smile when Buffy shares her chocolate with her fairly lights the room.

He does make them leave the library for second period and go to classes. Giles has to go to a staff meeting - again - so that Snyder can tell them all how much he doesn't like them, or the children, or the way they do things, or the excessive amount of bizarre death in Sunnydale High. This last is, so far, the only thing upon which he and the Principle agree.

"Good luck with the troll," Buffy offers as he shrugs on his jacket.

"Just go all alpha on him," Xander suggests.

"But tendering my resignation would be so much quicker," Giles says dryly.

"Not as much fun," Oz points out.

"We like the way you do things," Willow says decisively. "Don't listen to him."

"You like the way I let you skip class," Giles says with a small smile. "The more I listen to you, the more I agree with Snyder."

"If he fires you, we'll protest," Buffy says.

"A boycott of your classes, one presumes?" Giles asks, eyebrow raised in amusement.

"It's a sacrifice we're willing to make," she says, tossing her head back righteously.

He can't help but laugh. "Your support means a lot," Giles says, waving them off to their classes. He weaves in and out of the students and makes it more or less unscathed to the faculty room. Hand on the door, he takes a deep breath. *For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.*

He sets his shoulders, and steps inside.

Chapter End Notes

laws of the jungle that didn't quite make it, but nevertheless get an honourable mention:
remember the night is for hunting
when ye fight with a wolf of the pack, ye must fight him alone and afar/lest others take
part in the quarrel and the pack be diminished by war
kill not for the pleasure of killing, and seven times never kill man!
cave-right is the right of the father - to hunt by himself for his own:/he is freed of all
calls to the pack; he is judged by the council alone
because of his age and his cunning, because of his gripe and his paw,/in all that the law
leaveth open, the word of your head wolf is law

Fairytale of New York

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Giles drops his holdall to his feet and pirouettes slowly on the spot, eyes scanning the crush. He stands a head over the crowd, making it easier to see and be seen, but all he can actually see is a sea of winter hats and hoods.

He sighs deeply and resolves to stay where he is, an island in the swarming chaos that is London Gatwick Airport on the sixteenth of December, and wonders why he's doing this.

A hand latches onto his arm and Dawn pulls herself through the crush, doing her best impression of an intrepid adventurer. "Yikes," she says with feeling.

"Quite," he says, tucking her suitcase further into their bubble of stillness. "Where are the others?"

Dawn shrugs and he rolls his eyes. "Hey!" a familiar voice yells. "Watcher-man!"

Giles looks about him and finally spots Xander waving from next to the Toblerones. "Are the others with you?"

Xander dips slightly and then reappears, arms wrapped around Buffy's waist and lifting his shorter friend off the floor. "No-one else though," she calls.

Dawn prods his arm. "I can't see. What's going on?"

Giles wraps his hands around her hips and lifts her, ignoring her shriek, so that she can wave at the other floating Summers girl. "Try and spot Tara and Willow, would you?"

"I can see them," she says quietly and they watch in amusement as Willow sneaks up behind Xander, making him squeal and drop Buffy when she tickles him.

Giles puts Dawn down and picks up his bag, fighting through the swarm of people to his charges. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah!" Willow beams. "We're going to be in England! Giles is going to read us *The Night Before Christmas*!"

"Giles is not," the man himself objects.

"Will, we *are* in England already. You pointed that out when we landed, remember?" Xander says, ignoring Giles.

"When you'd stopped being sick," Dawn adds helpfully.

Tara rubs her girlfriend's back. "Well, yeah, but not *England* England. Airports don't count," Willow says.

Giles rubs his forehead, narrowing his eyes at the noise and people. "L-let's get out of the airport, then," Tara suggests, looking at him. He notices, gives her a small smile of gratitude and leads them to the hire car booths.

All is blessedly quiet in the car. Initial excitement had quickly given way to bone-deep exhaustion and not even bizarre names could keep them up any more. Somewhere between Pease Pottage and Faygate Xander had started snoring in the back and Dawn had dropped off on Tara's shoulder. Slinfold passes Willow by entirely, curled up on Tara's other side; Tara herself points out the sign for their destination - The Hog's Back - and falls almost immediately asleep. Buffy is having to try increasingly hard to keep her eyes open to make ham jokes at every possible opportunity.

"Why are so many places named after hams?" she yawns, stretching in the front seat.

Giles smiles, keeping his eyes on the road. It's almost dark already, and it's not even four o'clock yet. "They aren't; 'ham' is a Saxon word meaning settlement." He looks over and catches her yawn again. "You can sleep if you like."

"Nah, I'll keep you company. Not tired?"

"Slept on the plane," he reminds her. "Besides, I've places to be."

She grins at him. "Excited?"

He mirrors her expression. "Beyond words. A proper Christmas, with all the right traditions - none of your American rubbish - and all my family, at *home*."

Her smile softens at his boyish enthusiasm for the holidays. Then she frowns. "Sunnydale's not home? You've been there years." *We live there*, she doesn't say.

"It's where I live. It isn't quite home." He gives her a half-smile. "Present company makes it bearable, but England will always be where I'd chose to be."

"Tell me what you'd choose," Buffy says. He looks at her curiously and she settles into the corner of the seat and door. "If you could have anything."

Giles looks at the road for a good minute and she starts to wonder if he'll answer at all. "England," he says at last. "A big house, just outside Bath. An old bookshop in the centre, in one of the old Regency buildings, and Anya can run it and I can read the merchandise and argue with the other old men who come in to look at books. We stay afloat and I never have to sell anything." She laughs and he grins. She's never been to Bath, but she thinks she can see it.

"Tell me about the house."

“Honey-coloured stone, with a door in the middle and windows on either side. It’s got a big garden, and a paddock for a horse or two. Tara and Willow keep the garden when they aren’t at Oxford studying. Xander has a workshop and he makes beautiful bookshelves and I always want them. Dawn is at a local school and is insanely popular, because she’s American and stylish. She’s going to go to Cambridge, because it’s just as good as Oxford and she’s teasing me. Xander and Anya are getting married in the Spring and she’s making parental noises already.”

“What am I doing?” Buffy whispers.

He smiles softly at her. “You’re lounging about in the grass, or painting your nails, or watching telly. We train sometimes, because it’s fun, but you don’t need to - you study in Bath and you get to do whatever you want.” He guides them around a corner and a gap in the trees shows the sunset over the Downs. “If I could choose.”

Willow and Tara wake suddenly when the car passes through an innocuous-looking gate. Buffy feels a shiver run down her spine and the three of them look at each other in confusion.

“Giles?” Willow says.

He beams. “The wards. We’re here.”

Dawn wakes easily enough, rubbing her eyes and piling out to stand on the gravel in front of the large thatched cottage, built from dark grey stones. Xander requires slightly more encouragement and then hangs back as the girls excitedly investigate everything in sight - declaring it all truly British.

Giles nudges his arm with his elbow. “Alright?”

“Yup!” he says, too fast and too bright. Giles raises an eyebrow and Xander deflates slightly. “Guess I’m just glad I never had to meet Anya’s parents.”

“I am sorry she couldn’t come,” Giles says, toeing the gravel.

Xander shrugs. “No, you’re not. She’d have been insufferable about missing sales, and then too open in front of your parents, and then sniffy about your traditions.” He grins at Giles’ surprise. “See, I do actually know her. I’ll miss her, but this is the best way. She promises to call and charge you for it.”

Giles huffs a laugh and ducks his head, turning his back on the house. “Yes, I imagine she will.” He looks askance at Xander. “They will like you, you know. There’s no need to be nervous.”

“Rupert-child!” a voice calls from the house, all round vowels and strange emphasis that entirely throws the Americans and saves Xander from needing to answer. It belongs to a small old lady in wellies and a waterproof, short where Giles is tall and softly rounded where he is thin and angular, but she has his sharp laughing eyes and unruly curly hair - this is, without doubt, Giles’ mother.

Giles himself spins to face her in surprise. He drops his bag and, with it, several years worth of Hellmouth-stress. "Mum," he breathes in something like relief and rushes forward, wrapping his arms around her and burying his face in her shoulder.

His mum gives as good as she gets, stroking the hair at the nape of his neck in a way that Xander recognises from the hugs Giles has given him - and this inherited affection calms Xander ever so slightly. They pull apart, beaming. "It's good to see you, Rupert. You look better than last time." Giles huffs a laugh, eyes bright. His mother peers around him to the others. "I suppose you're responsible, then," she says to Buffy.

"For both how bad he looked and how less bad he looks," Buffy says with a grimace. "Hi."

"Mum, this is Buffy." Giles smiles proudly as he gestures to her. "My Slayer."

"Your?" Buffy and Giles' mum say together, incredulous.

Giles rolls his eyes. "Right, yes, fine." He turns to his mother. "Am I allowed to introduce you as *my* mother, or is that also forbidden?" She rolls her eyes in turn and Xander can't help but grin at Willow at the matching Giles-y-ness. "My mother, Guinevere Giles."

"Pleasure," she says, beaming at them all. She bustles up to Buffy and Dawn. "You must be Dawn, then." Dawn grins and the girls both accept her hug. "Gosh, so grown up and pretty!" She turns back to her son. "You never said they were so grown up and pretty."

"I'm fairly sure I actually never say anything else," he says, hands in his pockets and staring at the stars to hide his smile.

Guinevere nods. "True." Buffy and Dawn blush and send amused glances at Giles, who studiously ignores them as his mother moves on to Tara and Willow. "You must be the witches! Goodness, look at you both. You'll have to show off for Edwin and I later." The girls get hugs as well and the old lady starts to move to Xander. "Oh, you're allowed to hold hands, by the way," she says over her shoulder.

Willow turns to Giles as she links fingers with her girlfriend. "I didn't tell her anything," he says.

Xander looks at the old lady before him and tries not to be too terrified. It's not like it matters if his proxy-parent's parents don't like him. Except, it does - their opinions matter to Giles, and what if Giles listens and realises he's made a mistake in keeping Xander around and he has to sleep outside like he has every Christmas at home, and it's much colder here -

And then Guinevere smiles at him, and says "Hello, Xander." She doesn't try to hug him and Xander makes an effort to make his tension less obvious. "Shall we come in out of the cold?"

Inside the cottage looks pretty much exactly like what Willow imagines when she thinks of an English cottage that had produced Giles. Grey flagstones, almost a foot and a half square, cover the floors with worn burgundy rugs to keep the chill off. A wooden staircase faces the

main door, with a living room to the left, kitchen to the right and large study, packed with books, behind the stairs.

Guinevere leads them into the living room where three sofas form most of a square facing a roaring fire. In one corner is a real fir tree, haphazardly decorated with a bizarre assortment of tinsel and baubles and surrounded by brightly-wrapped presents. She drops another log on the fire and nudges a large black shaggy rug, which then gets up and ambles over to the guests.

“Boatswain!” Giles says happily, kneeling down to allow what Willow now realises is an enormous hairy dog to snuffle at his face. “Yes, hello, I’ve missed you too - no, no kisses, thank you.” Xander and Dawn drop to their knees, burying their hands in the thick fur and cooing at the dog.

“Daft dog,” Guinevere says affectionately. “Your father’s got the other one; I’ll shout for him.”

She leaves and Boatswain huffs, flopping on Giles’ thighs. Willow, Tara and Buffy curl up on the sofas, at the ends nearest the fire. “So, your mom’s not got a British accent. What’s the deal?” Buffy says, tucking her feet under her.

Giles looks up, affronted. “She does. British does not mean exclusively BBC-English, you know. She’s from South Wales - which is a part of Britain, not England.”

“Wait,” Xander says. “The most English person ever to England is actually half Welsh?”

“Tell no-one,” Giles says dryly.

The back door opens and four feet scabble wildly on the kitchen tiles and a spaniel puppy bursts into the room. It jumps on Xander, Dawn, Boatswain and even tries for Giles’ shoulders before slowing down enough for Willow to see and then stroke the white and brown fur. “Ariel, behave,” a male voice calls from the kitchen.

Giles senior, when he follows the dog in, is more like Giles junior. Tall and lean in a waxed jacket and polished boots, he could be an older Rupert, were it not for his pale blue eyes and flat flaxen hair. “Hello, Rupert-child.”

Giles turns to look up at his father, obstructed more than slightly by the lapful of Newfoundland. “Ariel?”

His father rolls his eyes. “Well, if not tempestuous he is certainly a pest.”

Giles smiles, turning back to running long fingers through fur. “Buffy, Dawn, Xander, Willow and Tara. This is my father, Edwin Giles.”

The kids wave. Edwin folds his hands behind his back and nods at them all. They wait for him to break the silence, but Willow gets the feeling they could be waiting a while.

Guinevere joins them in time for Ariel to try his luck at joining Willow and Tara on the sofa and for all three Gileses to chorus “Off the sofa.”

The dog whines and gets down, putting his chin on Tara's feet to better gaze sorrowfully at the witches. "Don't you dare," Guinevere admonishes. "You know you're not allowed." She sighs. "I swear, trials or no trials, Edwin; if that dog doesn't start behaving I'm taking him to the vet and having his bits chopped off."

Edwin and Rupert don't seem surprised, but the girls' eyes widen and Xander crosses his legs defensively in a way that makes Rupert snort and hide his laughter in Boatswain's fur.

Giles leads them upstairs to where they'll all be sleeping, pointing out the bathroom and his parents' room. Tara and Willow are sharing the main guest room above the living room, Buffy and Dawn are up in the attic rooms with the gabled windows looking over forest to one side and rolling fields and garden to the other, and Xander -

"-I'm afraid will have to share with me," Giles says, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

Xander shrugs. "Hey, I usually sleep in the garden. The only way is up." Which, oops. A bit too real, judging by the look on Giles' face.

"Yes, well. We're in my old room." This gets the attention of the girls and they all pile into the bedroom above the library. His room looks out on the garden, which is more practical than beautiful but Xander is prepared to make allowances for winter. The room itself, like all the others, is spacious and has a large bookshelf in it, although this one has fewer books on gardens and demons and more fiction - a whole shelf of Terry Pratchett, some classics whose names even Xander recognises, a great many that he doesn't, and some very old children's books: Biggles, The Famous Five, Narnia, Tolkien. What really steals the show, however, is the ceiling, hanging from which on delicate, near-invisible threads are fourteen model airplanes. In truth, their quality varies dramatically, but none are dreadful and the good ones really are very good.

Giles follows their eyes and grins embarrassedly. "Ah, yes. I got one every year - made them when I was at boarding school and had to be done before I came home for the summer." He prods the worst one gently, setting it swinging. "Not awful for a four-year-old, I suppose."

Buffy sits on the airbed set up for Xander. "Hey, Giles, why do your parents call you Rupert-child?"

"Yeah - I thought they were calling you Rupert Giles at first, which, also why, since there's only one of you," Willow says.

"Well, technically, there isn't," Giles says, crossing to his bookshelf and pulling out a small book. "This book was popular when I was young, and every man of my age has a stuffed bear somewhere called Rupert Bear in his honour. I've had mine since I was very small, but the nickname came when I was a little older." He grins briefly. "I was an annoying child and used to require my parents to specify which Rupert they wanted to do the chores - Rupert-child, or Rupert Bear."

"Aw, cute," Dawn says.

“So, h-have you still got the bear?” Tara asks.

“Oh, yes,” he says absently, placing his holdall on the bed.

“Gonna introduce us?” Xander says. “‘Cause you know otherwise I’m going to be searching all night.”

Giles pauses. “I don’t suppose you’d all just close your eyes for a moment?” They all shake their heads. He sighs. “I didn’t think so.” He unzips the leather bag and pulls out an extremely old and well-loved bear in a yellow scarf and handmade red jumper, handing him to Buffy.

“Aww,” Dawn says again, but slightly more emphatically. “Giles keeps his bear with him.”

Giles ducks his head, embarrassed. “Yes, well.” Then he sets his chin defiantly, determined not to be cowed or mocked. “He’s done valiant service against homesickness through boarding schools and Hellmouths, and I dare say he’ll keep me company in my nursing home, too.”

“I think it’s nice,” Tara says.

“I’m jealous,” Xander adds and Tara nods.

Giles frowns. “You didn’t have bears - either of you?”

Xander shrugs. “My parents weren’t big on the whole spending-money-on-me thing.” Giles looks vaguely horrified and Xander and Tara are only saved by Guinevere calling them all down for dinner.

Giles takes them all to London on the train, whizzing through the countryside and funny little towns like Liss, Liphook and Milford. They take the underground from Waterloo to Oxford Circus (not a circus, Willow notes) and he walks them around the shops and sights. Giles lets them roam free and shop at their own pace, as long as they’re in pairs at least and meet him at the right place and time to move on. He even acquires a few bags of his own on Regent’s Street, but not nearly as many as Buffy and Dawn, and Willow’s too distracted by the look of wonder on Tara’s face at the Christmas lights to mind him anyway.

They visit Buckingham Palace, but don’t see the Royals, no matter how much Xander and Dawn crane their necks and Giles laughs at them. Westminster sparks a debate over Richard the Lionheart and Britain’s imperial past, but the others ignore Willow and Giles in favour of gazing over the bridge at the Thames. Giles horrifies them by calling the London Eye overrated, is bemused by their need to see Tower Bridge, and slightly offended by their lack of interest in the Tower of London.

Willow makes him promise to take them again, and sleeps the whole train ride home.

“What I don’t get,” Buffy says, lounging on the sofa opposite her sister, “is how Giles got all his stuff into the one holdall.”

“Right?” Dawn says, stroking Ariel and Boatswain in turn. “I mean, most of my bag is presents. I can’t not bring that stuff.”

The girls think, and then get twin horrified looks. “Giles!” Buffy yells.

He sticks his head round the door. “Hmm?”

“You did bring us presents, right? There isn’t some funky British tradition about not giving presents, is there?”

He blinks. “Sorry, did I not say? Father Christmas told me you weren’t getting any this year.”

Dawn’s mouth opens, affronted.

Giles grins. “Check the tree, and then remember that presents are a thing that one can post on ahead.”

Buffy and Dawn fall off the sofas and crawl under the branches, happily comparing brightly coloured packages, each signed “with all my love, Giles.”

Willow loves the nature that surrounds the house: the forest that lines the road to the local village, the stream at the bottom of the garden, the vegetable patches and flowerbeds that the Gileses tend so carefully. She loves sneaking out to look at the stars through foggy breath with Tara. She loves being with her family, in this cottage where she feels at home.

What she loves most, though, are the evenings when Guinevere lights the Advent candles and then hands the matches to her so she can light her Menorah.

It’s nice to play dreidel games with someone other than Xander, too, even if Edwin and Rupert are both much too competitive about a game they don’t really know how to play - Guinevere mutters something about “Monopoly all over again,” and retreats to a safe distance.

Giles is reading on the sofa by the fire, Boatswain acting as a pair of slippers, when Dawn collapses next to him, jolting him suddenly out of the book. He blinks at her in surprise.

“Your dad is weird,” she says, then pulls a face. “I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

“I’d have thought you’d be expecting - weirdness. Where do you think I got it from?” Giles says, mild and amused.

“He just doesn’t switch off! He’s like, Watcher-mode, all the time!”

Giles smiles. “Again, where do you think I got it from?” She swats his arm and he closes his book, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “Alright, what’s going on?”

She frowns. "He asks me about being the Key a lot. And, like, totally weird stuff - like, is it affecting my schoolwork? Has it given me 'particular affinities' - his words."

"You astonish me," Giles murmurs.

"And he asks Buffy about being the Slayer a bunch, too, and Willow and Tara get interrogated about their witchcraft, which you know just stresses Tara out. And-"

"Dawn, I see your point." She pouts and snuggles into his chest. "My father - and it really should not surprise you to learn this, having met both him and me and knowing what you do about British men and their general inability to express emotion - is not particularly *chatty*." Dawn snorts. "He's asking, not out of Watcher duty, but out of interest."

Dawn sits up. "But he keeps bringing up the whole Key thing."

"In order to ask how you're getting on at school and whether you have any hobbies. I suspect the same is true of the others, too; he knows the supernatural, and is using this to find out about you."

"Huh," Dawn says, after a long pause. Giles waits while she gets her thoughts in order. "Wait, why?"

"Why does he want to know?" Dawn nods. Giles hugs her tighter. "Because, my darling, you are very important to me. All of you. You're the closest thing I'll ever have to children, and therefore the closest thing my parents will ever have to grandchildren. You're important to them because you're very, very dear to me, and they want to know you."

Dawn is quiet, then very suddenly kisses his cheek. "Hey, look at you. A British man, expressing emotion."

"I've spent too long in America."

Guinevere Giles seems to know exactly when Xander gets to the point where he cannot possibly sit inside waiting for Christmas for one second longer. He's too busy being relieved, however, to notice this until he's elbow-deep in brambles, armed with a pair of secateurs.

He shoots a grateful glance at the old lady, who simply smiles and keeps working on clearing the mass of twining thorns. "Rupert tells me you're a construction worker," she says.

He ducks his head awkwardly. "Uh, yeah. Not so much for the world of learning, me."

Guinevere nods decisively. "Good." Xander's head snaps up and he looks at her incredulously. That had been...unexpected. "Too many people go to university and such who wouldn't like it and would be far better off elsewhere. Rupert was ever so glad you found a job you seem to like."

Xander blinks, and says the only thing he can think to. "Really?"

She hums an agreement. "He always thought you'd be better off with something practical. Worried about you terribly when the girls went away to university, though." Guinevere grabs at the vines, then recoils. "Ow, cachi. Don't say that word in front of Rupert."

Xander grins, both at her swearing and the idea of Giles secretly worrying over him, and ducks his head again. His recollection of that time was more centred around Giles keeping him occupied for hours with books and research rather than Giles fretting over him, but now that he thinks about it that may have been the same thing.

When he looks up again Guinevere is looking at him rather intently. "Non-academic work is not lesser, Xander. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise." She goes back to her work, snipping at the brambles with a tinge of anger. "If the Council thought more about who printed their books, built their bookshelves and maintained their boilers, the world would be a very different place." She looks at him out of the corner of her eye. "For instance."

Xander shrugs. "Book stuff is kinda more important for the slayage, though, than, like, how to make a window. 'M sure Giles would rather have research-man."

"Rupert, Edwin and I would rather have *you*, just as you are," Guinevere says sharply. Xander is startled to find that she seems to mean every word, despite having known him less than a week, and having had him in her house, eating her food, for almost a week.

"Thanks, Mrs Giles," he mumbles around the lump in his throat.

She looks disapprovingly at him over her glasses with a smile to soften it. "Now, Xander, don't call me Mrs Giles. Call me near enough anything else, but not that - Guinevere, Gwen, Mum, Gran - don't care. But I love you, and that means you don't call me Mrs Giles."

They're all much too restless on Christmas Eve for Giles to deal with even slightly.

"Right!" he says finally, snapping his book shut and effectively ending Buffy, Xander and Willow's argument over Scrabble and whether or not "gloaming" is a word. "That'll do, I think. Get your coats and boots on, now."

He leads the kids, dogs and parents down the winding track which separates the house from the nearby village and past the small shop into the churchyard.

"Missing Sunnydale?" Buffy says dryly.

"Endlessly," Giles retorts. "This is the quickest way to the heath. Ariel, get down from that tomb."

Obediently the dog leaps off the large marble cuboid and bounces around their ankles happily. Willow has a closer look at it. "Hey, this guy's a Giles. Osbert Giles."

Edwin nods. "There have been Gileses in the village for generations. Since the Norman conquest, the family has occupied parts of the South of England."

"Were many of them Watchers?" Tara asks.

“Hmm, a fair few.” He nods at the grave. “Osbert was. Died in the line of duty, as I recall.”

“Here’s another,” Xander calls, tracing his fingers over much older, crumbling stone. “Fabian Giles, and his wife Adela.”

“Lucius Giles and his wife Elgiva, and their children Edwin and Arabella,” Dawn adds.

“This one’s another Rupert,” Buffy says, tapping her fingers on the headstone. “And it’s real old, too.”

“The church is newer - Victorian,” their Rupert says, shading his eyes against the sharp December sun as he looks up at the Gothic brick structure before them. “But there’s an Anglo-Saxon barrow over there, and an eleventh-century chapel round the back.”

Willow blinks. She always forgets that old, to Giles, means something a lot older than whatever she’s thinking of. Then Boatswain leans affectionately against her leg and she falls over with a yelp.

Giles and Tara are, traitorously, laughing entirely too hard to help her up. Edwin offers her a hand with a smile. “Excuse him, he’s not well trained.” He shoots a glance at his son. “Boatswain isn’t either.”

“Oi!” Giles says, grinning. “Boatswain is a paragon of virtues.” The subject of the attention wags his tail idly, drooling for England with a dopey sort of smile and not a shred of comprehension.

Ariel, however, is bored and heads at top speed for the gap in the hedge that leads to the heath. “No! Loose hound!” Dawn exclaims and chases after him.

Guinevere rolls her eyes at her son and they follow, leading Xander, Buffy and Tara. Edwin offers her a shy half-smile and matches her stride. Willow grins back and gazes appreciatively over the heather. “It’s so nice here. All green and grow-y.”

Edwin hums in agreement. “I’ve never been able to stand cities long. Not sure how Rupert does it, really.”

“Me either!” Willow says emphatically. “I mean, not with the city thing, exactly, but - he moved away from, like, *everything*, for some kid and country he’d never seen before. To risk his life and train a girl who’s basically guaranteed to die, because of destiny or whatever. And he doesn’t like the heat and the desert and the city and he does it anyway.” They watch as Giles wrestles a stick away from Ariel and flings it as far as he can, laughing at something Tara and Guinevere were saying.

“I’m very proud of him,” Edwin says suddenly. “As a Watcher, and a - a man.”

Willow looks up at him, but Edwin seems unable to make eye-contact. “You tell him that, much?” she says gently.

He looks down. “He knows.”

She turns back to the troupe ahead of them. "It might be nice to show him, though." Willow can feel him looking at her in astonishment but can't quite bring herself to meet his eyes. She squirms briefly under the attention, then elongates her steps and runs down the slight slope, skidding on the sand and wrapping an arm around Giles' waist to slow herself. He wraps an arm around her shoulders comfortably, continuing his conversation with his mother uninterrupted.

Tara turns from up ahead, on the slope opposite the one she'd run down, and smiles invitingly at her. Willow disentangles herself from Giles and catches up with her, kissing her girlfriend casually. "Hey," Tara says. "Come look at this."

On the flat there is a rare area of grass in between the gorse and heather. In its centre is a neat circle of emerald green grass, about six feet across. "Ooh, funky."

"Don't step in it," Guinevere says sternly when she spots them approaching it. "That's a faerie circle."

Buffy looks at her askance. "Seriously?"

"Glittery tiny ladies? Really?" Xander says.

"Not exactly," Giles says, with the tiniest hint of a smile. Willow narrows her eyes, unsure how serious he is. He opens his mouth and sings out, loud and clear. "True Thomas sat on Huntley bank, and he beheld a lady gay: a lady that was brisk and bold, come riding o'er the ferny brae."

Xander frowns. "So, faeries are human-sized and beautiful? Doesn't sound so bad."

"The Faerie Queen steals Thomas away to Elfland to serve her for seven days," Giles explains. "He returns to Britain to discover he's really been away for seven years. Time moves differently there, and those who eat there are doomed to remain forever. The Fae Folk are beautiful, and they are cruel."

"So why no circle?" Willow says.

"The circles are where they dance," Guinevere explains. "Enter, and be stolen away to dance until your feet bleed for all eternity." Tara and Dawn step back from the circle.

The dogs snuffle around their feet and then lead them on, distracted. Willow walks beside Giles, heather scratching at her legs. "Are you serious?" she asks. "About the faeries?"

Giles looks down at her, raises an eyebrow, and offers no response.

Willow steps into the church on the walk back, waving Tara on at her inquiring look. Inside is just as bitterly cold as out, but at least the old stones keep the wind off. She stares around her at the stained glass windows depicting saints slaying dragons and leading men, at the plaques on the wall remembering long-dead colonels and generals and lieutenants.

Willow brushes her fingers over a shiny bronze rectangle, engraved with the name of yet another Giles - this one lost to an unknown field in Belgium in 1917.

“Died with his boots on,” Giles says softly, behind her left shoulder, and she jumps. “Sorry. But it would have been consolation to his family, to know he died fighting.” His hand emerges from his pocket and traces a small lion depicted sleeping under the name. “Dogs for those who died in bed, lions for fighters. You see them on graves from the Middle Ages onward.”

“You gonna die with your boots on, Giles?” Willow says, unsure what exactly makes her ask.

He snorts. “Not bloody likely. I’ll die in bed, aged a hundred and seventy-three, surrounded by you lot and your multitudes of children and grandchildren.”

Willow smiles at their reflection in the brass. “*That* would be consolation to your family, I think.”

Giles grins, ducks his head, sings a snatch of a song in Latin. The sound echoes beautifully in the old space.

“Why don’t you talk to your dad as much as you talk to us?” Willow blurts out, and their wobbly golden reflections both look equally surprised.

Giles clears his throat and shuffles his feet. “Not very good at it, I suppose,” he offers at last. “Never really practised.”

“You should,” Willow says.

He smiles shortly. “When he told me I’d be a Watcher, it became his fault that I would be. I was never as good as Buffy about it - she was terribly forgiving, really. Only ran away once, and came back without killing anyone at all.” She nudges his arm chidingly at his dry, self-deprecating tone and he shoots her a mildly apologetic look. “When I ran away and came back, it felt like all the Watchers were judging me - Father included. Of course, that was probably paranoia begot from withdrawal, but it - it was hard. It’s hard to come back from that.”

“But he loves you,” Willow whispers, the words hanging in the air in a cloud of steam.

“And I him,” Giles sighs. “But it’s difficult. He says things, and - and I, being me, then mouth in reply, some shallow or sorry phrase or word, too starved of breath to make itself heard.”

Willow smiles sadly at that. Emotion via literature is all Giles, top to toe. He scuffs his boot against the stone under their feet, and she notices this one, too, is in memory of a Giles.

“Watcher?”

He nods. “Father and son, each in their time.” He offers her a sad little smile and his hand. “Come on, let’s go home.”

The Gileses leave the kids to their own devices after dinner, wrapping up again in coats and scarves to attend the evening service at church. Guinevere laughingly calls them “foul-weather Christians,” saying that they only really attend Christmas and Winter ceremonies, but doesn’t make the others come with them, which Tara has to admit she’s pleased about.

Even if Giles *had* unrelentingly refused to read them ‘The Night Before Christmas’, dismissing it as entirely too cliché.

It’s nice, though, to sit in the living room with the dogs, surrounded by evergreen garlands and candles by the flickering fire. Very Wicca, actually, and it strikes Tara that there’s some serious overlap between old English traditions and straight-up paganism. The thought makes her smile.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Willow asks, hair fairly glowing in the firelight.

“Tradition,” she says. “Like, this? Much better than Christmas with my old family, but equal knowledge of magic.”

“The real magic is the holiday spirit,” Buffy says, then pulls a disgusted face. “God, I’m an actual Hallmark card. Save me.”

Tara and Willow giggle. “If the real Christmas present is the friends we made along the way, though,” Xander says, “I’m gonna sulk.”

Dawn shrugs. “Not to get all real or anything, but, like - best Christmas anyway, or best Christmas anyway?”

Tara looks at the love of her life, beaming and gilded, and where Tara can just lean over and kiss her soundly without fear. She does just that, to prove she can. “Best Christmas ever ever,” she says.

Xander hears the door open to admit the cold adults around midnight. He’s supposed to be asleep, having agreed with the others to sleep as early as possible to make morning come faster, but he can’t.

Instead, he’s curled up on the sofa in his pajamas, staring blindly at the tree, hoping that they don’t come in and find him.

Consequently, he also hears Guinevere head up to bed and Edwin hold his son still at the base of the stairs.

“Father?” Giles - Xander’s Giles - says. “Alright?”

“Yes, yes.” Edwin clears his throat and shuffles his feet in that peculiarly Gilesian way. “Fine. Look, Rupert, I - I’m proud of you.”

There is a long pause. “Are you sure you’re alright?” Rupert says. “Not about to kick the bucket or anything?”

“Can’t I just express affection for my son without it prefacing pushing up the daisies?” Edwin says, a little snappish.

“You can,” Giles says dryly. “You just very rarely do.”

“Rupert, please.”

“Sorry, Father. Go on.”

Edwin sighs. “I spoke to Willow today.”

“So did I. Might have known,” Rupert huffs.

“And, I am. Proud of you, that is. And I love you, and your myriad of children.” This makes them both laugh softly and a smile tug at Xander’s mouth. “Merry Christmas, Rupert-child.”

“Merry Christmas, Father.”

Xander listens to them both go upstairs in silence, clunky exposition of feelings apparently now done for another year. It makes his heart hurt.

He loves Giles. He really, really does. The man flew them to his childhood home for Christmas, to introduce them to people who want Xander to think of them as grandparents. He already thinks of Giles as his dad.

But he has a dad. And a mum, and once upon a time he had grandparents, too, though they’re dead now. And he’s not sure how he feels about them. Because his parents were neglectful, certainly in comparison to Giles, and he’s happier and healthier with Giles’ cooking and affection and healthcare. But they were always his family first. It doesn’t really hurt to not be with them, but it hurts that it doesn’t hurt, and that Tony Harris would never set aside time to deliberately tell his son that he loves him, let alone host five teenagers for any length of time.

“Xander?” Giles, at the doorway, is peering through the gloom at him. The lights from the tree shine blue, green, red and yellow, casting false cheer. “You weren’t in bed.” And Tony Harris would never come looking for him.

“Just-” He gestures vaguely at the tree, presents and all the trimmings. “Checking. Not done this indoors for a long time, you know. Forgot how it goes in here.”

Giles pads in and settles beside him in his pajamas. Xander had teased him for their tweediness, and had been told with mock-superiority and laughing eyes that they were *tartan*, thank you very much, and not remotely the same thing. “It’ll still be there in the morning,” he says softly. “Promise.”

“It doesn’t feel real,” he whispers.

Giles wraps his arm around Xander’s shoulders and makes himself more comfortable on the sofa, tugging a blanket off the back to wrap around them. “Then we’ll stay.”

And Xander doesn't think about what Tony Harris would do, or betrayal, or hurt - he curls into the solid warmth of Rupert Giles and watches the lights flicker until he falls asleep.

Giles is comfortably drunk by mid-afternoon. Dawn's actually sort of impressed - he, as had they all, had eaten a truly heroic amount of festive fare: pigs in blankets, turkey, stuffing, potatoes, sprouts - which, hey, not actually that bad, so she'd eaten Giles' when they thought his parents weren't looking. They'd pulled crackers and told stupid jokes and Xander had dropped his ring puzzle in the gravy. The grown-ups had put away an impressive amount of alcohol - which left her here, laughing at Giles' stupid grin and wonky paper crown and complete inability to work the CD player.

He gets it going eventually, piano playing gently before words come in. The guy sounds seriously slurred and drunk and Dawn is beginning to wonder if the machine is broken before Giles joins in, deliberately matching the man's tone. He stands and sways, singing along, and the other kids put down their presents to watch. Xander and Tara keep their new teddy bears on their laps, but they all stare, grinning, as violins start a jaunty waltz.

Giles grabs her hands and swings her around in a passable impression of ballroom despite her inability and his inebriation. "The boys of the NYPD choir were singing Galway Bay, and the bells were ringing out for Christmas day," he sings cheerily, whirling and swirling her as she giggles in his arms.

Then, suddenly, his eyes widen and he claps his hands over her ears. She can't quite hear the next part, but Buffy and Xander are howling with laughter and Willow and Tara are wide-eyed in astonishment. His hands come away again in time for her to hear Guinevere call from the kitchen. "Rupert Owain Giles, watch your language in front of your children!"

He pulls a laughing guilty face. "Oops. Sorry Mum!" Then he giggles, pulling Dawn close again and twirling her. The room spins as he sweeps her off her feet, spinning and spinning them as he sings happily in her ear.

The song comes to an end and he sets her gently back on her feet, holding her steady against the dizziness. Dawn beams at him and he presses a kiss to her forehead. "Love ya, Giles," she says.

"Here here," Buffy says. "We love you lots, Watcher-man."

Giles swoops down and presses kisses to all their foreheads - even Xander, who is too surprised to try and evade it. He blows a kiss to the ceiling. "And you, Anya."

Edwin comes in and pats his son's shoulder. "Your turn to wash up, lad."

Giles sticks his tongue out, which startles a proper laugh from Edwin, but goes anyway. Giles the elder sits down on the sofa and Dawn collapses beside him, impulsively leaning against his arm. Wrongfooted, the man freezes, but before Dawn can pull away he moves his arm to hesitantly encircle her shoulders.

He, Willow and Tara return to their new books and Dawn absently plays with her new necklace. Xander, on his back in a pile of dogs, is making his teddy dance on his stomach while Buffy paints her nails.

The house is silent, but for the fire crackling and the gentle clinking of washing up in the kitchen, until -

“Oh holy night, the stars are brightly shining,” Giles sings, voice echoing hauntingly off the kitchen tiles. Sweet and peaceful, he gives them the first verse and chorus, resounding in the space and filling the house. His voice is crystal-clear, like icy meltwater, and Dawn wants to cling to the sound and the moment forever.

He trails off and Edwin squeezes Dawn’s shoulder. “Come again next year,” he says, voice oddly pleading.

She snuggles into his side. “You just try and keep us away.”

“Gotta come ‘nd see Gran and Granddad,” Xander says sleepily, as Guinevere and Rupert re-enter.

They all notice the tear-bright eyes, but, since pointing it out would be distinctly hypocritical, say nothing.

“Sounds like a plan,” Rupert says. Then he laughs at himself and the inherent cliches of their situation. “Ah, what the hell. Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night.”

Chapter End Notes

giles quotes harmonium by simon armitage, thomas the rhymer by steeleye span, twas the night before christmas by clement clarke moore, and a veritable multitude of christmas songs.

this whole fic has been a love letter of sorts to my own parents, who are the bomb. i'm a week away from the end of my first semester at university nearly two hundred miles from home - which is a big deal in britain, honest. i've learned a lot about the stuff they did and do for me, so, y'know, ta.

ta also to you all, for reading and commenting and keeping me going. it means the world.

so enjoy the holidays, sing the pogues at the top of your lungs, hug your families (blood or otherwise) and have a bloody good time. ily x

Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Prom ends.

Their last dance is danced, their farewells said - all that now remains is for Buffy and Angel to continue working together until the Ascension, like two people who have said goodbye and then continue to walk in the same direction, but whilst also stabbing each other repeatedly in the chest.

But it's been a long night, what with the hellhounds and the dancing and the emotional uproar, so Buffy just goes home and peels off her beautiful gown and gets into bed. The dress remains puddled on the floor, discarded, and Buffy thinks of Angel and the last time her clothes lay untidied upon a different floor, worlds away when they loved each other and thought that it might even work.

Abruptly she gets out of bed and puts the dress back on. In front of her mirror, suddenly wanting anything but to acknowledge that this day too must end, she might be back at the dance in the arms of her lover but for the gloom of her bedroom and the sadness she can't wish away from her eyes.

Buffy climbs out of the window. There isn't much forward-planning to any of her actions, her mind managing half an idea and her body enacting it without much more input. She's aware that walking the streets of Sunnydale at night in her present state of distraction is endlessly unwise, but it's as if there's a barrier in her mind. Or a dam - if common sense breaks it, her own thoughts will drown her.

She ends up at Giles'. There's a certain inevitability there - she goes to Xander to cheer her, to Willow to confide in her, and eventually tells Giles everything anyway. He can't always mend it, but it's easier to manage some kind of damage control with some sarcastic, affectionate, experienced advice.

She raises a hand to push the door open, then stops. It *is* past midnight, after all, so Buffy makes a fist to knock, and stops again. She's never actually knocked on Giles' door before, and besides, if he's awake she needn't bother - if he isn't, she'll still be disturbing him by knocking, and if she's already in he can't turn her away. Can he? Well, no, Slayer-strength and all. Would he? Buffy thinks he might, and that, if he did, she's not sure where she'd go.

The door opens and Giles, clearly fighting a wry grin and frowning, raises an eyebrow at her hovering hand and surprised expression. "The next step to knocking, Buffy, is to rap your knuckles against the door." He demonstrates with one hand. "I appreciate you are unfamiliar with the concept, but I'm sure you'll get the hang of it by the time you finish college."

"I know," Buffy says, automatically adding a sulky note to her voice in response to his teasing. Her brain's not actually working enough to really respond yet.

Giles leans on the side of the door, eyes crinkled in amusement. “Well, you let me know when you’ve decided whether or not you want to come in, or if you’d rather sleep on the porch and make the neighbours gossip.”

Buffy looks at her feet. “Can I come in, please?”

Her eyes flick back up, still unsure if he’s going to actually let her in or not, in time to spot something in Giles’ expression subtly change, his laughing eyes hardening slightly. He stops leaning on the door and instead pulls it open fully, giving her space to walk through but not inviting her to do so.

Buffy suddenly makes the connection and huffs, offering him an apologetic smile and stepping inside over the threshold with a tiny “tada” gesture.

Giles rolls his eyes, shutting the door behind her. “You must see how that looked, Buffy. Don’t do that to me. I’m not as young as I once was and it’s entirely your fault; you take years off my life.”

Buffy smiles to herself, following him into the kitchen as he grumbles in a rather relieved way.

She leans against the door jamb, knowing well enough by now to stand clear as he fusses about his tiny kitchen to make drinks for them both. He sets the kettle to boil with one hand, hunting in a cupboard with the other with a practised efficiency. To her surprise, he digs out a purple canister of chocolate powder and heaps spoonfuls into the two mugs already on the counter.

“Expecting someone?” Buffy says, fiddling nervously with her fingers.

“Well, perhaps. Not expecting, exactly.” He frowns into the milky depths of the mugs. “But I suppose I was right in the end.” Giles offers her a shy smile and she relaxes.

“I’m way predictable, huh?”

Giles pauses halfway through the motion of handing her a mug, then continues, not looking at her. “Angel was very kind, and very cruel, tonight. I thought - perhaps - you’d like company.” He clears his throat and turns back to his cupboard, giving Buffy time to blink back any wayward emotions. “Now, I believe *Dirty Dancing* is on some black-and-white backchannel, if you’d like?”

Buffy grins. “Hot chocolate and chick flicks? I can’t tell if you’re like fifty or fifteen.”

Giles sniffs imperiously, placing bowls on the counter with two neat clicks. “Neither, thank you. Do you want this ice cream or not?”

Buffy can’t help her amusement, but finds the remote and channel anyway, tucking her legs up beside her as the music plays. Giles hands her a bowl and spoon and sits beside her. The mirror opposite them gives her a solid view of them both - in formal wear, curled up and

slumped on the sofa, eating ice cream and drinking hot chocolate in the small hours of the morning.

Slowly, they slump closer together until her head is pillowed on his shoulder and it's more comfortable for his arm to rest around her. Giles gently squeezes her arm, and the dam breaks.

Buffy sobs into his tuxedo like her life depends upon it, grasping blindly at his lapels. It suddenly hits her all over again that after the Ascension she might never see him again, that he'll certainly never hold her close like he had that night, that this pain and heartbreak is forever now.

"Oh, Buffy, no," Giles says. "Nothing hurts forever, even if we sometimes wish it would. You will feel better, I promise."

"I want it over, Giles," she begs. "All of this."

"I know, love, I know." He strokes her hair gently, leaning his cheek against the crown of her head.

"It hurts so much," she says, almost a question. "How can it hurt this much?"

"Because you're grieving. For the relationship you didn't have." His voice is level and calming and Buffy clings to it like a lifeline. "And I know this is tremendously difficult, but you are so very strong, Buffy. So much stronger than even you know. Like all things, this too shall pass, and you shall bear it admirably and then find even greater happiness."

She closes her eyes and presses her face into the comforting warmth of his chest. "Promise?"

"Promise," Giles says, with such confidence that Buffy can really do nothing but accept that he's right.

Her tears dry but she remains cuddled to him for the duration of the film. "It was nice of Angel to come," she says eventually. Giles doesn't respond. "I know you said it was and it wasn't, but- I'm glad he did."

"Saved you from being a social pariah, I suppose," Giles concedes. "Although it must be said that the social hierarchies of American high schools are both beyond ridiculous and not to be encouraged."

Buffy smiles a little at that. "Are they better in English ones?"

"Haven't the faintest idea." The famous last song starts playing somewhat tinnily from Giles' aged TV. "We hadn't the dances and such that tested them - and, of course, no girls."

Buffy sits up to look at him. "You never danced at a prom?"

He smiles, bemused. "No. It's - it's really not the big *thing* you seem to think it is. For me, I mean," he hastens to add.

She stands and holds a hand out to him.

He laughs and slumps even further back into the cushions. "Not on your life, young lady."

"Oh, come on," Buffy says, grinning. "I bet we could do the lift and all."

"Possibly, but we won't."

"Scared you'll drop me?" Buffy raises an eyebrow in challenge. "I could lift you instead?"

Giles covers his face with his hands and laughs. "Even more certainly not." He peels his hands away, still smiling. "That really isn't how I want to go."

"Can you imagine?" Buffy waves her hands before her as if stroking over an imaginary poster. "New Slayer called; last one dies not through, y'know, fighting vampires or anything, but crushed by her Watcher in a *Dirty Dancing* lift." Her smile falters when she mentions vampires, but rallies at Giles' expression of abject sympathy.

There is a pause as the film wraps up. Buffy, still standing, looks back down at her Watcher to find him staring back at her fondly.

She tilts her head with a shy smile. "Something on my face?"

"You really do look lovely, Buffy. And I'm terribly proud of you." Giles is ever so soft and serious when he says this.

Buffy resists the urge for a flippant response - Giles is not demonstrative and she knows he's proud of her, so when he says it out loud she's learnt to recognise it for what it is: special.

"Thank you," she says, instead, equally soft and a bit more formally polite than usual. There is music playing over the credits and Buffy sways gently, eyes shut, too sleepy to pretend not to want to.

Giles is grinning at her when she opens her eyes and she smiles in return, going back to her dancing. "This is why your American need for a prom partner is ridiculous, you know," he says, amused.

She ignores him for while. "I thought you were going to dance with me for a moment there. At the prom. Before - before."

Giles inclines his head. "I thought I might, too. Probably best I didn't, though - no need to further your pariah-ness."

Buffy frowns. "Wesley managed it."

He raises his eyebrows briefly and sighs. "Wesley, whatever else he may be, is younger than I am. I shouldn't like it to be - weird - at all, for you."

She holds out a hand to him again. "Well, since we both know you're going more for the father-of-the-bride vibes than Wesley, you'd better dance with me now." He glares without

much anger at her and Buffy grabs one of his hands. "Come on. Have a prom dance - we're all dressed up with nowhere to go, after all."

Giles sighs deeply and gives in, allowing Slayer-strength to haul him to tired feet. He lifts their joined hands and twirls her under an arm before she settles in, one hand on his shoulder.

He can dance pretty well, it turns out; he wants to do footwork, of all things, and she follows along as best she can. Even when he gives in to her relative lack of ability, swaying them gently to the beat, his posture smacks of formal training.

Angel had been trained, too.

"It isn't fair," Buffy whispers.

Giles' hand moves from her waist to her back, the other cradling her head to his shoulder. "Not remotely," he whispers back, almost angrily. "You don't deserve this at all. And he doesn't deserve you."

"I want him to," she says, muffled by his shoulder. "I want him to deserve me so much." Tears prick, hot and angry, behind her eyes. Giles rubs gently at the base of her skull. "Why won't he love me?" she whispers, letting the tears run down her cheeks and onto Giles.

He wraps his arms more securely around her as she cries. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'm so, so sorry."

"What if no-one ever loves me?" she sobs, hands fisted in his jacket.

"I love you," Giles says forcefully. "You hear? I love you. And your family loves you. And Willow and Xander and Oz all love you. You will find love again, Buffy, I promise. There are so many people who love you."

"But I want him to love me," she chokes out.

"I know." One of Giles' hands moves and there is a clatter as his glasses are tossed onto the coffee table. He presses his cheek to her head and sounds a little choked up himself. "I know."

"Can I stay here tonight?" she murmurs, all cried out and exhausted by it.

"Of course."

"You'll still be here?" Buffy yawns wide enough to crack her jaw, scrubbing a hand over her face and flopping onto the sofa.

Giles tugs a blanket out of a cupboard and drapes it over her. "I'll always be here."

Buffy smiles sleepily up at him and he is helpless to return it; this girl, so young, so strong yet fragile. "Good," she pronounces, and falls almost immediately asleep.

Chapter End Notes

giles promised her ice cream and i refuse to believe that he did not deliver

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