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## **Baphomet's Knight by Gypsy Gray**

### Part One

The motorcycle slowed to a crawl when it passed the sign that read "Welcome to Sunnydale." Its rider glanced at the sign as he drove by, but when he was past it the bike picked up speed again and streaked down the highway. Running full throttle it ate the road like a thing starved, and the leather clad figure on its back leaned and shifted with an ease that spoke of long practice and great skill. Though it looked like your average kick-ass black bike, a closer inspection would reveal just how unique it really was. There was no other like it in the world.

A gift to its rider, the bike was handmade...literally. Its top speed was nearly 180 mph, and it had never failed its

master. Its loyalty and skill in battle had earned it the name Bane. No other of its race had a name, no other of its race were allowed to think and act on their own. Only its master gave such freedom, and in return it gave absolute devotion.

Elementals are powerful creatures, harnessed by only the most powerful to serve as familiars, when the Great Master had given it as a gift to the Master it had been sure this new one would misuse it. But the Master was not like any other of his kind either. Because he was different, he made it different. And now it had a name and a purpose...and a friend. It had its Master. What more did an elemental geas bound to the service of a not quite mortal need?

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Buffy Summers walked along the paths that lead from one building to another on the U.C. Sunnydale campus. The night was calm, the vamps were still recovering from the last time she and the remaining Scooby-gang had defeated them. Of the original Slayerettes only Willow and Giles remained. Cordelia was in L.A. along with Angel, Oz had returned for the second and final time a few months ago. And even then he had no interest in them. He'd returned for Devon. Neither the werewolf

nor the singer had been heard from since Riley spotted them heading out of town in Oz's old van. And Xander...

Two weeks after defeating the initiative and destroying Adam, Xander had been killed. His father had gone into a drunken rage and shot both Xander and his mother. When he sobered up in his jail cell, he hung himself with the belt that the arresting officers forgot to take. Three hours after Xander's body was delivered to Sunnydale's morgue, it disappeared. For weeks afterward Willow, Giles, and Spike tried to find the boy. Terrified and half-convinced that he was a vampire, Willow had even prepared the spell to restore his soul.

For her part, Buffy kept her eye out to make sure he got staked if she spotted him on a patrol. The boy had always been their weak link, and she'd known since the beginning that eventually she would have to kill him. Xander attracted trouble like honey drew flies.

But time passed and no Xander. The reality of him slipped away into a kind of dream memory for the Slayerettes. And he was all but forgotten. Surprisingly, it was not Willow who came every night to the empty grave with his name on it. Shortly after the stone marker was set, Spike took up residency in a crypt only a few feet away.

Angel had paid for the grave and the stone that bore Xander's name. He, Cordelia, Doyle, and Wesley had come to Sunnydale for the memorial service. When the words had been said and everyone else had long since gone on, it was Angel who returned just before sunrise to lead his silent child into the safety of the crypt.

That was the first time in decades he had truly been able to be a Sire to his child. He didn't understand why Xander's death tore Spike apart, he only knew that he was needed. He held his son while he screamed out his pain and honored his wish to have a gravestone put up for the boy. It was a simple gray marble stone with Xander's name, birthdate, and the day he died carved into it. At Spike's request, one word had been added at the bottom in small letters...Friend.

Spike tended the grave every night. Weeds were removed, the stone was cleaned, and a single tiger lily was left...every night. In one of the many all day/ all night conversations they'd shared, Xander had told the vampire that the lily was his favorite flower. He'd also confessed that the only thing he feared about death was being alone. So Spike stayed with him.

The brunette had been something the vampire had never had before and most likely would not have again. He'd

been a friend. Even now, he was uncertain how they'd come to be friends, but they had. And the only thing that Spike could do for his friend now was care for his grave, talk to his ghost (just in case it was around), and protect the friends Xander had risked his life again and again for. Spike's existence was simple now, take care of Xander and help the Slayer. There was nothing else left to do.

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## Part Two

Bane felt the brush of its Master's mind. Obeying the silent command, it stopped in front of an old house. Boarded up and abandoned for a long time, and still the place stank of death and pain. Someone had suffered for a long time in that house. Opening its senses wider, Bane caught a familiar aura from the place. The Master had suffered in this place. The house was bad. It would have to be destroyed, and the one who had hurt the Master would have to be killed. No one was allowed to harm Bane's master.

A wave of pleased affection and calming assurance washed into its mind. The Master was not upset. The one who hurt him was already dead. Good. Another brush against its mind sent the bike rocketing down the street

toward another part of town, closer to the thing that was making Bane grumpy.

It didn't like this town. There was too much power here. And no one was even trying to control it. And the shadows, the shadows oozed with the lost ones. Little better than animals, most of them would have been locked up with the Berserkers. But here they ran loose, endangering everyone by calling attention to their existence. Sloppy fools.

The Tribes would never allow such stupidity. Again a touch from its master's mind. He agreed with Bane. These savages were a danger to their kind. The two of them would have to be very careful here. Here the humans knew their kind existed. There would be no hunting and no letting the beast slip loose. If they were discovered here they would have to kill any who saw them. And deaths attracted attention. They would have to be very careful here.

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Spike slammed into the wall. The demon that threw him charged the slayer and sent her into the opposite wall. The blonde vampire shifted to gameface and attacked. It didn't take long to get the thing down. Ripping its throat

out was even easier. Then other demons in its pack attacked.

Slimy gray critters swarmed them. The witch was chanting for all she was worth. The slayer fought hard, but she was too busy doing showy kicks and flips to do any damage that counted. Spike just shredded anything that got in his way. He should have known this was gonna be a mess when the Watcher had come to help.

Since Ethan Raine had returned to Giles' life the slayer and the witch had kept their distance from him. It was perfectly acceptable for Buffy to go back to Angel after he tried to kill them all, but when Giles took Ethan back into his life the two girls treated him like he was diseased. Spike didn't see the problem. Giles and Ethan loved each other. Nothing else should matter in the face of that. He'd been alone long enough to know how important love was.

A demon hit him in the lower back and he went down. Three of them were on him then, and the slayer didn't even try to help. A clawed hand on his throat convinced him that he was about to spend his last night on earth, but then the creatures were gone. Something had ripped them off of him like they were made out of paper.

The vampire sat up to watch his savior. A figure dressed in head to toe black leather slung demons around the clearing like wet rags. Blood and eviscerated gray corpses littered the ground, and the slayer was too busy flipping through the air to notice. But the watcher and his lover weren't.

When the dust settled Ethan Raine walked to the dark figure and kneeled at his feet. Touching the index finger of his left hand to his tongue, his forehead, and then his heart; the older man was the figure of supplication. Leather clad hands brushed his shoulders, and then Ethan moved back to stand beside Giles. The helmet came off slowly and Spike couldn't hold in the gasp when he saw the face inside it.

"Xander!"

"Hello Spike."

And then he was hugging him. Xander was alive and here and hugging him back. And nothing in the world mattered more than the arms around him. Not even the fact that there was no pulse in the throat his lips were pressed against. And then his head was being tipped back, and a cool mouth was against his. And it was wonderful to be standing here kissing Xander, while cool hands caressed his back. Too soon that longed for mouth

pulled away. And then that wonderful voice was whispering to him. Words meant only for him.

"I told you I was a nummy treat."

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Part Three

"Xander?"

"Hello Willow. How's Tara?"

"Gone. We broke up. Are you a vampire?"

"No."

"What are you?"

"Something else."

"Cut the crap. You're a demon. Xander's dead and you're gonna be."

Buffy rushed him and swung a powerful roundhouse punch. It would've broken his jaw and knocked him cold if he'd been human. Or if it had connected. By the time the slayer realized what was happening she was dangling two feet off the ground, being held in place by the iron grip on her fist. She was shaken like a ragdoll and dropped on her backside at Xander's feet.

"Enough. I have no patience for stupidity and even less tolerance for willful ignorance. Warlock."

Ethan Raine stepped forward and bowed his head. He kept his eyes fixed on the chest of the dark clad figure he stood in front of. He was not about to offend this person, and he certainly wasn't going to display any behavior that could be taken as a challenge. He wanted to live.

"Yes, my lord."

"Explain it to them. Make sure they understand. I will return tomorrow night. All of them should wait for me at your mate's home."

"Yes, my lord."

Ethan repeated the gesture with his index finger, and then backed away to stand next to Giles. From his position beside his lover he observed the others. Willow looked like she didn't know whether to laugh or cry, shifting from foot to foot, she was holding back her need to hug her long lost friend by the force of her will alone. Buffy was on her ass in the dirt. The perfect place for her as far as he was concerned. She was gritting her teeth and scrunching her brow, and her face had turned purple from the strain of not bursting into tears of frustration. All in all, she looked badly constipated.

As if his thoughts had been heard, which they might of been, the leather clad figure chuckled softly and kissed the vampire still in his arms. A low rumble signaled the arrival of a beautiful and riderless motorcycle. All black, the leather seat and the metal of the bike itself, it stopped in front of Xander and waited. The dark haired man whispered into the ear of the blonde and they got on the bike. As soon as Xander's hands touched the handlebars the bike roared to life and all but disappeared.

Ethan breathed a sigh of relief and was immediately pulled into his lover's arms. Warm hands skimmed his shoulders, checking for injuries from the brunette's touch. When none were found he was kissed. Soft and sweet, it was his favorite kind of kiss now. It was the kiss that was both Giles and Ripper. The one that said "I love you," "I will always love you," "You're safe with me." It was the type of kiss he'd waited a lifetime for from this man. And now he got them whenever he wanted. Life had certainly just gotten more complicated, but it was still nearly perfect. Now, if they could just get Buffy a personality transplant...

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They arrived at the cemetery in what seemed like seconds. Spike was reluctant to lose his hold on Xander's waist, but the younger man climbing off the bike gave him no choice. They were in front of the boy's grave and Spike watched in silence as the brunette observed his own final resting place.

His hands traced the word at the bottom of the stone and then carried the flower back to Spike. One look into those eyes gave all his secrets to the boy. A soft, shy smile that was completely Xander lit his face, and Spike found himself holding the man in his arms and brushing kisses over the lips pressed against his.

"You remembered this."

"I remember everything. Even that we've never kissed before."

"Wanted to. Wanted to kiss you every time you got close. Every time we fell asleep on my bed talking. Wanted to do more than kiss you the night Anya left."

Another kiss. Deep, powerful. A cool tongue tasting every inch of his mouth. Cool hands in his hair, holding his head in place. A muscled, leather-clad thigh pressed into his crotch. Spike groaned into the mouth devouring his and wrapped his arms around his lover's neck.

The next thing he was aware of was being flat on his back on the stone slab in the center of his own crypt. A sleeping bag was under him and a naked Xander was above him. They were both naked and his legs were wrapped around the strong waist between them. He could feel that he'd been stretched, something slick and cool was inside of him and he wanted more. Thrusting up against the brunette, he felt his lover enter him.

He'd never been so full. The younger man was barely in and Spike felt stretched beyond anything he'd ever experienced. Slowly, the other man pressed further in. And the vampire felt himself losing control. More of that cool hard length entered him and he shifted into full game face. And finally, finally, the boy was completely in and the blonde was split open. A moment of stillness, and then movement.

Gently back and then forward. Slow easy rocking, and some how Spike knew that he was still just being stretched. Every shift rubbed the cock inside him over his prostrate and the blonde moaned and whimpered. The rocking picked up speed, he was kissed deeply. Hands held him open as the hips between his legs began to move with more force.

"Cum for me. Let go. Show me you like this, and I'll show you how much better it gets."

Spike screamed and gasped. Clamping his legs around his lover's hips, he felt his orgasm roll through him like a tidal wave. And then it really began. Pleasure left his muscles slack. The rocking turned to deep thrusts. Stronger and stronger with each movement. Spike was hard again in seconds.

Moving with the body above him, he thrashed and arched his back. Looking into the face of the man moving inside him, Spike watched in stunned awe as he exhaled smoke. And then his own gameface was revealed. Fangs that made his look like a child's toy, eyes still the same chocolate brown but now the iris was slit vertically. The creature on top of him smiled. And Spike knew it was just beginning.

Thrusts that rocked his whole body slammed into him, a clawed hand pulled his head back, and a mouth fastened to his throat drinking deeply. At the first taste of his blood, the cock inside him exploded. But the fucking didn't slow. It picked up speed and force, and Spike felt his orgasm slam into him like a freight train.

And still he was being taken. And it was wonderful. That amazing wonderful cock was splitting him in two. He was

impaled again and again. Cum from his lover's first orgasm oozed from his hole and made the strokes even easier. The vampire was being owned. Possessed. And nothing in this world would ever satisfy him again after having this. And at last his mate roared his release. And wave after wave of cum so cold it burned flooded the blonde's body.

Another moment of stillness, and then he was empty. Cum rolled down the insides of his thighs in cool trails, and his hole spasmed and jerked in reaction. Cool arms gathered him close, and he was kissed and cuddled. When he finally got the energy to raise his head he couldn't resist looking at his lover's groin. Nine inches long and as thick as three fingers where they joined the hand. And he couldn't believe that thing had been inside of him. But the delicious ache in his ass said it had, and his lover was kissing him again. And as soon as he got his strength back, he was going climb on that marvelous thing and fuck himself unconscious.

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## Part Four

Giles watched Ethan fidget with his teacup. Buffy was glaring furiously at his lover, while Willow waited with a look that was half fear half hope. For himself, he only

wanted his lover not to be in danger. Anything else could be dealt with.

"I suppose I can't convince you to wait till morning for this."

"Start talkin' creep."

"Buffy!"

"Giles, he..."

"You will at least maintain some level of civility in my home."

"It's all right Ripper. Under the circumstances I don't blame her. I'm not sure where to begin. I...I suppose it all begins with Midian."

"Midian? Ethan that's a legend. It's just a story."

"No my love Midian is very real. Or at least it was."

"Umm, guys, what's Midian?"

"My apologies young witch. I'll start further back, shall I? At the very beginning. You know that not all demons are evil. With some, it's that they are exceptions to their species. With others, they are as a whole decent people. They're just not human. Not demons really either, that's

just a convenient name forced on them by cowards and murderers."

Ethan drained his tea and stood from the table. Walking to the window, he moved the curtain and looked out into the night as he spoke.

"During the rise of the church, there was an inquisition. Bare in mind this was when they were still just the Romans and the Catholics, rather than the one cohesive unit. The heads of the church laid waste to whole villages of non-humans. Creatures that weren't bothering anyone, just trying to exist. Men, women, children, all of them slaughtered. Until finally, one rose up to fight. He used the forbidden magics of his people to harness the strength of those who were already lost. He used their souls' need for vengeance to decimate the hunters. At the time they were in Rome, the greatest city in the known world fell to Baphomet's rage."

"Baphomet. I've heard that name. He was a demon."

"No Rupert. In the beginning he was just a man. Unfortunately, he wasn't a human man, for that the church decreed that he and his kind must be eradicated. It wasn't until he rose against them that he became...what he is. Even with their great city in ruins and the church defeated his people weren't safe. The

hunters would come again and again until nothing was left. So he used the power again. He brought himself here, to America. Then it was still undiscovered and clean. The only humans here lived in a natural balance with non-humans. He found a spot away from the eyes of the world, and he built Midian."

Ethan faced them again. Sorrow and awe danced in his eyes, and Giles knew that his lover felt connected to this story. He understood that feeling, the magic in his blood stirred at the words his mate spoke. Images of Midian and its creator raced through his mind, too quickly to be comprehended but slowly enough to be longed for.

"He created a sanctuary, and called his people to him. Baphomet let the magic use him, it eviscerated his body and rended his flesh to draw power from his pain. But the pain was laced with his joy at knowing that soon his people would be free. And the magic guided them to him. He gave his life to save them from their enemies. And for centuries Midian thrived. Its people became the Tribes of the Moon, and the natives of this land accepted them as just another part of the world. And then the church came again. More death, more suffering, and this time Baphomet cannot fight. Others must fight to protect their sanctuary. So they went to him, one by one. They

drank his blood and the magic changed them. They were given their beasts."

"Their faces became masks, hiding their true nature. Whenever they chose the beast could be let loose. And it was unstoppable. They were Baphomet's fighters to begin with. Those that lost themselves in the beast were called Berserkers, and they were locked away to be cared for and let loose if they were ever needed. Those that were able to control it became Baphomet's priests. He became their God. Their warriors were baptized in his blood. And in the last days of their great victory, there was a prophecy. A man, who would become of the Tribes, a blood innocent would heal Baphomet and remake Midair. And he did. Boone came to Midian."

He sat down again. Giles' hand held his lover's and Ethan kept his eyes on the table as he spoke.

"In the centuries since the last battle the Tribes had become known as the NightBreed. They discovered that they could add to their numbers, not only by having children, but by turning humans into Breed. Of course, the humans had to die first. And when they joined the tribes they became a different type of Breed. No babies for them, no sunlight either. But then sunlight became intolerable for all the Breed in time. You see, after the

last battle, Baphomet pulled Midian underground. The first law of the Breed became "What's below remains below." In time, humans forgot Midian was there at all. They built a town on top of it. The town died, nothing was left but a cemetery. Midian became known as a city of the dead. The place where the monsters lived. The place where they forgive you."

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"The hunter's came again. This time they found Midian because of a madman and Boone's love for a human woman. Midian was destroyed. The Baptizer called his priests to him and gave each of them a piece of his body. The priests fled the ruins of the city, escaping with the other survivors of the Tribes. Each going in a different direction to keep their God out of the hands of the hunters. Baphomet's last act was to call Boone to him. "

Spike ached with the sorrow and pain in his lover's words. Xander had told him of things he had never dreamed of. Creatures who could become smoke or fire, or transform into a flock of birds. Beings that were each gifted with skills and magics as different as night from day. But all of them connected. All linked together through their God. Baphomet, The Baptizer. And now when Xander spoke it was not in his own voice.

Something old and powerful, and sad so sad, spoke through his lover. And the vampire knew he was hearing the voice that Aaron Boone had heard when he'd stood before The Baptizer.

"You have destroyed our home. This was inevitable. No refuge is forever....Find me, Heal me. Save me from my enemies...You are Cabal."

The power faded in the silence that followed. Spike was drawn closer to his lover's now shaking body, and he kissed the younger man gently to calm him.

"He succeeded. Cabal, He Who Unmade Midian, remade it. And this time there are plenty of warriors to protect it. We will not lose our sanctuary again. He found all the pieces of Baphomet, all but the heart. That was stolen by the resurrected madman who led the hunters. Before they could stop him, he divided the heart into pieces and sent them all over the world. Now you have to understand, Baphomet was a big guy. His heart was the size of a young elephant. And the pieces were scattered. So Cabal decided to send out his best warriors to find the pieces and return them to the new Midian. And while most are either born NightBreed or made that way, there are accidents. Cabal himself was never meant to be

turned. The reason I became NightBreed was I got bitten. Just like Boone."

"Some of the Breed are here in the Hellmouth. The bite started the change, and when I died I came back as one of them. Something pulled me to Midian, and the Tribes of the Moon embraced me. I found my place in the world. When Cabal started sending warriors out to look for the heart, I was chosen. He gave me Bane and made me promise I would come here as soon as I could. It was alot harder to keep that promise then to make it. I've found three pieces of the heart, and each piece calls to the others. I had to go where they led me. And now they led me to you. And when I leave this place you'll come with me?"

"Yes. I'll stay with you."

"All my life, I dreamed of loving and being loved. Completely and absolutely. All my life I dreamed of you."

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## Part Five

Sunset found a silent grim-faced Slayer pacing Giles' living room. No amount of explanations from Ethan could convince her that Xander was anything but a demon. And he had to die. Willow was refusing to see the truth and

Giles was so hooked into his precious Ethan that he'd believe anything. Even Riley had tried to convince her she was wrong. But none of them mattered. Xander had been her pet clown. This thing was strong and dangerous. It was not Xander. It had to die.

"Buffy this is a mistake."

"Shut up Riley. That thing is gonna die...tonight."

"You can't kill him."

"Spare me the invincible stories Ethan. I'm not interested."

"You should be. He's already dead Slayer. Dead and risen. Knives, guns, stakes, spells, none of that will work on him. He is a Knight of Baphomet, a Warrior of Midian, and one of Cabal's Chosen. Nothing can kill him, except the blood of the Baptizer. And we happen to be fresh out."

"That thing is just another demon, and I'm gonna kill it."

"That thing is your friend Xander, and if you try to kill him he'll eat your heart while it's still beating."

Buffy turned her back on the warlock and went back to pacing. Ethan left her to her stupidity and Riley to his

lousy taste in women. Sitting at the kitchen counter he smiled at his lover when a cup of tea was placed in front of him. A taste revealed it to be laced with a healthy dose of whiskey, and that earned Giles a kiss.

"You really love each other don't you."

Giles looked at Willow for a long moment. The red-head had been distant but not cruel since Ethan's return. She seemed more stunned than angry, and now she was sitting beside his lover trying to discuss something that was obviously very awkward for her.

"Yes Willow. We love each other."

"I thought so. Buffy said that you two getting back together wasn't like her and Angel because they loved each other. But you love each other too. I don't understand, I don't think I ever will. But...you're Giles. You're my Giles and I want you to be happy, you deserve to be happy. If Ethan does that then I guess I should wish you lots of warm fuzzies."

"Thank you Willow. I know how much your disapproval was bothering Ripper. You have a good soul, shame you don't have better taste in friends."

"Ethan!!"

"Ripper that Slayer of yours is going to get us all in deep shit with one of the toughest forms of life on the planet all because of a bruised ego. I think I'm entitled to be a little snarky."

"I agree with Ethan. She wants to hurt Xander. Snark away."

"Willow don't encourage him."

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"Spike meet Bane."

The blonde vampire studied the motorcycle his lover had just introduced him to. He could sense...something. The bike was alive, and it was powerful. Anything more than that was hidden and carefully concealed by the same kind of mask Xander wore. In frustration, the blonde turned to his lover with an appeal in his eyes. Smiling softly, the brunette chided his servant for teasing his lover.

"That's enough Bane. Come out and meet Spike. You'll like him."

As soon as he finished speaking, Bane came out. Smoke rolled from nowhere to surround the bike in a shroud of mist. From within it Spike could sense but not see

movement. When it cleared he got his first look at Bane. The size of a Clydesdale horse, the creature's body was covered in muscle underneath a layer of jet-black fur. Short and sleek, the animal's coat seemed to swallow whatever light hit it. It stood on all fours, legs that were obviously capable of great speed and strength finished with paws the size of a bear's, complete with three inch long retractable claws. A head like a wolf's cocked to one side, and its fang-filled muzzle opened to let a pink forked tongue lull out. The beast made a soft chuffing sound, and Spike got the impression he was being laughed at.

"Bloody hell! I've stayed in apartments smaller than you."

Bane laughed again. The Master was right. It liked this one. And from the scent the blonde one carried, the Master liked him too. Bane sent a questioning thought to the Master. Would this one be joining them? Surely Master hadn't claimed one so lovely just to leave him behind. That would be foolish. And the Master was not foolish.

A wave of amusement and happiness washed over Bane. The Master was pleased that Bane liked the pretty one. He would be traveling with them. And Bane was to

protect him at all costs. That was fine with Bane. The Master had never been so happy before. Anyone that made him that way was worth protecting. Besides, Bane really did like the pretty one. His words sounded very funny when he talked. And anyone who had sense enough to know that Hell was indeed bloody, was fine by Bane.

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## Part Six

The ride to Giles' was a blur of wind and speed. Spike sat in front of Xander with his hands on Bane's handlebars. Now that he'd seen what the creature really was he couldn't think of it as just Xander's bike. The feel of the engine translated itself into a rumbling purr, and the vampire understood that Bane was pleased. Apparently, it liked him.

Xander's arms around his waist were their own distraction. He was leaning back into his lover's chest while the bike did all the work. Xander had told him that the longer they spent together, the stronger the connection between the two of them would become. They were already more than lovers. Soon they would be tied to each other in every way, and Spike could already feel Bane's presence at the edge of his mind. Even now,

he could feel that the elemental and his mate were discussing something. Whatever it was, Bane was not happy.

Bane let his engine rumble loudly and spit out sharp pieces of gravel into the few cars they passed. The Master had ordered him to hold back in the coming fight. The Master knew that the Slayer would attack. He didn't want Bane to interfere. And what was even worse was that he didn't intend to kill the fool. The Master considered her to be too insignificant a threat to bother disposing of. Bane did not agree. She meant to harm its Master, and whether she was actually capable of doing it or not, just the intent was reason enough to put her into a shallow grave. He would have suggested eating her...but she smelled awful.

Xander was content. He finally had his mate. A lifetime of pain and loneliness had left a hole in his heart. Spike had filled it. He had a purpose, a people, a place, and his mate. For the first time in his life or his death he felt complete. He knew Buffy was waiting to kill him. He knew Bane wanted to use her for a scratching post. He knew Spike was being drawn into his link with Bane. But Buffy's bullshit seemed impossibly unimportant in comparison to the wonderful man he had in his arms. He wasn't even going to bother with killing her, after all who

was to say the next slayer wouldn't be worse. Still, he'd given Bane orders to protect Spike. If the Slayer so much as stared hard at his mate, Bane would get a new collar...made out of Slayer skin.

If Ethan Rayne had done what he was told Giles and Willow would stay out of the fight. He was sure the warlock would obey him. As a user of the forbidden magics he owed a certain amount of loyalty to Baphomet and his followers. Even the most jaded Catholic says sir to a priest. Whether he did his job or not, Buffy wouldn't care. He'd embarrassed the Slayer in front of her groupies and that was intolerable to someone as self-absorbed as she was. He would never understand why the Powers gave so much responsibility to such an arrogant child. Still, it would be fun to see her face when she found out Ethan had told her the truth. Buffy bashing could turn out to be fun, now that he had a little perspective on the situation.

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The roar of the engine signaled that her enemy was near. The Slayer moved into fighting stance and waited. Within a minute her target came into view. She watched from her hiding place as the two figures dismounted the bike.

The brunette pulled the blonde into a deep kiss and then moved toward her. The blonde stayed with the bike.

Xander's hand was on the doorknob when Buffy struck. Stepping out of the shadows, she sent a hard punch into his kidneys. A kick to the small of his back was followed by blows to the back of the head and legs. The stake made a satisfying thunk sound as it penetrated his back and came out through his chest. She stepped back with a smile on her face, waiting for her enemy to turn to dust. Waiting and waiting and waiting.

"Damn it Buffy! I liked this shirt."

Xander turned around to face her. It was only as she saw him calmly pull the stake out of his chest that she realized he'd never reacted to the blows she landed. She'd hit him full out with all her strength and he hadn't so much as grunted. And there he stood...smiling at her. He raised the stake to eye level and then calmly crushed it into splinters with one hand. Still smiling, he grabbed a fistful of her hair and dragged her into Giles' apartment.

"Spike! You can come in now."

From her awkward position Buffy saw Spike walk into the apartment. The blonde smirked at her and took a seat on the couch. Giles handed him a cup of tea and sat beside

him. Willow nodded hello and perched on the arm of the couch. Riley moved as if to help her, but Ethan's voice stopped him.

"I wouldn't. If he wanted her dead she already would be. He seems in good spirits Mr. Finn, for all our sakes, don't make him angry."

"Well said Wizard. I see you've done your job."

"As you commanded My Lord. Is there some other way I may serve you?"

"Yes. Put a binding spell on this one. I want her unable to harm my mate."

"As you wish. May I extend the spell to include my lover and myself? As well as, the young witch?"

"Yes."

Ethan began to chant an intricate spell, as the words left his lips they formed bands of light that surrounded Buffy. The bands began to overlap and then weave together, until finally she was covered in a spider's web of light. When Ethan stopped speaking the light flared for a moment and then seemed to soak into her skin. When the last of it was gone, Xander released her and she fell to the floor.

"You son of a bitch!! I'll get you for this. Who the hell do you think you are?!! You bastard!!!"

"Silence! I am Alexander, a priest of Midian and a Knight of Baphomet. I give you your life this once, cross me again and I will kill you."

Xander crouched until he was looking into Buffy's eyes. He breathed out the faintest whiff of smoke and felt his eyes shift. When he spoke this time they all heard an echo of the power Spike knew lived inside his mate.

"Now listen carefully Slayer. I want no part of you or this place. When I've achieved my goal I'm leaving. I will take my mate and any who wish to join us back to Midian. You will not interfere. This is none of your concern. Understood?"

"Yes...Xander."

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## Part Seven

Willow was the first to react. All the joy she'd been holding in since the night before came spilling out in a happy little squeal. The red head seemed propelled by the sound and charged to Xander pulling him into a hug before he'd completely straightened up from glaring at Buffy. Xander wrapped his arms around his friend and

hugged her tightly. She wiggled away, but only far enough to see his face. The witch studied his cat's eyes, and his long teeth, and the slight point to his ears.

"Oh Xander! You look wonderful. Your eyes are so pretty. Can you see in the dark?"

Xander laughed in delight. Willow's easy acceptance of him was a gift he'd prayed to Baphomet for, he'd been answered. With one arm around the woman he thought of as his sister, Xander guided them both to the couch. Sitting next to his mate he pulled Willow down on his other side. He smiled when Spike snuggled into him and was pleased to see the grin on Willow's face when his mate stuck his tongue out at her. Their friendship was obvious and a great relief for him. It would be difficult to convince the witch to come to Midian if she thought it would make things awkward between he and Spike.

"It's good to see you again Xander. We were very worried about you."

"Nice to see you too G-man. I see you got your wizard back. Things working out?"

"Yes, quite. And while I fully accept that you are extremely powerful and dangerous...I have asked you repeatedly not to call me that."

Xander rose from the couch to hug the Watcher close. He was thrilled when Giles hugged back. The older man had always done his best to be kind to him, and Xander had missed the tone of fatherly reproach in his voice. It was nice to know that Giles wasn't afraid of him.

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Ethan watched his lover be hugged by a Knight of Baphomet, and felt his heart melt. Ripper had been heart broken over the boy's death. Seeing the two of them reunited made the wizard almost glad that the Knight was here. But despite good moods and happy reunions, Alexander was still dangerous. And Buffy was still a fool. Ethan made up his mind to keep the Slayer from doing anything stupid...again.

When Giles was released and the Knight motioned him forward, Ethan's heart froze. The boy this man had been knew of his past. Perhaps the Knight thought him unworthy of Ripper. If that were the case his life was over. It was obvious to the Wizard that his lover, the witch, and the vampire were already being thought of as part of the Knight's tribe. When this man left he would take them with him. Ethan had to be included, he could not live without Ripper again.

Kneeling in front of Alexander, he made the appropriate symbol of respect and fealty. Finger to tongue, forehead, and heart. He bowed his head and waited in silence that seemed to sink into his skin like a leach's teeth.

"You served me well. You will serve me again. I require your assistance in completing my task."

"Whatever is needed My Lord."

"First, I need you to get up. Then I need you to call me Xander. After that...could you talk Giles into springing for Chinese food. I'm starving."

Ethan looked up into laughing brown eyes and couldn't stop his own smile. He was helped to his feet by strong gentle hands. And then he was being hugged. And while the others had missed it, Ethan knew he was being scented and sensed. He'd just been accepted into the tribe. And when he was released he kept his eyes down to show that he knew who was in charge. And Xander made a point of catching his eye, and then he winked. And Ethan wasn't quite as worried anymore.

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Part Eight

Spike cuddled against his mate's side and purred to let him know how content he was. It was nearly dawn, but Giles had insisted they stay in the guestroom. Empty food containers from the closest Chinese restaurant littered the floor. The witch was asleep in the overstuffed easy chair, Buffy and Riley were curled in the corner as far away from them as possible, also asleep. The Watcher and his warlock were deep into a discussion with his mate about the history of Midian.

"What I don't understand is how Baphomet survived what the magic did to him. It was blood magic, fueled by his pain and the pain of all those murdered souls, so why didn't it destroy him?"

"It nearly did G-man. It rended his flesh and tore pieces out of his soul, but his willingness to suffer for his people made him stronger than the magic. In the end, it remade him. The man he was is gone. All that's left now is a tortured god, whose only solace is the survival of his people."

"Then why allow Boone to destroy Midian? Why not stop the prophecy and protect his people?"

"That version of Midian was already destroyed. It was grave. There was no future for the Tribes there. Every year our numbers dwindled until only a few remained.

What happened with Boone and Decker was a tragedy, but in the new city the Tribes have more than tripled. The NightBreed are thriving again...because of Boone. There's even talk of alliances with true demons. Not the let's kill everyone and eat their poodle demons, just your average regular person except for the horns and tail type demon."

"Clever that." Spike sat up straighter but didn't move away from Xander. The blonde nodded in thanks when Ethan handed him a lit cigarette. Taking a deep drag he nibbled his lower lip and blew smoke out his nose as he thought over the proposed alliances. "Those type have families, you offer a safe place to snooze for the kiddies and you get loyal fighters. With the ankle biters in the city, if someone attacks mumsy and dadums'll go out fang and claw defending Midian. Damn smart that."

"Boone thought so. You're gonna like him Blondie, and I can't wait to see you and Narcisse butt heads with each other."

Spike smiled up at his mate and stole a quick kiss. Ethan watched his lover's eyes cloud over and then go blank as the mask he'd perfected fell in place. That indifferent stare had never worked on him, it appeared that it wouldn't work on Xander either.

"Giles? What's wrong?"

"Nothing...just, for a moment I forgot you'd be leaving again. It was nice to have my family together again."

Xander caught Ethan's eye as the warlock pulled his lover into his arms. A small nod toward Ripper was the only encouragement he needed. Coaxing the taller man to his feet, Ethan led him to their room. Stripping his lover with comforting ease, he pulled off his own clothes and joined Giles under the covers. For awhile, they simply laid in each other's arms. Then Ethan began working on the task Xander had set for him.

"I'm so sorry my love. I know how much you've missed him. It will hurt you terribly when he leaves, and I hate that there's nothing I can do to stop that."

"Don't let him leave."

"He can't stay here Ripper. Midian needs him...almost as much as you and young Willow do. Ripper...."

"Hmm?"

"You do know don't you? You have felt it?"

"Felt what? You always pick things up before me, what is it?"

"When he leaves Spike will go with him..."

"Of course."

"...and so will the little witch."

"Willow?! To Midian?"

"I almost envy her. I only saw the old Midian for a short time, and I've never seen the new city."

"Mmmm, I wonder what it looks like?"

Step one accomplished...get him thinking about Midian. Step two would be trickier. But it had to be done. Ripper was wanted in Midian. The two of them could have a good life there, and his beloved would be with his family. And convincing Ripper to go to Midian would spare him the trouble of helping Xander abduct his beloved when he left.

"I know what you're doing Ethan."

"Of course you do, it wouldn't be fun if you didn't."

Giles rolled on top of Ethan and kissed him deeply. Looking into his mate's eyes, he couldn't keep from laughing at the mischief in them. Ethan was the same. In all the years they'd known each other, Ethan was always the same. He was Giles' constant...in every way. The

worst times in the Watcher's life were the times he and Ethan were parted. He'd let the council separate them, he'd let his own fear of his self keep them apart, and then he'd allowed the opinions of an arrogant brat to hurt his lover. Giles was more grateful then he could express that his beloved had forgiven him. If Ethan wanted to go to Midian...Giles would just have to find out if he could get out of his lease.

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"Clever that luv." Spike leaned back into Xander's arms as Bane took them back to his crypt.

"You said that already."

"S'true. Smart about the demons and smart about settin' Ethan to get ol' Ripper ready to go. You're bringin' him and Red with us aren't you?"

"Yes. The safest place for them is Midian. I won't have my family in danger."

Spike smiled when his mate hugged him even closer. He felt Bane purring in his mind and sent his own happy thoughts right back at the creature. Visions of a bloody Buffy made the purr grow louder and the bike move faster. They were at the cemetery long before the blonde

was ready to give up his new found feeling of contentment. As it turned out, he didn't have to.

Xander stood and picked his mate up in one smooth move. Carrying him back to their bed in the crypt, he stripped them both quickly and laid down beside him. Spike pulled the taller man on top of him and spread his legs. The brunette let smoke roll out between his parted lips and felt the man beneath him react to the sight of his fangs and eyes. Growling low in his throat, Xander let the beast slip a little further. With a sound like an angry lion he flipped the smaller man onto his stomach and then up to his knees. Slathering his length in the lube he'd left in the crypt, Xander lined him self up with the tight pucker in front of him. Pushing in slowly he breached the ring of muscle with the head.

"Oh...Xanderrr....wha..." Spike's panting moans were exactly what he wanted to hear.

"Shh, need this. Give me this...please." The vampire had to respond to the need he felt coming from his lover, he dropped his head to his arms and spread his legs wider.

The brunette howled in triumph and slammed into his mate. The body under him froze and started to shake. Purring into the ear he was nibbling on, Xander held completely still waiting for his mate to adjust to his size.

Slowly, the shaking stilled and the vampire rocked his hips back. The Knight let the last of his hold on the beast slip and pounded into his mate.

Spike felt cool breath on his back and a cloud of smoke floated around his face and shoulders. He felt his lover's body shift against his back, and instead of flesh he felt fur against his skin. Arms covered in fur wrapped around his waist and pulled him up until he was kneeling on his lover's lap. The huge cock inside of him stroked his prostrate with every forward thrust, and he was in gameface snarling for release. Xander sank his fangs into the vampire's neck, offering his own wrist to his mate. Spike bit down into an arm covered in soft, short, chocolate brown fur.

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## Part Nine

Purring. Something was purring in Spike's ear. Shifting his weight resulted in strong arms tightening around him. He tried to wriggle away, but the shaft buried inside him thrust into his prostrate and kept him in place. Slowly the blonde became aware of his body and its location. He was in his mate's lap, legs wrapped loosely around the brunette's waist, that glorious cock inside his aching body. And oh fuck...he ached. He fucking hurt!! His skin

was on fire, while his lungs fought for air he didn't need. His muscles twitched and shifted and it seemed as though his whole body was rearranging itself from the inside out. He began to fight against the arms holding him, growling and snarling in pain.

"Shhh, hush my love. Easy, easy. It's the changing. Let it happen. Don't fight. Be with me. Be with me always."

The voice was cool water on seared flesh. The vampire forced himself into stillness. Wrapping his arms around his mate, he buried his face in the larger man's neck. Soft fur soothed his aching body everywhere they touched. Hands as steady and sure as time smoothed his twitching body, finally they settled on his hips. Spike moaned when he was slowly lifted and then lowered onto the length impaling him. He wanted to pull away, but the sensation was too intense. Up and down up and down. Gradually he began moving on his own. And then the hands were only holding onto him for their own enjoyment.

He rode his lover. Spike knew this had nothing to do with Xander's pleasure. This was his. Bracing himself with his hands on the brunette's shoulders, Spike fucked himself. He set the pace he wanted, loving the feel of nine inches of cock inside him. Until Xander he'd never been near anything so big, he could've wept for the years wasted.

Ramming his hips downward he took every inch, lifting up until barely the head was inside, he'd slam down again. Cum flooded his hole. It rolled down his thighs and pooled around his mate's cock. Spike howled in fear of that wonderful dick going soft on him. But it didn't. Increasing his pace, the vampire knew his ass and thighs would be bruised. He didn't care.

Sweat poured off his over heated body, and he had to throw his head back to get hair the color old gold out of his eyes. And still he rode. His mate had used this cock to own him, now he would own his mate. Cum filled him again. His mate fell backwards, lying flat beneath him. Spike screamed his victory out as his own seed poured out of him. Collapsing onto the body under him, the last thing he was aware of was two strong arms holding him. And something was purring in his ear.

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"Harder, please Angel...Harder!" Wesley writhed under him, as Angel thrust smoothly into his lover. He loved making the Englishman lose control. Wesley was a true sensualist and Angel reveled in him.

They'd been lovers since the ex-watcher had found a way to take the happiness clause from the curse. Angel's soul was permanently his, and he celebrated by taking Wes to

his bed. The man had been driving the vampire nuts with the cloud of pheromones that surrounded him every time they looked at each other. He hadn't meant to lose his heart to the rogue demon hunter, but Wes' loyalty and faith in him had won his friendship...after that it was impossible not to melt at the slightly crooked and endearingly delighted smile that greeted him every time Wesley looked his way.

"Is this what ya' need darlin'? Aye, I thought so."

Wesley laughed in delight and pushed his hips up harder against Angel's stomach. The human thrilled every time he heard that wonderful brogue. Angel often became so involved in their lovemaking that he slipped into it without noticing. It had become Wes' goal to get the man to lose it enough to revert to Gaelic. He'd come close on more than one occasion.

They found release quickly after that, and sleep followed that. Wesley had no idea how much time had passed when his lover woke him. It didn't help his befuddled brain any that his lover chose to do this by sitting straight up in full game face and letting loose an enraged bellow.

"SPIKE!"

"Angel, what's happening? What's wrong?!"

"Spike! Wil, my childe. He's gone!!"

"Has he....was he killed?"

"I don't know!! He's just gone." The Master Vampire was beyond furious. He couldn't feel his Wil. He didn't know if his beloved childe was dust, or if the soldiers had him again, or...what?!! He didn't know what had happened. But he was damn well gonna find out.

"Fetch Delia and Doyle. We leave as soon as they're dressed. Hurry darlin' I cannae wait long. My Wil could need me."

Wesley pulled his pants on and ran through the hotel. A flight of steps and a hallway later and he was beating on a door. "Francis! Cordelia! Hurry! Something's happened to Spike!"

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## Part Ten

Xander watched his mate adjust to his new body as he woke. The once milky pale skin had become porcelain, traced through with the most wonderful patterns of blue veins barely visible beneath a velvet surface. The already lean and muscled body was now more defined and toned. A tattoo stood out clearly on the smooth skin over

his heart, it was the outline of a face. Slanted yellow eyes and a red line for a mouth were the only distinct features, but it was still clear whose face it was. When Spike ran his hand over the face its mouth opened a little and sharp teeth nipped at his finger tips. The once vampire and his demon were still joined, but now they had become something new.

The hands Spike snatched away from the creature were the same, with one exception. They were newly tipped with a lovely set of short razor-like talons. The newly born being flexed his hand and the talons extended to over three inches long and then retreated. He opened his mouth to speak, but then stopped when he ran his tongue over his teeth. They were all slightly sharper than normal, but his canines were as pointed and sharp as his new claws. A tongue brushing against them caused them to grow. They came down to rest just outside his bottom lip and then drew back up, but the point never went away. His fangs were permanent now.

Xander ran a hand up the center of his mate's back. The blonde shivered and extended his wings. Freezing, he turned to look at his mate in shock. Xander kissed him gently and then rose from the stone they slept on. Going to a wall he ran his hands over the surface while whispering soft words in a language no human had ever

heard before, when he was finished he went to the opposite wall and repeated the process. There was a flash of light and the brief smell of ozone, and then both walls were transformed into mirrors. Floor to ceiling facing each other so you could look in one and see a reflection of your back in the other. Then the Knight led his mate to the mirrors and watched him discover himself.

Spike stared in shock and awe at the creature that faced him. White blonde hair shot through with strands the color of old gold and fire hung to the small of his back. The tattoo on his chest opened its slitted eyes wide to get a good look at him. It clacked its teeth together in approval and then seemed to go to sleep. Wings that started out as black as ink at their arch and faded to pure white at their feathery tips hung from each shoulder blade. Flexing the muscles in his back extended them; their width and length made it clear they weren't for show. He could fly. When he turned his head to look at his mate he caught sight of one pointed ear.

"I look like a friggin' elf angel!"

"You look like one of the Breed. You're one of us now."

"One of you...the Tribes of the Moon."

"Boone will make it official when we get back, but you are NightBreed. And you're mine."

The Knight stepped behind his mate and nuzzled into the space between his wings. The blonde moaned and arched into the touch. Turning in his lover's arms, he wrapped his wings around the both of them and pressed against him. The brunette's arms circled his waist and he buried his face in the smaller man's neck. Spike tilted his head back to give Xander better access.

"Xander, show me. Please?"

The brunette pulled out of his love's embrace and moved to stand directly in front of the mirror. Taking in a deep breath, he slowly let it out. Smoke came from his mouth and began to surround his body. It clung to him like a second skin. As with Bane, Spike could sense movement inside the smoke. A low growl rumbled through the crypt. Walking forward slowly, the ex-vampire stopped at the edge of the smoke and watched in awe as it began to roll away. It was gone in the space of one unneeded heartbeat and the next. And then he saw his mate. No masks, no magic, this was the real Xander.

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The knock on the front door was more a furious bang than anything else. Ethan and Giles rushed into the living room to find a barely awake Willow opening the door to Wesley. Buffy and Riley staggered to their feet when a blanket covered Angel followed the ex-watcher in. Behind him came Cordelia and Doyle, and then Wesley was slamming the door and pulling the curtains. The sun was blocked at the same instant Angel let his displeasure be known. Riley was turning blue from lack of oxygen when Buffy threw herself at the vampire. She used all her strength to try and pry his fingers from the commando's neck. It didn't work.

"Where is my Childe? What have you done with Wil?!"

"Angel, it would be easier for him to answer if he could breath." Wes ran a soothing hand up his lover's arm. The taller man released Riley and turned to Giles.

"Where is he?"

"He and Xander were here. They were going to stay in the guestroom. I suppose they left right after we went to bed. Have you tried Spike's crypt?"

The ride to the crypt was accomplished quickly through Angel's and Giles' complete disregard for speed limits. When the vampire told the watcher that his link with

Spike was cut off Giles got pissed. Very few things could disrupt the connection between Sire and Childe. The most common was death. If anyone had hurt Spike they would pay. The blonde vampire was a friend and the lover of his newly returned son. He was apart of the family, and no one fucked with Ripper's family.

Ethan was scared. For Spike to be hurt or dead meant one of two things. First, Xander was dead. Ethan wanted nothing to do with anyone or anything strong enough to kill a Knight. And the second was what had him more worried. If Spike was gone, and Xander was still around...there wasn't going to be much left standing in Sunnydale. The warlock did not want to face the possibility of a vengeance hungry Xander looking to take apart those responsible for his mates' pain.

Angel was wrapped in his blanket when the two cars pulled into the cemetery. Piling out they rushed to Spike's crypt only to freeze just inside the door at what they saw.

"Wil?"

"Hello Daddy. Come for a visit?"

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Part Eleven

Xander was beautiful. Short velvet fur the color of milk chocolate covered a well muscled body. Broad shouldered and narrow hiped, Spike licked his lips at the thought of running his tongue over a six-pack. The perfect cock was soft and also covered in fur, and the once vampire couldn't wait for the feel of it again. His mate's feet and hands were both clawed. The soles and palms were calloused, speaking of time spent running on all fours. The ears were pointed, but not so much as Spike's. All the teeth in the slight muzzle were gleaming and sharp. Xander was a meat eater. Despite the catlike appearance, he was still recognizably Xander.

"There's more isn't there?"

"Yes. I can shift fully into a creature...more like Bane. But this is my natural form, just as that is yours." The voice was a soft rumble. Throaty and deep, it made the hair on the back of Spike's arms stand up.

"I can change more?"

"Yes, but it will have to wait until we get to Midian. Babbette can teach you like she taught me."

"You can't teach me? Why not?"

"I'm a fighter love. I have no talent for teaching. Now come here."

Spike walked into his mate's arms and ran his hands up and down the fur covered chest. Xander purred softly and Spike was delighted. Grinning like a kid at Christmas, he pounced. Xander was flat on his back and laughing helplessly before he realized the blonde was tickling him. Hands and feathers were being run over his chest and stomach. The result was a string of undignified giggles and pleas for his beloved to stop teasing him. But Spike was having too much fun. Using his wings for balance and blocking escape, he straddled his love's waist and showed no mercy.

He was just about to swoop down for a kiss when something itched the back of his neck. Xander went still at once. Cocking his head to the side he listened carefully. A frown marred his face, and then he was on his feet with Spike behind him. The brunette had maneuvered himself between the door and his mate. Spike felt anger and annoyance rub against his mind. For a moment he was shocked, but then he sent his own feelings of concern and love back to his mate. He wasn't worried. Now that he was paying attention he knew that people were coming to their crypt. More importantly, he knew who was with them. He had just enough time to slip into his jeans and force Xander into his. Then the door burst open.

"Hello Daddy. Come for a visit?"

Angel walked slowly into the room. As his Sire got closer, Wesley ushered everyone else out. Firmly closing the door between them and the outside, the ex-watcher stayed by the entrance and watched his lover approach the blonde.

"Wil? My sweet Wil. You've got wings."

"Xander gave them to me. He came back to me."

Angel registered the brunette's presence for the first time. He stared in shock at the picture his beloved and bewinged Childe and his fur covered catman made together. The connection between them was obvious, but the older vampire was still confused. Xander was dead. It hadn't struck him as odd when Giles said Spike was with him earlier because he hadn't been listening. But now...

"Xander? But you're dead?"

"Not quite. Not quite alive either."

The vampire felt power coming from the creature standing with his Childe. Old power. But his senses told him this was Xander, the boy's scent was unmistakable. The lack of heartbeat was worth a raised eyebrow

though. And then it happened. The brown furred beauty slowly breathed in. Smoke came from everywhere, shrouding the form and hiding what took place inside it. The smoke rolled away as quickly as it had come...and there stood Xander.

"NightBreed!"

Wesley's shout drew the trio's attention to him. He'd drifted from the door over to where they stood. A tentative hand reached toward Spike's wings while eyes full of awe asked permission. Spike smiled and Wesley stepped closer. Gentle hands traced the inner side of one wing, ruffling the feathers a little. Then a face full of joy and awe turned to their owner.

"You're wonderful! You're here."

Xander used slow easy movements and a delicate touch to turn Wes' eyes to him. They were shining with happiness and tears. The Knight smiled softly and brushed the moisture from the other man's face. When he spoke his voice was low and laced with the power Spike recognized as the Baptizer.

"What do you know of Midian innocent?"

"They forgive you." A whisper. Hushed and rough.

"What could you want with forgiveness...innocent?"

"I...I failed." The tears came quickly now. Angel moved to take Wes into his arms, but Spike understood that something important was happening. He put himself between his former Sire and the ex-watcher.

"You have not failed. You have accomplished your purpose. Angelus has been banished for all time. The Powers have their champion...and his anchor."

"Wha...I don't understand."

"You are the tie that binds. It is your love that holds the soul in place, that keeps the demon at bay. No spell is unbreakable, no curse unending. But your love is eternal. Your devotion will never waiver. You have succeeded at the task you were born for. You have not failed. You will never fail at you destiny. You have accomplished your purpose. "

The power faded. Only Xander stood before them now. He studied the man before him. The tears were gone and he stood tall and straight. When he raised his head he kept his eyes on Xander's chest and said nothing. Xander smiled and gently pulled the glasses from his face, a gentle hand wiped his tears, and then Angel was holding him.

Spike moved back to his mate and watched Angel comfort the mortal. For a moment he felt a twinge of regret. Angelus was no longer his Sire. But Xander's arms were around his waist and Angel was not Angelus. And nothing in the world was more important than Xander coming back to him. Nothing.

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"Right. Now one big push up and then flap as hard as you can." Wesley watched his student with a critical eye. As the only person to have studied the mechanics of flight he was elected to help Spike learn to use his wings. It was ironic that the studies that were serving him best now were the ones his father had condemned as useless. The idea of flight had always fascinated him, it was this fascination that led him to Midian. Stories of creatures beyond imagination, creatures with wings or without that flew. Stories of a million kinds of magic caught the mind of a lonely eleven year old boy, and had never really let him go. Yesterday if you had asked him if he believed in Midian he'd have said no and then felt guilty for lying. But today he wouldn't bother. Midian was real.

"Look out!!"

A blonde torpedo knocked him off his feet. He and Spike landed in a heap, much to the amusement of the

spectators. Giles and Ethan were sitting on the blanket spread on the ground, books about flight surrounded them and the large thermos of coffee. Willow, Cordelia, and Doyle were sitting on another blanket munching on the endless supply from the bottomless pit of a basket Willow had brought with her. Wes was convinced it was enchanted, there was no way a normal basket held that much. Angel was leaning on a headstone next to Xander. They were each keeping one eye on their respective mates and the other on the Slayer. Moping against a tombstone, she made her distaste for the new Spike abundantly clear. The odd thing about that was Riley's reaction to it. Instead of backing her up he was keeping his distance. His eyes never left Spike.

"Wes I think the idea is for him to stay in the air."

"Do shut up Angel."

More laughter and a sheepish grin from Spike, and then they were trying again. This time when Spike lifted off he stayed up. They spent the rest of the night learning control and speed. By the end of the night Spike could fly. He wasn't ready to soar with the eagle, but that would take time. The impromptu "teach the blonde to fly" party broke up, but the only one's to leave were

Buffy and Riley. She stormed off to patrol and after a moment of staring at Spike he followed.

"So...you're undead. Right?"

"Yes Cordy."

"But you're not a bad guy."

"No Cordy."

"I cried for you."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't you ever do it again." The hug was fierce and long. Cordelia let go of the last of the grief she carried for her first love and Xander regained one of the truest friends he had ever had. When they broke apart Cordy's Doyle smiled at him and held her while she fussed with her mascara.

"You took my Childe."

"I claimed my mate. You should be able to understand that Deadboy."

"You...!"

"Angel" Wes' voice was soft but sure. "He's right. They belong together. Remember what you told me about Spike after the funeral."

The anger in Angel's face slipped away. He let his eyes wander over his former Childe and finally settle to gaze into the bottomless blue looking back at him. A thousand memories of a million moments good and bad raced across the Master Vampire's face. A sad smile drifted into place, and before the others realized he'd moved he was hugging Spike. "Be happy my sweet Wil. You deserve it."

"Thank you...Angel."

"As for you," Eyes like molten gold turned to Xander. The voice that spoke was a snarl. "If you ever so much as make him feel bad...."

"Hey, the vamp version of the shovel speech. I'm just in time."

Riley Finn walked directly to Spike. He stood in front of the ex-vampire and studies him in silence. Finally, he reached out one slow moving hand and brushed against Spike's left Wing. Xander moved to push Riley away, but Wes got between them. Angel moved forward with the same purpose in mind, but Riley spoke before he reached them. "I'm sorry. What we did to you was wrong. It

would've been kinder to kill you. I know that now. But then...you weren't real. You weren't a person. But you love Xander, you loved him when he was alive, you grieved when he died. I saw you cry. I watched you slip further and further away everyday he was gone. But now he's back. And he loves you...loves you the same as you love him. I hate you for that. I hate you for having the one you love love you back."

Riley turned to face the rest of the group. His face was dry, but his mouth was a thin line and his eyes were glassy with tears. "Buffy sent me to get you. There's a nest of vampires. She wants help. I'm going home now. Goodbye."

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## Part Twelve

Xander watched Riley leave. When the ex-soldier was out of sight he turned to his mate. Kissing him softly he let what was about to happen slip into the blonde's mind. Spike pulled away and stared at him for a moment, finally he nodded and Xander felt his acceptance. The Knight stayed long enough to watch his mate go with the others to help Buffy, then he ran. The moon was more light than he needed even without shifting, and he could smell the despair coming from Riley. It would've been

impossible for a blind toddler to miss the man's trail. Xander kept his distance until they were just outside Lowell House. Riley had his hand on the doorknob when the Knight stepped out of the shadows.

"Did something go wrong? Is Buffy okay?"

"I didn't go with them Finn, I followed you."

The older man studied him for a moment, as if trying to read his mind by the expression on his face. "I'm not gonna invite you in."

Xander smirked and let an amused little chuckle escape as he brushed Riley aside and walked into Lowell house. "We can do this here if you want, it makes no difference to me."

Finn closed his eyes for a moment and breathed a deep sigh. Then he looked Xander in the eye. One sharp deliberate nod was all that was offered before he turned and headed toward the stairs. It was Xander who locked the door when they arrived at the ex-soldiers room. Riley sat on his bed and stared at the wall.

"You gonna kill me?"

"Do you want to die Riley?"

"Does it matter? You're either gonna do it or not."

Xander knelt on the floor in front of Finn and used one hand to turn the older man's face to look at him. With the other he brushed soft blonde hair out of tired eyes. That was the last draw for the older man. He collapsed in on himself, suddenly becoming small and impossibly helpless. But Xander was ready for it, he sat on the floor with his back braced against the bed and pulled Riley into his arms. The blonde curled around him and buried his face in the brunette's chest.

"Shh...such grief for so worthless a cause. Hush now, she doesn't deserve your tears and she was never worthy of your love. She can't love; its not you she doesn't love...it's anyone that isn't her."

"Angel...she loved Angel..."

"No. She owned Angel. And now she doesn't. Let her go Riley. She's not for you. There's no future with her; there's no future in Sunnydale."

"I don't...there's nowhere else to go."

"You're wrong. There's a place for you. A place that needs your courage and your loyalty. A place where you will never be second prize, a place where you matter,

where you belong. People to love you, people who want you there, who need your help.... a home."

"...how....where.."

"Shhh, close your eyes. I'll make it better. I'll take you home. I'll...forgive...you..."

Smoke from Xander's lips surrounded them as he guided Riley to tilt his head back and expose his throat. He bit gently but deeply. The older man jerked from the pain, but the Knight held him in place. He pulled his mouth away long enough to bite into his own wrist and place it against Riley's mouth. Then he went back to drinking from the bite. He felt the tugging at his wrist when the other man began to drink. After a moment he pulled away and laid Riley on the bed. Then he moved to the chair in the corner of the room and waited. It wouldn't take long for the older man to wake up, and when he did... Things were in place. It was time to find the heart and leave. The Slayer could have Sunnydale. He already had what he wanted.

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The fight was already going strong by the time Spike and the others got there. As usual, Buffy was performing a complicated gymnastics routine when a few well placed

punches would have worked. The former vampire was surprised to hear Angel heave a sigh of resignation before wading into the fight. He watched his ex-Sire methodically dust any vamp that got within his reach. There was no fire in this fight. Angel was helping because it was expected, not because he cared about the outcome. The blonde was so absorbed in studying the Master vamp that he noticed the moment Angel's attitude changed.

A random minion ran from Buffy. He passed close by where Wesley and Spike stood watching the fight. As it fled it reached out with one hand and attempted to jerk Wes between it and Buffy. Angel roared his fury and charged. Of course, the ex-watcher calmly staked the stupid creature before it had the chance to make him so much as stumble. But that one foolish reaction was the end of this nest. They had threatened Angelus' mate, and they had to die. Indifferent resignation turned into snarling fury, and even the Slayer had the sense to get out of the way as the Master vampire laid into the idiots.

When the last was a pile of ashes Angel strode over to them and took Wesley into his arms. A deep kiss and whispered reassurance from the Englishman calmed his fury. The Slayer's reaction to the kiss reawakened it.

"Jeez. Give it a rest." Buffy's distaste was obvious. So was Angel's lack of patience. For some unknown reason Spike felt the need to try and stop this disaster before it started. He suspected it had something to do with wanting the Slayer to be around to see what his Xander had been up to.

"Let's all toddle of to our respective beds for the night kiddies. We've all had a full day."

"Yeah and we're all soo eager to watch Wes drool over Angel when he can't do anything about it. Talk about pathetic."

"Give it a rest Buffy, we've all had enough for one day." Spike began to ease away from Angel and the Slayer. It was obvious even to Buffy that what she'd said had upset Wesley, what she didn't seem to notice was Angel's growing rage. Spike was pretty sure he could get Wes out of the crossfire, but he had no idea what to do about the others.

"Actually Slayer, Wesley is my mate...in every way."

"Uh-huh, and let me guess...the curse doesn't apply to ex-idiots from England. Or maybe it's that he doesn't have what it takes to make you happy. You don't really

love him do you Angel? It's not like it was with you and me. He's just there."

Spike felt Bane brush the back of his mind. It had sensed his concern and was checking up on him. A quick look around showed him that the proverbial shit was about to hit the metaphoric fan. Ripper, Rayne, and Red were standing shoulder to shoulder giving Buffy looks that would've scared the devil himself back into hell. Doyle was red-eyed with anger...literally. He was also green spiky skinned and ready to enlighten the Slayer about his feeling on this subject. The prom-queen was calm, she was very calmly loading her crossbow and aiming it at Buffy. And Angel...Angel was smiling. Spike left concerned, bypassed worried, and went straight to fucking scared. He knew that smile.

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## Part Thirteen

Riley began to stir from the sleep he'd fallen into. The changes were complete. His transformation had taken only a few minutes instead of the hours it usually took. Xander had known that Spike would change quickly, his being a vampire with a faster rate of healing and regeneration had ensured it. The Knight wasn't sure what had caused the speed in Riley's change, but he'd sensed

that this would be the case. Turning away from the window he settled into a comfortable lean to watch the ex-soldier wake.

Riley felt himself swimming up out of a fog. He was asleep and dreaming, he knew that, but the dreams were so real. And so much nicer than his current reality. In his mind he was in a city full of people he knew and cared for, and what was even better was that they all cared for him. Then there was the woman...almost too thin, tall but not his height, long dark hair, wide dark eyes, an odd slightly crooked smile, skin that glowed in the moonlight, and her voice.... Her words had an odd accent to them and he wasn't sure what she was saying, but she was smiling that smile and reaching out to hug him and he never wanted to leave her arms. He was home there. She was his home. And that wonderful voice was in his head, even though he was leaving the dreams behind, her voice followed him into the waking world and as he woke he echoed the last of her whispers...

"....Rachel."

Sitting straight up on his bed he was immediately aware of the differences in himself. They were rather unavoidable. For starters, his skin was green. Closer

examination of the webbing between his fingers revealed that his body was now covered with a layer of miniscule scales, each one was an odd shade of opalescent green. When he shifted on the bed the light coming from the window made him shimmer and glow. He was dark like an emerald or the deep seas, and when he touched the sides of his neck he wasn't surprised to find gills. He'd become amphibious. His feet were webbed like his hands and when he concentrated he found that his fingers hid claws he could extend or retract.

The mirror on the wall showed him that his hair had darkened to the color of burnished gold. Like Spike's it had lengthened, it was now down to his shoulders. His teeth were obviously that of a carnivore, although unlike Spike and Xander he did not have elongated canines. His eyes were a darker shade of green than his skin and when he blinked he discovered two eyelids. One served the usual purpose, the other was nearly transparent to allow him to see underwater and still keep his eyes protected from debris, like a crocodile.

" That'll be useful."

The sound of his voice was what finally shocked him. It was unmistakably his, but it was also changed. The tone

was deeper now, it seemed to resonate more in his chest like a purr. He was reminded of the stories about sirens who lured sailors to their deaths and was pretty sure that if he tried to sing he'd hear something very different than the off key warble he was accustomed to.

"You look beautiful." Without turning to look at him, Riley could hear the smile in Xander's voice.

"Don't let Spike hear you say that."

"He'd agree. So will Rachel."

That got Riley's full attention. He spun to look at the dark-haired man. Standing up he discovered that his balance was better, which probably had something to do with the webbing. He was about to question the other man about his dreams when Xander's smile disappeared. His brow furrowed and he bared his teeth in a snarl.

"Spike's afraid."

That was all Riley needed to hear. Xander was already climbing out the window and he was following. They hit the grass and set off at a full out run. Xander was the person that had given him a new chance at life, a place to

belong, and a mysterious beauty to dream of. Spike was Xander's mate. Any threat to either man was intolerable.

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Angel kept smiling. He slipped out of Wesley's arms and walked up to the Slayer. Pitching his voice just loud enough to be heard by everyone else, he spoke in a calm intimate tone. And he never stopped smiling.

"You're right Buffy, it's not like it was with us. You were so sweet and young. So naive and unsure...so bloody boring. When we were together it was everything I could do just to keep my cock hard, and you just laid there. Stupid girl. If I'd wanted to fuck a corpse I'd have stayed in the cemetery."

Buffy swung with her right arm, but Angel was ready for it. He caught her wrist and twisted it behind her back. Grabbing her other arm, he spun her around and twisted it too. Shifting his weight forward he tangled his legs with hers and pinned her against him. Leaning low he put his mouth close to her ear and continued in the same silky cool voice.

"But my Wesley, mmmm... He's amazing. Oh, I can't describe how he moves when I'm in him. You wouldn't

believe the things he can do with his mouth. And it's so good....when he fucks me."

Buffy screamed and tried to jerk away. She threw her body forward and tried to head butt the vampire that held her. It was a wasted effort.

"I love it when he fucks me. You should see his cock. It's perfect, long and thick. And when he comes in me it's like fire going through me. On his worst day he's a better fuck than you could ever dream of being you frigid little cunt. Even soldier boy had to go out and screw a few stray vamps to get his end away after being stuck with just you."

Angel let her go then. During the last of his words she'd sagged against him, without his support she fell to the ground. Using his foot he turned her over to face him, then he stood straddling her waist and staring down at her. Now when he spoke it was in his normal quiet voice, the one they'd all heard a thousand times.

"You wanna know the best part? The part that made he and I had to go through worth it? It's the love. I love him. More than anyone or anything. Whatever you call this existence I have...unlife, death, I would give it up for him

and never hesitate. If he got turned tonight, to be with him....I'd give up my soul."

Buffy curled into a ball on the ground. She was sobbing and shaking. Angel turned his back on her and went to Wesley. The vampire gathered his mate into his arms and held him close. Wesley laid his head on Angel's shoulder and turned his face in to nuzzle the taller man's neck.

"I love you Liam."

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## Part Fourteen

Xander strolled out of the shadows calmly. His hearing and his connection to Spike had let him know what was happening. Considering what he was about to spring on Buffy he almost felt sorry for her...almost. He stood behind Spike and pulled the shorter man into his arms. The ex-vampire cuddled against him and they both felt Bane's approval.

The bike rolled up next to the two entwined men and let its engine purr. The one who tried to hurt its master was in pain. She wasn't dying, but it was a start at least. It liked the tall dark one; he had made the woman cry. As far as Bane was concerned that was a very good thing.

Spike couldn't keep from chuckling at the elemental. He wasn't thrilled with the idea of it taking a liking to Angel, but considering how pleased he was with his ex-Sire at the moment it was hard to begrudge the creature its approval. Pressing further into Xander's hold on him, he turned his eyes to the spot in the shadows where he could feel a presence.

Riley watched Xander and Spike hold each other. He sensed the power and the intelligence in the motorcycle parked next to them; it was obviously not what it seemed. He turned his attention to the two other men embracing. Angel was holding Wesley close to him and purring softly. Their feelings for each other seemed to flow from them like a soft colored light, after a moment Riley realized that he could actually see what they were feeling. Focusing on the others he let this new ability show him what was happening.

All the lovers were covered in blue; it was the color of their love for each other. With the exception of Buffy they were all flashing between red and dark gray, anger and sadness. Willow was encircled in a pale gold that showed her to be a powerful witch. Ethan and Giles were each surrounded by a deep almost fiery golden halo. They were infinitely more powerful than the young witch, but she had potential.

Cordy was covered in a soft purple, she was human but the threads of gold lacing through the purple showed she had the potential to be a very powerful witch. Doyle was green. His demonic heritage was visible, but the flashes of silver showed that he was a seer.

Wesley was purple with bands of gold, a human who regularly used magic. The streamers of pure white that surrounded his chest showed that he was an instrument of the Powers. Angel was a seething mass of red, black, and purple. The rage and hatred of his demon in constant battle with his human soul. But there were lines of white that shot through the mess. They were thin, but pure and undeniable and each one of them corresponded to one of the streamers of white that emanated from Wesley.

Red and black also encircled Xander and Spike, but it was a calm shroud that was overlaid with gold and the occasional streamer of white. A purple haze hung over both of them; they had their souls. In the center of them both there was a pulsing yellow-white flame. It was the mark of Baphomet; it was what made them NightBreed.

Riley knew that a mirror would show him the same colors surrounding his own body. The only thing that would be missing was the blue of love. It was this thought that caused him to turn his eyes to Buffy. Red and black, as

violent and volatile as Angel. The purple of her soul was dim and dirty looking. Where there had once been streamers of pure white, there was now a dingy cream color like old lace. There was no trace of blue. There was no room for it. Xander was right, she couldn't love anyone.

Riley felt the last of his pain slip away. He couldn't hate Buffy anymore; he could only pity her. She had once been a servant of the powers like Wesley, but she had let the violence that was a necessary part of her nature rule her. Her connection to the Powers was almost gone and when it was she would no longer be able to survive. Very soon a new Slayer would be called. Because he had once loved her, Riley was relieved that death would be coming for her soon. Perhaps in it she would be able to find some peace. Maybe she would be rewarded for the good she'd done and forgiven for what she had become.

Taking a deep breath, Riley stepped out of the shadows. It was time to say goodbye.

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"I must say Mr. Finn, green is definitely your color."

Ethan's voice drew everyone's attention to Riley. Rayne was smirking, he wasn't surprised by the change in Riley

at all. Somehow, he'd known. Giles raised his eyebrows, and then nodded once. He was a slightly surprised, but he approved. Willow reached out to touch him.

"You're scaly, but not bad scaly. Like a snake, smooth and kinda soft, slippery scaly."

"Yeah, it comes with accessories too." Smiling at the redhead, Riley raised his hand and spread his fingers. The webbing was translucent in the moonlight.

"Wow, have you considered joining the Olympic swim team." Willow's smile was brighter than he remembered it being for a long time. It was full of acceptance. Riley realized that he had a friend, one he hadn't even known he'd made. He couldn't keep himself from hugging her.

"What is it about the green ones?"

Cordelia's voice was full of laughter. Or at least it was until Doyle leaned up and kissed her. The two of them had no problem with the ex-soldier.

Angel finally pulled away from Wesley long enough to look Riley over. "Is this what you want?"

Once, Riley would've heard scorn and disgust in that calm voice. But with the fear of losing Buffy gone, all he heard

now was concern. "Yes, this is what I want. It's what I'm supposed to be, only I didn't know it."

"You're not like Spike and Xander. You haven't gone beyond death, and...you probably will never be able to pass for human again."

The newly made Breed could hear and feel the gentle concern in Wesley's voice. He wasn't trying to change Riley's mind; he just wanted to make sure the younger man understood the choice he'd made.

"That's okay. I didn't do such a good job as a human anyway. I think I might be better at this."

"You'll be fine in Midian. The fact is, there's a lot fewer of us that can pass for human. There are no secrets among the Breed Riley, you'll be accepted exactly as you are."

Xander's voice was a rumbling purr, probably because Spike was busily nuzzling his neck. The blonde raised his head long enough to grin at Riley, but then he went back to making a meal out of his lover's neck.

"Riley, what's going on?" Buffy's voice was harsh. Angry and cracking from tears. The others had been standing between the two of them and she hadn't seen Riley yet. Taking a deep breath, he stepped out from behind his friends and faced the Slayer.

"Riley?! What happened to you?!!"

"Buffy, I..."

"Don't worry. We'll get you fixed. Giles will find something and you'll be back to yourself in no time."

"I am myself Buffy. Nobody did this to me. I chose this."

"You chose to be Kermit's taller brother?!!"

Buffy's words should have hurt. They didn't. Riley actually found himself to be amused. Doyle on the other hand was not.

"Hey, let's not make this about color...you bottle blonde."

"Oi! Bugger off leprechaun!!" The former human couldn't keep from smiling. Doyle was closer to Kermit green than he was, and there was no way Spike would let his shot at bleach jobs slip by. These were his friends. He had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

"You think this is funny?! You're smiling about this!!?! Riley you're not even human anymore!"

"Neither are you."

"What!? What the hell are you talking about?!"

"You're not a human being anymore Buffy. There's nothing of humanity left in you. Whatever you could've been, all the good you've done; you've made it all worthless by the way you treat people."

"Okay, okay. This green thing is messing with your head. I'll get you help Riley."

"Buffy stop!! Listen to me, please. I don't need your help. I don't want it. Once I needed you to love me, but you didn't even try. You used me as a convenient replacement for Angel. And I don't know who to feel more sorry for; the two of us because we honestly cared about you, or you because you can't care about anybody."

"You wanna feel sorry, feel sorry for yourself. I hope you like the spot in Hell where you burn demon, cause you're gonna be there or a long time." Buffy's voice was a snarl. She spit each word through clenched teeth.

"I'm not going to Hell Buffy, I'm going to Midian. So are Giles, and Ethan, and Willow. You're going to be alone, so be careful. No one's going to be here to help you. Goodbye Buffy."

Riley found it was easy to turn his back on her. She was nothing to him anymore. Just another slayer. Just

another pawn in the Powers endless war with the bad guys. There had been thousands of slayers before her, there would be thousands more. It was only her friends that had made her different, and she didn't have them anymore.

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## Part Fifteen

Sunrise snuck up the horizon. It oozed across the landscape like honey on a cold morning. Spike watched Riley slip into a deep sleep as light came into the world. They'd returned to Giles' at the insistence of the others, all of them in sleeping bags on every available inch of floor in Rupert's living room. Even he and Ethan had opted to pull their mattress into the room rather than be separated from the group.

Xander was curled behind him, spooning around his body like a second skin. Riley was lying in front of him with his head tucked under his chin. The drowsiness that had hammered into the newly changed man had frightened him. He'd become convinced that something had gone wrong and he was really dying. Oddly enough, it was Spike who had been able to sooth him. Lulling him into a calm sleep with the same gentle tone that had soothed the worst of Druscilla's daymares for decades.

"He's asleep?"

"Finally. He was terrified Pet."

"I know. The first night I woke up I thought I was in Hell, at least he knows what's happening to him."

"I knew what was happening to me when Angelus turned me. He made sure I knew...it didn't make it any easier."

"Spike, I know you weren't turned against your will. I also know that Angelus did not tell you the whole truth."

"I knew enough, ignorance is not an acceptable defense against the willful abandonment of one's innocence."

"Hmph. Thank you Professor."

"Do I really need to pretend to be something I never was with you?"

"You never need to pretend anything with me. I know you were and are a highly educated and intelligent man, but I also know that Spike isn't just the mask William hides behind. You're one person...two sides of a coin. You don't have to be one or the other ever again."

"Old habits Pet. Your boy here's quite somethin' though."

"Yeah, Riley's gonna do good in Midian."

"Would you two please shut up?" Cordelia's voice broke into their whispered conversation and Spike could feel Xander's grin against the back of his neck. Cuddling back into his mate's arms he almost laughed when Riley moved with him. He let himself drift off to sleep then, safe and content in the new life that was stretching itself out for all of them.

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"Nooo...please no. Stop them. Someone stop them... Xander?!" Riley's voice was a gasping whisper. His head tossed back and forth while his hands clenched into fists until he was white knuckled. His whole body seemed to be trying to twist itself into knots. Spike was the first to wake up, Xander second, and everyone else seemed to join the waking world at the same time.

"Soldierboy. Finn. Riley, wake up. Come one now Pet, open your eyes. It's only a dream. Wake up now." Spike's voice was soft and low.

"No!! Stop them!! Please! Spike, Xander!! The heart...they have the heart!!!" Riley's voice was a desperate wail. By now the others could see that he wasn't asleep, he was lost somewhere inside his mind. Doyle was the first to act. Scrambling over to the thrashing man, he drew back and cracked an open

handed shot across the left side of Riley's face as hard as he could.

The reaction was immediate. Xander was on his feet and shoving Doyle back, Spike was cradling a now silent Riley against his chest, and Cordy was tugging on Doyle's arm in an effort to get him away from Xander. Wes was on his knees beside Spike and a now sobbing Riley, Angel was shoving his way between the Knight and the Seer. Giles was holding Willow back from charging at Doyle, and Ethan was pouring a double shot of whiskey.

Striding past the arguing forms in the center of the room, Ethan slid to his knees next to Wesley. He passed the whiskey to Spike and watched as the ex-vampire quieted the shaking man in his arms and got him to sip from the glass.

"WILL YOU PLEASE SHUT THE FUCK UP THIS INSTANT!!!!"  
Ripper's snarl was music to Ethan's ears. While he was grinning like a lovesick jack-o-lantern, everyone else was stunned into silence. Only one voice could still be heard. It was a soft whisper. The soothing voice of a parent speaking to a frightened child.

"It's alright pet. You're alright. Shhh, take it easy."

"I saw them, I saw where they are."

"Who pet?"

"The one's who have the heart. The last piece of Baphomet's heart. They're at the school, the Hellmouth. There's a man with burns on his face. I think...I think he's a priest."

"Ashebury."

Xander's voice broke the spell Riley and Spike's soft voices had cast. The Knight moved swiftly around the room; gathering his shirt and jacket, putting his shoes on. The roar of an engine let the others know that Bane was as ready to leave as his master. Spike was stuffing his feet into his boots and rooting on the floor for his duster before the others started moving. They were still gathering weapons as the Knight and his mate were striding out the door and down the path to the waiting motorcycle.

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The school was still a charred wreck. The new high-school had been built across town, not over a Hellmouth. No one in the town was really sure why some developer hadn't snagged the property and thrown a mall on it. Bane could have told them why.

The whole place itched. A burning little tickle between his shoulders and the pads of his paws. It felt like the stingy stuff that the Master had once poured on it when it was badly cut. The smell made its eyes water. This place was the same. Plus there were shadows. Too many Naturals had died in this place. They were still tied to it, not going up or down or anywhere else. They were all unhappy and Bane wanted to whine to show it was sorry for them, but then a new smell hit its nose.

Filth, corruption. Not the smells of clean earth or natural decomposition; not even the wild stench of the Berserkers. No this was the worst kind of smell. This was from something that should be laying down and rotting but didn't have the sense to know it. Decay, black magic, disease, and madness poured from this place. Even the shadows kept away from the source of that smell.

"Easy big guy. We know what that is." The Master's voice was quiet but very tense. The Pretty One said nothing, but began unloading weapons from Bane's saddlebags. Bane waited until Pretty One was done and then shifted its form. It would be following the Master inside. Whether the Master liked it or not. For now it was content to keep a close eye on the foul place while Pretty One scratched its neck.

"Nice to see you two bonding."

"We have a thing or two in common love. For instance, we both love you. We both think you should have let Bane eat Slutty; and we're both goin' inside with you."

"No."

"No my buggery bollocks. You try getting' in that building without me and Furry here and we'll just follow you. I'm not stayin out here love. You can't make me, and if parts in this little drama were changed you'd be pissed off if I even asked you to." Bane leaned into Pretty One's hands and purred its agreement.

"Ganging up on me huh? Fine. Grab something pointy. Furry?" Bane huffed out a breath and tilted its head to look at the Master from an angle.

"Don't get smart fleabag. You keep that nose of your's on him. Make sure he comes out in one piece...Furry."

"Oi! I can take care of meself. Don't need no overgrown spaniel nippin at me heels."

The sound of an engine stopped Xander from speaking. The others had caught up to them. They piled out of Angel's car one after the other, and Xander was reminded of the clown car at the circus. They were all

armed and looking seriously pissed, he was gonna hear about storming out of Giles' and leaving them behind. But that was for after, for who ever was left when this was all over. For now, they needed to know what they were facing. Maybe they'd be smart and stay out of it. Maybe not.

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## Part Sixteen

The combined groups from Sunnydale and L.A. surrounded the Knight and his companions. Their body language made it clear that no one was going anywhere until they knew what was going on. Xander looked to Spike for assistance, but found his mate leaning against Bane idly scratching the elemental's side. Neither of them had any intention of helping him.

"Now then, would you kindly tell us what and who we're here to fight? Or shall we charge in blindly?" Giles' voice was crisp and calm. He was pissed. Willow wore her resolve face and Angel was a breath away from vamping out. But it was Riley that convinced Xander to relent. The younger man was staring at the school looking terrified, but he had an axe clenched in his hands.

"The man Riley saw is called Ashebury. He was a priest, a priest who liked to wear silk and lace under his robes. When the Hunters came to Midian they brought him with them...to have God on their side. But Ashebury, he saw those good human men slaughtering women and children. He didn't care that they weren't human, he still tried to stop it. Somehow he wound up in the Tabernacle. He watched as our priests left with pieces of Baphomet, and he recognized him as a God. It was more than his mind could handle. An urn containing the Baptizer's blood was overturned, and Ashebury was burned. It took what was left of his mind. When it was all over, he used some of that same blood to bring a man called Decker back to life. They're both inside. They're who we have to fight."

"Who's Decker? Why did this Ashebury bring him back?" Giles was calmer now, but no one had moved. They were still determined to help.

"Decker framed Boone for murders he committed. He slaughtered whole families and convinced first Boone and then the police that Boone was responsible. That was why Boone ran to Midian in the first place. Decker set it all in motion. Decker led the hunters to Midian. Boone killed him, but Ashebury brought him back."

"He stole the heart." The Knight turned to his mate and nodded in approval. The blonde had been listening to every word. He was the first to make the connection between this story and what they'd already been told about Midian. "This Decker bloke nicked the heart, and him and the poncey priest are in there with some other random nasties waitin' to chomp on us. They know we're out here. It's a bleedin' trap. And you were gonna march right in. Get yourself topped and leave me and Finn here with Furface and the Dogooders. I don't bloody think so you great swaggerin' git."

"Spike..."

"He's right. You were gonna leave us." Riley's face was a mask of fear and grief. Xander could feel the pain and abandonment rolling off of him. Before he could move Spike opened his arms and Riley buried his face in the blonde's neck. He moved to them and embraced them both. Speaking softly so only they could hear, he tried to explain.

"I wasn't trying to leave you. You're both still so knew. We're not even sure what you can and can't do. And what's in there is pure is strong. Strong enough to destroy me. Decker was resurrected by Baphomet's blood, so in away he's apart of him. I don't know that I

can do this. But I have to try. What I do know is that I can't deal with the thought of the two of you getting hurt or being taken from me. Please don't be angry. I'm just trying to protect my family."

Spike released Riley and pulled Xander into a kiss. It was slow and deep and full of the love they both felt. When they separated they stayed in each other's arms. Riley watched them both with wary eyes. Spike's place with Xander was clear, but he was still in doubt of his own.

"Riley I won't lie. It's not like with vampires, you're not my Childe. But I did bring into this. Before you I've only done it twice. Once with my mate, and once with the man I call my brother. You'll like Richie, he taught me how to ride a motorcycle."

Xander watched the smile creep across Riley's face. The ex-soldier finally had the family he'd always wanted. This time he didn't wait for an invitation before hugging the night and his mate. He knew he had the right to do so whenever he wanted. They were his brothers. It was Spike's question that brought them back to the world around them.

"Xan, didn't you say there was Breed here?"

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## Part Seventeen

Riley was in awe. So many. There were so many of his people here. And he never knew. Xander had summoned them. They'd crept out of the shadows around the old school like phantoms, drawn from all over Sunnydale by Xander's summons. He was an avatar of their God, they could not refuse him.

Some came alone, walking slowly toward Xander. Others came in groups, speeding up to the Knight on motorcycles or piling out of old cars with the windows painted black. Some crawled out of the sewers, more climbed down from the trees, a group of three flew from behind a low cloud and landed just behind Bane.

Riley couldn't keep track of everything he was seeing. An animal that looked like a large cat separated into a mother and child. The winged flyers breathed in smoke and became a young woman no older than 15, with bright purple hair. There were horns, and scales, and teeth, and claws, a man with snakes that slithered from two gashes on either side of his navel, another whose whole body seemed to be painted in black shoe polish except for the two golden horns that grew from his head. A woman with the face of a wolf, a child with glowing

green eyes in the palms of her hands.... So many... So different... So beautiful...

He wanted them. Wanted to know them, to touch them, to walk through the world with them, to know the night and live in it forever... Those words... They were her words. Rachel's words. He'd heard them in his dream. She'd whispered them to comfort him, to welcome him. But when he woke up he hadn't remembered. So why? Why would they come to him now? Why did he feel like he could reach out his arms and touch her?

A car roared into the street in front of the school. Riley felt himself stop breathing. The doors opened. Now he was panting. A man, a man in a battered straw hat and sunglasses, getting out of the driver's seat; opening the rear driver's side door. A figure getting out of the car. Riley felt himself begin to sweat. Her. Her...It was her!

"Rachel!! Rachel!!"

"Riley? Riley!"

Her voice calling his name, calling him. And he was running to her. Crushing her to him. Kissing her. Her taste, coppery and cold and perfect. And she was real, she was in his arms and kissing him back. His Rachel, his beautiful Rachel, his mate.

“Riley, I think you know Rachel. This is Narcisse.”

Riley turned at the sound of Xander’s voice, his embrace with Rachel never easing. Xander stood next to the man who’d been driving the car. The battered straw hat perched on top of the ruined flesh of his skull. The skin of his face was an island in the sea of exposed muscle and tissue. Another patch of skin at the back of his skull anchored a thick growth of long shaggy brown hair, it looked like someone had attached a horse’s tale to the back of his skull.

This was one like him. A being that would never be able to hide what he was. Xander could look human, Spike could make his wings disappear, they could walk down the street and no one would know what they were. But not him, and not Narcisse. They could never be anything but what they were...NightBreed.

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Xander was thrilled. He’d been a little surprised at Spike’s suggestion that the Breed in Sunnydale be called in to help with the fight. Once he’d seen the sheer numbers of his people that were living here he’d felt stupid for not calling them sooner. But when that beat up old car had rolled up the street he’d been in shock. Riley’s reaction to Rachel had snapped him out of that. Narcisse was

watching the two of them with a lecherous grin, it was good to see that some things never changed.

“Riley, I think you know Rachel. This is Narcisse.”

“Nice gills handsome.”

Riley didn't answer, instead he blushed and buried his face in Rachel's hair. Narcisse let a whoop of joy and turned on Xander. The Knight found himself swept up in his friend's strong embrace. It was as familiar as the calloused hand copping a feel of his ass.

“Oy you, walking road kill, get your bleedin' hands off my Xander.”

Spike was all but snarling at Narcisse. Xander pulled away from his old friend and put his arm around his mate's chest.

“Narcisse, Rachel...this is Spike.”

Xander's introduction got immediate responses from the new arrivals. Rachel stepped away from Riley long enough to kiss Xander on the cheek and brush her hand along Spike's cheek.

“He is as beautiful as you said he was. Congratulations Xander, you've chosen a lovely mate.”

Her smile was soft and kind, and she returned to Riley's arms as soon as she finished speaking.

"Spike...William the Bloody!! You're fucking William the Bloody! Well fuck me raw, wait till Boone hears about this. His Favored found a mate, and it's the fucking scourge of Europe. Oh oh...please let me tell Peliquin, he'll shit bricks!"

Spike was grinning from ear to ear at Narcisse's laughter. It didn't hurt that Xander was nuzzling his neck, or that he'd just found out his Xan had been talking about him, thinking about him all along.

"I hate to break up the reunion, but bad guys with missing hearts don't wait forever."

Angel's voice brought Xander back from the joy of seeing members of his tribe. They had a battle ahead of them that could take whatever life they had away from them. He couldn't imagine Narcisse laying still in a grave or Rachel's severe beauty wasted by decay, but it could very easily happen in the fight they were walking into.

And worse yet, what about his family that wasn't Breed. How could he go from one night to the next if the night came in a world where Willow wasn't somewhere being his sister? And Spike, dear dark Gods and Goddesses, the

very thought of losing the blonde man sent a surge of emotion through him that he hadn't felt since he was chosen by the Baptizer. Fear. He was terrified of being without his beloved mate.

"Xander, it's time to go."

Giles' voice was low and calm. It did not erase Xander's fears, but it freed him from the paralysis that gripped his body. Fear was unimportant, it was something to be examined and dealt with when the fighting was over. For now, it was time to step up and do what had to be done.

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Buffy watched them from the shadows. She thought she ought to be angry with her friends for being here with Xander. She was almost certain that she should feel betrayed and enraged that Angel was choosing these people over her. She knew she should be screaming with jealousy at the sight of Riley in another woman's arms.

She wasn't. She was tired. There was an empty feeling inside her that she didn't recognize. It wasn't anger, she knew that feeling too well. There had been a slow burning rage inside her for so long that she only knew it had been there when it was gone. She felt like the ashes at the tip of a used match, brittle and ready to snap off

and crumble at the slightest touch. And with the anger gone she was beginning to understand that she'd been feeling that way for a long time.

Buffy loved her mom. Joyce had stood by her through the best and worst times in her life. She hadn't turned her back on her daughter no matter how out of control things had gotten. But the Slayer couldn't remember when she'd last seen her mother. In fact, the picture of Joyce inside her mind was vague and fuzzy around the edges. What color were her mom's eyes? Wasn't her voice soft and kind? Buffy couldn't remember.

Something was wrong with her. She hadn't known it before, but she did now. Something had been wrong for a very long time. Since before Xander was killed. She could remember thinking she would stake him before Willow and Giles could give him back his soul. But why? Xander was her friend. Sweet, smiling Xander who made everything better when he made her laugh. Why would she want to hurt Xander?

And Willow, when had her best friend become "The Witch" in her head? Because that was how she thought of her, The Witch, with no more caring or concern than she would give to thoughts of the sword or the stake. The redhead had become just another tool. A weapon to

be used and then tossed away and forgotten when it wasn't useful anymore. No more a person than "The Watcher" ....But that wasn't right either. Giles wasn't just her watcher, he was her friend and teacher. And once he'd been the father she kept in her heart.

Something was wrong with her. She didn't understand it. She'd only just started to see it. But it was real, and she needed help. She needed Giles and Willow to research and find the answer. She needed Xander to hug her and tell her not to worry. She needed all the Scoobies to tell her that they loved her and would help her like always. She needed her family. But they weren't her family anymore.

Riley was right. She was nothing special, just another Slayer. Angel had been right too. She was nothing but a stupid little girl. She had ruined everything. Burned every bridge anyone had ever tried to build to reach her in the middle of the sea she was caught in. She'd always prided herself on being a strong swimmer, but she had known that sometimes her arms got tired and her legs cramped and the only reason she stayed afloat was that her family never let the current drag her under. But now...

Now she was further from the shore than she had ever been and she was swimming alone. She was already so

tired and the water was getting rougher. There was a storm coming in. The waves would get taller, the current would get stronger, and she was barely keeping her head above the water now. Soon she wouldn't be able to swim anymore, and this time there would be no strong loving hands to pull her up and keep her floating until she could start swimming again. This time when she went under, she would drown.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was her family. They were going to try and fight what was in the school. Everything in her told her that they would fail. Her mind was full of visions she didn't want.

Giles with his throat torn out. Willow crumpled in a heap with a gaping hole in her chest. Spike pinned down by things she couldn't see while they ripped his beautiful wings off. Xander a nearly unrecognizable lump of twisted and torn flesh. Ethan burning himself out using the last of his magic trying to stop something from getting to Cordelia. Riley and the strange woman beaten to death and thrown aside to die beside each other. Angel's head being ripped from his body by a faceless thing that she couldn't make her mind see. Doyle crushed by some beast too horrible to be real. Wesley...that was worst.

Wesley would live. She didn't understand why, but whatever was in the school wouldn't kill him. No, what happened to him was too horrible to think about. The vision of his mangled body and the overwhelming knowledge that his mind would remain intact and trapped forever in his ruined flesh was more than she could deal with. It had sent her to her knees, vomiting up what felt like everything she had ever eaten.

When she'd finally stopped she was shaking and exhausted. Standing up had been one of the hardest things she had ever done. Because she knew what would happen if she did. If she stayed on the ground she would pass out. Then it wouldn't matter. She wouldn't have to do anything. Maybe when it was all over she would find what was left of Wesley and put him out of his misery.

But if she stood up...she would die. She knew it like she knew the sky was above her and hell was ahead. If she stood up she would go to the school and help her friends. She would fight whatever was inside and she would die. She wasn't strong enough or special enough to live through facing what was in the school. But maybe, just maybe she could save them. If she could do something, even just buy time or make a distraction, her family might have a chance.

The anger was there, screaming at her to let them die. Saying that they deserved it for turning on her. She had almost given in to it. She'd started to let herself lean back against the headstone she was crouched beside. That was when she realized she was in a cemetery. She didn't know how she got there, but it didn't matter. What mattered was the grave she was kneeling on. The stone was familiar. She'd seen it every time she came to fetch Spike. But she'd never really looked at it.

She'd never paid any attention to the name of her brother carved into the marble. Never realized how few years there were between when its owner had come into the world and when she thought he'd left it. She's never read the word written on it, the word she knew that Spike had asked Angel to add. Friend.

It was such a small word. But it was so much. So much more than she had been in so long. Friend. Her friend. Her friend was in trouble. Her friend needed help. She braced both arms on the stone and pulled herself to her feet. For a moment all she could do was lean on the cool marble and sob. But she'd leaned on Xander so many times before, maybe this one last time wouldn't make him too angry.

Finally, she was able to hold herself up. She drew in a deep breath of night air that was cool and clean, and she shivered when it made the tears on her face sting like ice shards. But she drew in another breath, and another, and then she could breath without hiccupping on sobs. Her throat burned and the taste of bile was in her mouth. But she was on her feet. She had stood up.

That was when she felt the anger go. It drained out of her like the air from a punctured balloon, hissing and rushing. It left her feeling shattered, as though she was a broken doll whose pieces didn't fit together. But she'd stayed on her feet. It was on the long staggering walk from Xander's grave to the school that she realized something had been wrong with her for a long time.

She didn't know what it was or where it came from, but it didn't matter. She knew her family were good people, they were clever and loving. Maybe someday they would understand what had happened to her. Maybe then they could forgive her. But that didn't matter either. All that mattered was that they were her family, and she had failed them.

Not this time. This time she wouldn't let them down. Saying she was sorry wasn't important. Let them think she hated them, let them stay angry with her, it might

make it easier for them when they found out what happened to her. She didn't want them to hurt, she'd hurt them too much already. But she could make it right. Not because she was the Slayer, not because she was special or strong. Because she loved them, Xander, Willow, Giles, Spike, Cordy, Riley, Angel, and Wes. She didn't know Doyle and Ethan, but her family loved them. And that made them important.

Buffy sat in the shadows of the old chemistry lab and watched her family through the broken window. More than anything in the whole world she wanted to hug them. She wanted to feel them hugging her back. She wanted to grin at Willow while Giles cleaned his glasses, she wanted to snicker when Xander winked at her right before he called their father G-man. She wanted to hear her brother and sister laugh. She wanted to see her mother smile. She wanted to go home.

But she didn't. She stood up. She turned away from the window and moved silently into the deeper shadows. Movement outside the lab door told her she would have to wait before she could slip out and get closer to the library. She took deep steady breaths, the air here was cloying and smelt like fouled earth. It was still cold, and it still made her shiver when it cooled her scalding tears. But that didn't matter either.

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## Part Eighteen

The pain hit Doyle like a sledge hammer. His knees buckled and his eyes rolled back in his head. Angel was supporting his full weight, while Cordelia stroked his forehead and whispered comfort. His body twitched, muscles spasming in reaction to overwhelmed nerve endings and the images racing through his mind. A murmur began to roll through the crowd gathered around the Scoobies, ..“prophetic,” ....“seer,” ....

They knew it was over when he went still. Ethan was offering a flask and Cordy was asking if he was alright, but Doyle wasn't seeing either of them. His attention was focused on the school. He was staring into the cracked window of a classroom. Tears streamed down his face and the pity and sorrow surrounding him where as obvious as the ruined state of the school itself. It was so overwhelming that even Angel's voice seemed hushed when he spoke.

“Doyle, what did you see?”

“She's, Angel man it's B....”

“The battle ahead will be a difficult thing. It is understandable that a seer would be shown a glimpse of it.”

Rachel’s voice was calm, a cool pronouncement of an obvious answer. Doyle was caught in eyes blacker than any night he’d ever seen, and the knowledge of what was in those eyes almost sent him back to his knees. She knew, she’d known what was going to happen before she ever came to Sunnydale. And there was nothing that could be done. If he told the others what he’d seen they would try to stop it, and it would get them all killed. What was about to happen was horrible and brutal, but it was the only way. For the first time in a very long time Doyle would’ve sold his soul for a full bottle of whiskey.

“Yeah, the battle. Just, everyone just be careful. Nobody try playin’ hero. Not today.”

Rachel’s nod was a solemn concession to the misery she must have seen in his eyes, and while everyone else seemed to accept this explanation Ethan’s eyes kept moving back and forth between them. But in the end he only nodded and offered Doyle the flask again. The brandy wasn’t nearly strong enough and there was nowhere near enough of it, but it was better than nothing.

“Right, no more fainting spells from you Kermit. Scarlet O’bleedin’Hara you ain’t.”

“Up yours, you walking Disney wet dream.”

“Least I don’t look like somethin’ the grocer tossed out two weeks too late.”

“This from a man with Vulcan ears”

“Oy! Why you prickly overgrown leprechaun...”

Doyle let the teasing with Spike distract him from the sick knot in his gut. His hands were shaking, and he thought he was going to vomit any minute now. But his body was still going. While he argued with the ex-vampire he was helping Cordy pass out weapons from the trunk of the car and checking his own crossbow and knives. He couldn’t do anything about what he’d seen, but he could do the best he could to stand with his friends and family. No matter what.

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Getting into the school turned out to be easier than they’d imagined. Xander simply instructed the breed to get inside anyway they could. Some turned to birds and flew through broken windows, some became shadow and seeped into the cracks in the walls, and some let

their beasts out in a breath of smoke and charged. These led the rush on the entrance, rending and ripping anything that got in their way. Xander and Angel led the others in behind the first wave and Bane brought up the rear.

Nightmares that would have sent regular demons running came at them from all sides. Beasts so horrible that even as you fought them your mind shuddered away from cataloging what you were seeing. But no matter how hideous they were, they fell to the Slayerettes.

Xander and Spike were using fang and claw to shred anything that got close. Angel and Riley kept Rachel between them while their swords took off limbs and sliced open throats. Narcisse was a cackling whirlwind of carnage, tackling the beasts and burying blade encased thumbs in eyes and throats while his teeth tore hunks of flesh from whatever part of their bodies he could sink them into.

Cordy's aim was as vicious as it was true, and gargling screams always followed the sound of the crossbow's release. Doyle was beside her in full demon mode, and while his knives were deadly the sharp spines that covered his flesh were deadlier. Wesley and Giles were working as a team, short swords in one hand and maces

in the other, they hacked and bashed their way through the mass.

In the middle of the fighters Ethan and Willow had joined hands. A mist of dark purple began to pour from their lips as they chanted and while it passed around their friends and the breed harmlessly, everywhere it touched their attackers flesh began to shrivel and fall away from bone.

But for all their combined skill and power, none of them could match the sheer mayhem that Bane was unleashing. Ranging from the rear to the very front of the battle he snapped spines with powerful jaws, gutted things twice the size of a man with a single swipe of his claws, and reveled in every moment of it. This was his world. This was what he was made for.

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The walk to the library was a like a slow crawl through hell, and while they were all bloody by the time they reached what was left of it, they did all reach it. That wasn't so for many of the breed. Bodies lines the halls, and while more of them were the corpses of the enemy, too many of them were children of Baphomet. But nothing they had seen could prepare them for what was happening right in front of them.

A battle was already raging inside the library. The room was filled with a pack of things even worse than what the Scoobies had already fought. Multi-limbed and headed, they seemed made of pure madness. They were foul, oozing, shambling things, with far too much speed and strength for the ruined flesh they inhabited. They barely seemed to notice the group entering the library, all their attention was taken up by the two figures locked in combat in front of a small altar.

One was tall, dressed in tattered rags that had once been an expensive suit, the head was covered in a mask with no features except two button eyes and a small zippered hole for the mouth. It was limping and the side of its head was bleeding. There was broken glass imbedded in the flesh visible under the remains of the suit and there was an obvious wound on its side.

The other figure was smaller and far more damaged. The wheeze and gurgle of its panting breaths told of broken ribs and punctured lungs. The left arm hung limp and useless at its side, the left side of the face was a bloody gash with shards of glass glittering wetly in the ripped flesh and exposed muscle. Blood matted the hair and clothes and the left leg was being dragged behind it as it moved.

For a moment no one moved, minds that had already seen too many horrors for one day could not take in what they were seeing. But then the fighters caught sight of them. With more speed than should have been possible, the smaller figure buried its sword hilt deep in the chest of the other fighter. Leaving the blade there, it whirled and snatched up a cloth wrapped bundle from the altar, the force the damaged form used to hurl the package at them sent it sailing over the heads of the beasts watching the gruesome display.

It also over balanced a body already weak from pain and too much blood loss, and sent the smaller figure to its knees. Bane reacted first. Snatching the bundle from mid air and cradling it safely in his jaws, as a voice that was too familiar to the Scoobies rang through the room.

“Guys run! Get out of here!”

Even as she screamed Buffy was struggling to her feet. It was already too late. She was unarmed and too weak to go on; the Scoobies were too far away and there were too many monsters between them and her. But she tried. The masked figure buried a machete in her stomach. But she tried. With the last of her will she stood up.

She didn't have the strength to pull the blade out of her stomach, but she staggered toward her enemy. With her eyes closed she grabbed him around the waist and pulled him to her. She felt the blade sticking out of her bury itself in the taller figure. She felt it hiss and jerk. She felt it try to pull away. But she didn't understand any of it.

In her mind she saw Willow, all long red hair and shy smile. Next to her was Xander, with his skateboard under his arm laughing and mooching chips from Willow's lunch. They were standing in the hall next to Willow's locker, and at the end of the hall Giles was in the doorway to the library motioning them inside. Cordy and the Cordettes were teasing Spike about his hair and he was laughing at Angel, who was being coerced into singing by Wes and her mom.

In her mind, the jerk of her enemy was something she couldn't see trying to pull her family away. But she had lost them once already, and nothing would ever take them away again. She held on through the blows that shattered her spine and left both her legs useless. She held on through the enraged screams of her family and the mad charge that decimated the beasts between them and their slayer. She held on through the pain of the knife that ruptured her spleen and skewered her kidney. She held on through Spike's desperate flight

carrying Xander and Wesley to her side. She held on while Spike ripped the legs off her killer. She held on while Xander ripped its head off.

Then strong warm hands were coaxing her to let go. She came back from her mind to find herself on the ground, and for a moment she forgot, she was back at Xander's grave and she had never stood up, and her family was dead. The sob that tore from her chest brought blood and shredded lung with it, but she didn't even feel it in her grief.

"Buffy? Oh god Buffy? Please, please...?"

She knew that voice. Giles. It was Giles. And Willow was next to her. And they were bloody and crying, but they were alive. And the hands touching her face were Xander's, and he was there. Whole and wonderful. And suddenly she knew where she was. And her family was there. They were battered and bruised, but they were alive. She could see Wes and Riley and Cordy and Doyle and Angel and Ethan and Spike, and they were all there. All safe.

The strange woman was looking at her with black eyes and standing next to Riley. And that was okay, because the stranger loved Riley just like Wes loved Angel, and the two of them would take care of Riley and Angel. Just

like Ethan would take care of Giles. They would be alright. She had stood up, and her family would be alright now. But someone was missing. Where was ....

“...my mom?”

“Shhh. Be still, we’ll get you out of here.”

“Giles...my mom? Where’s...my...mom?”

“She’s home Buffy. She’s safe at home.”

“Oh. That’s good.”

She was standing in the hall again, and Willow and Xander were moving into the library with Giles. The others were already inside, and only she and her mom were still outside.

“Buffy honey? Come on. Everyone’s waiting for us?”

Her mom’s voice was soft and sweet. Her eyes were blue. Her smile was kind and warm. And she was so pretty. Buffy let her mom take her by the hand and smiled as she was led to join her family again.

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“No!! Buffy NO!!!”

Rage and despair fueled Willow's scream. She spun away from the lifeless body of her sister and onto the new wave of monsters moving toward them. Eyes like a shark's glared death at them, while small hands twisted into claws and threw balls of silver fire into the crowd. Angel and Spike's roars were twinned and terrifying. Angelus slipped the reins of his soul and reveled in the slaughter. Spike was a terrible glorious beauty, wings spread with fangs and claws dealing vicious brutal death. Even the tattoo on his chest had come alive. Blood dripped from its mouth like a wound as it feasted on any that were stupid enough to get too close.

There was no man left to Xander, on all fours he looked most like a great maneless brown lion. Fully the size of Bane, he killed with an animal savagery that not even Bane could match. Riley found pleasure in the feeling of flesh tearing in his teeth and claws, but it didn't slow the tears that poured from his eyes. All the Scoobies set on the enemy with new purpose. This was no longer about duty or the good fight. This was vengeance. And now came the reckoning.

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Wesley was aware of the battle raging around him, but Xander had slipped Buffy into his arms before joining the

fight. the ground was filthy and soaked with blood, and even though a good portion came from the body he held, he would not lay her in that filth. He didn't know how she got here, but why she came was obvious.

She had walked into what she knew would be her death to help them. Despite the anger and resentment, despite her belief that they had betrayed her and her turning on them, she had chosen to lay down her life for them. She had died like a hero, like the hero that had first earned the friendship and love of the people around her. That was all that mattered. And he would die before he would befoul her by laying her in that disgusting mess.

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Ripper saw the priest behind Wesley from the corner of his eye. The man was horribly disfigured and obviously insane, and Ripper knew who he was instantly. This was Ashebury, the priest that resurrected Decker. Decker who killed Buffy.

The watcher dived past Wesley in a move that would have done a major leaguer proud. Coming to his knees between Wes and Ashebury he brought his sword up and forward. He was rewarded with the heavy thunk of blade hitting bone. Twisting his arm earned him a shrill scream. And when he stood up using the strength of his legs to

move, he felt the rapturous sensation of muscle, sinew, and intestine shredding on the blade. By the time he was on his feet Ashebury was half the man he used be...literally.

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It was closer to dawn than many of the group realized, but where conscious thought failed instinct took over, and those who could not tolerate the sun were already seeking shelter from the morning light. They left the school in as many forms as they had entered it, smoke, birds, beasts, a cloud of insects, a wisp of fog. The Breed left the battlefield. They carried their wounded and their dead, no fallen friend was left behind.

It was Giles who carried Buffy from the wreckage of Sunnydale High. He cradled her mangled corpse close to his heart as though he were carrying his sleeping child. Angel and Riley walked just behind him, flanking him like an honor guard. Behind them came Ethan and Wesley, Wesley holding Cordelia's hand and Ethan guiding Willow along by the elbow. Doyle, Rachel, and Narcisse walked shoulder to shoulder behind them, Rachel between the two men carrying the piece of her God's heart. Finally, Xander and Spike ended the procession. Walking with

their shoulders touching and Bane beside Xander leaning into his side.

There was no noise. It wasn't just that no one spoke. It was a complete silence. As though the world had paused to join them in their shock. The stillness followed them to Angel's car. It surrounded them through Wesley's climbing into the back seat and Giles delivering Buffy into his arms. Wesley held her with the same tenderness while Giles climbed in next to him and the two Watchers shared the burden of her weight.

The world started again when Angel shut the driver's door. He pulled away with Riley in the passenger seat and the others were left to load a hysterical Willow into Giles' car. In the end Ethan simply pushed her into the front seat and slammed the door on her screaming sobs. Tears trailed down his own face and his hands shook while he tried to get the key in the ignition. Doyle held a crying Cordelia and sniffed back tears of his own while the other man pulled away from the school. Narcisse and Rachel climbed into their car and followed Ethan. Bane drew in his beast and Xander's grip on the bike's handlebars was white knuckled. He waited until he felt Spike settle behind him, and then he signaled Bane. The elemental roared away from the school, quickly catching up to Ethan and keeping pace with him.

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They stood outside of the Summers' home like condemned men standing in front of the gas chamber. Giles was holding Buffy again, but it was Wesley who was the first to move toward the house. Willow stopped Giles just before he moved forward. A brief glance to Wesley and Ethan had them gathered around the red head. They each put a hand on her shoulder as she placed hers on Buffy's still chest. Soft pink light surrounded the still form and faded slowly when Willow took her hands away.

When the light was completely gone Buffy was changed. Her golden hair was clean and combed; her pretty face smoothed out in an expression of peaceful slumber. There was no blood, no gore, the wounds were gone. It should have made it look as though she were only sleeping, an act of kindness to spare Joyce the horror of her daughter's death. A simple illusion to protect the older woman. But it was more than Giles could stand.

To see the mangled corpse of his slayer was a pain he would never escape, but to cradle her still form to his chest and look down at the sweet face of one of his children was too much. She could have been sleeping, should have been safe in her room dreaming of a future that she should have had every right to. Happy and safe,

with no bigger worry than whether or not she had studied for the test in her first class.

But she wasn't. She was as cold and lifeless as the concrete his knees would have slammed into when they buckled. Angel caught him. Holding him upright against a chest as still as his daughter's. The sound of the front door opening drew him away from his own grief. And somewhere between comforting Joyce and lying about how Buffy died, he passed the point where he could fall apart.

By the time the police were called the story was set. They were all gathered at the Summers' house for a reunion of sorts. Buffy had been running down the stairs and had fallen. It was sickeningly easy to convince them that she had broken her neck. Joyce was adamant that there be no autopsy and the police had agreed with the distraught mother who did not want her beautiful daughter cut open.

Sunset found them all in Buffy's old room. Joyce was on the bed and the rest of them were sprawled on the floor or leaning back against the walls. They spent the night that way. No one slept, but none of them were really aware. Time passed in a haze of blank grief. Each of them mourning and trying to understand what had happened

that brought the woman that hated them into the battle that took their beloved girl from them.

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“Xander? Xander?”

Narcisse’s voice penetrated the stillness as the last rays of the sun left the sky. He and Rachel stood at the door to Buffy’s room. Not entering, not staring at it’s occupants. Their manner was solemn and respectful, but that was no surprise. They were accustomed to the grief of others. Their world had once existed only in the shadow of mortal sorrow. The Breed knew it as a shelter for their pain and treated it with the reverence that such bitter despair deserved.

“We must go Xander. Boone is calling.”

Rachel’s soft voice held a cadence of empathy, perhaps her thoughts were on her own daughter. Perhaps she simply felt pain for the sadness that made Riley’s eyes an endless sea of green tears. Whatever it was, it finally broke the pall that lay over the others.

Movement came into limbs too long still. And throats made dry from too much silent weeping cracked in demand of water. It was Doyle who left the room first, with Ethan close behind. Over the sounds of exhausted

bodies trying to raise themselves from a softly carpeted floor, the sounds of the two men making their way to the kitchen was almost painful to ears that had heard only silence for too many hours.

“Xander, it is time for us to go.”

“Its alright Rach. You and the troublemaker get the heart back to Midian. I’ll be there when things are finished here.”

“Boone’s not gonna like that. I’ll let Rachel tell him.”

Narcisse’s parting shot drew no reaction from the Rachel. She was gazing at Riley. His nod was enough of an answer and she turned and followed Narcisse down the hall. Riley turned to Joyce then. She had risen from Buffy’s bed, but had made no move to leave the room.

“Mrs. Summers, I’m not staying for Buffy’s fun...for the ceremony. I want you to know it’s not because I don’t care. It’s just...I..”

“This isn’t your place.” Joyce’s voice was quiet but not hushed.

There was agony in every line and curve of her body, but her back was straight and her head was high. She was

looking Riley in the eye through the glitter of tears in her own.

“I know that. I’m sorry it took so much pain for you to see it. Never forget you have friends in these people. In time, you’ll have family too.”

The newborn Breed was crying again as he left the room. Cordelia hugged Joyce and slipped out without a word. Wesley shook her hand, nodded to Giles and followed the dark haired woman out the door.

“Now you be a good girl and listen to the poof. He’ll take care of everything.” Spike hugged Joyce close and stared hard at Angel over her shoulder. He didn’t let her go until the other vampire nodded in understanding.

“Watcher, Poof.” Nodding to Giles and Angel, the blonde brushed his shoulder against his mates as he left the room.

“Angel, I have something for you.”

Joyce opened Buffy’s nightstand drawer and took out a small box. It was a little girl’s jewelry box, white and pink with roses and ivy. The kind bought from the toy department for a child to hide her treasures in.

Angel could barely stand to look at it as Joyce walked over to him. She hugged it to her chest with both hands as though it were a way to hold the little girl it had belonged to. The vampire wasn't surprised when Joyce handed him the ring. The tiny hands gleamed around the small golden heart, and he felt his own still heart clench in his chest.

His soul ached with longing for just one more minute with the sweet girl he'd given that ring to. Just one chance to tell her how much he would always love her, just a moment to hug her, to smell her, to hear her heart beating strong and steady as though it would go on beating forever.

But the ring was cold in his hand. Colder even than his own flesh. There was no warmth of life in the band, no spark of the fiery-spirited creature that had worn it. She had been dead for far longer than the woman who had died the night before. Whatever echo of her had driven Buffy into the school had reawakened for him what was an old grief. He mourned for the loss of the girl he had loved, and was saddened for the waste of the woman she might have been. His sweet, brave, kind Buffy had been gone for a long time. Now they simply had to bury the shell she left behind.

“Thank you.” Angel held Joyce’s hand for a moment as he accepted the ring. Then he left the room.

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Joyce watched him go with a bitter taste in her mouth. She did not hate him, but for her Angel would always be the man that took her baby from her. Buffy had been growing up far too quickly for a long time, but her relationship with Angel brought an end to the last of her innocence in more ways than one.

Not only was he her first lover, but through him Buffy had first tasted the agony of betrayal. Through him she had learned the one thing that no child can ever know, because once they learn it they can never be a child again. She had learned that sometimes no matter how hard you fight the bad guys win and the good guys can die.

Joyce could still remember the moment she’d seen that knowledge in her little girl’s eyes. She’d hated Angel then. But not now. Now she was glad that he had loved her daughter. Glad that at some point Buffy had been able to love. Joyce Summers was a smart woman, at times she was too smart for her own good.

She'd seen the change in her daughter. Felt the distance her loving child was forcing between her self and everyone else. She didn't understand it, and she couldn't stop it. But she had seen it. And her mother's heart had been grieving for her lost child for far longer than she wanted to think about.

She also didn't want to think about the blood on Giles's clothes. She didn't want to feel the disjointed weight of her daughter in her arms. She'd known that the peaceful look her child wore was a lie. She'd felt in the way the bones in her skull didn't quite mesh together. Her daughter had died a brutal violent death. But she would never tell the others she knew.

Whatever they used to try and hide her child's suffering from her had been mostly effective. And it was done out of kindness. They had wanted to spare her whatever horrors haunted their eyes and she would never let them now that one look at them told her the truth. She would die before telling them that for one instant Willow had been so lost in her grief that the spell had slipped. A blink that she would have missed if she had turned away for an instant. But all her attention had been focused on the still form in her arms. She had seen. And she was never more grateful in her life than when the illusion turned back on. She would let them lie to her, and be thankful

for the lie. And everyday, for the rest of her life, she would pray to forget what she saw.

“I’m going downstairs. I’ll make some coffee before Cordelia ruins my machine.”

“Joyce...”

“Please don’t. There are things that have to be done Rupert. I have to do them while I still can.”

She left the room then. Walking slowly she made her way to the kitchen and started making coffee. She could hear Angel in the living room talking to Cordelia and Doyle. From the sound of things he intended to take her to Los Angeles. That actually sounded like a good idea. She’d known she would leave Sunydale after the funeral, but she hadn’t considered where she would go.

The others were leaving too from the sound of things. Wesley was on the phone with the counsel, telling them the Hellmouth would soon be undefended. Riley was already gone. Gone with the strange woman Xander had called Rachel and the zombie man in the cowboy hat. He had to be a zombie, no human could live through the kind of damage he had obviously suffered. He and the woman and Riley had left because someone named Boone had called them to somewhere named Midian.

Midian. That was where the others were going. With Xander, to Midian. She wondered if that was where Xander had been all this time. It was easier than wondering if Xander was a vampire or something else. She knew he wasn't human. Human beings don't come back from the dead. But Buffy had.

She'd read it in her diary. The summer Buffy ran away Joyce had read every single one of Buffy's diaries in the hope that they would give her some clue where her daughter was. She had thrown up and nearly passed out when she read the entry about Buffy's encounter with the master. Her daughter had died, drowned by a monster that had rejoiced at her murder. But Xander had saved her. Wonderful, awkward, dear Xander had walked into that same monster's home and brought her daughter back to life. She would always love him for that.

But now another part of her wondered if that was the start of Buffy's slip into madness. For all her amazing strength, Buffy was still a little girl. How many times can a child face things that would send adults running from sheer terror before it starts to affect her? What must it be like to live everyday knowing that it might be your last? To go out every night to fight things whose only purpose was to kill you in the most horrible way they

could come up with? To wake up every morning knowing that you just had to do it all over again?

No end in sight. No release but death. How long before death becomes too alluring to resist? How long before you want to just stand still and let the monsters have you? Just to see it end. But Buffy would never do that. Her will was too strong. Her sense of responsibility to those she loved had kept her going through trials that had claimed other slayers. She'd lived everyday knowing she couldn't let her friends down, because they would die for her.

But if death is what you want, will you start hating the people that are your reason for living? Can you resent them for loving you so much that they would die before they would let you go? Could you let yourself die if you knew you would also be killing the people you loved? Was that what happened to Buffy? Did she want to die? Had she had enough of the life she'd been condemned to? Had she come to see their love as a curse that would never let her rest?

Maybe. Maybe her own despair at the hopelessness of her life had finally overwhelmed her. Maybe she had been longing for death for a long time, but clinging to life for the sake of those who loved her. And maybe she had

come to hate them for holding her in this world. But what had changed? What had allowed her to finally let go?

Had she realized that while her family would grieve for her, they had finally reached the point where they would go on living without her? Had she looked at them and realized that they were each strong enough to fight for themselves and they no longer needed her to be their protector? Had something managed to get through the wall of insanity and rage Buffy had buried herself under? Was that why she was finally able to let go?

Joyce wanted to be wrong. She didn't want to be standing at her kitchen counter realizing that the power that had stolen away her child had been something so common as depression. She didn't want something that could have been treated, could have maybe even been cured to be the thing that drove her daughter crazy. She wanted it to be a monster. Some spell or dark power that had been controlling her sweet girl. But she didn't think she was wrong. And she didn't think any amount of therapy or drugs could have helped Buffy.

Buffy was the slayer. Slayer's fought and died alone. Slayer's died young and hard. And maybe this was why.

Because it was too much. Too much to know. Too much to live with. Too much.

Too much to bare. The sobbing woman felt her knees fold under her. She felt herself hit the kitchen floor. She heard herself screaming for her daughter. She knew she was hysterical. She knew Wesley was chanting some spell to calm her down. She knew Spike was holding her. And she knew she'd never tell.

She would go to her grave carrying the weight of what she believed had truly happened to her child around her heart like an iron chain. She would never tell them how Buffy had paid for the gift of their love. She wouldn't tell, because Buffy would have died before she let them be hurt. She couldn't bring herself to be so cruel to the people who had given her daughter something to live for. And something to die for. And that was something Joyce would always be grateful for. Her sweet girl had died as their friend, daughter, and sister. Instead of a nameless killer fighting because it was her duty, she had been a human girl fighting for the people she loved. In the end she had been Buffy Summers. That was all she had ever wanted to be.

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The silence in the room was deafening. They stood there staring at each other. They didn't know what to do, or what to say. They didn't even know if there was anything to do or say.

Giles started for the door but stopped when he stepped on something. At first the soft pink shape made no sense to him. He didn't realize what he stepped on. But then Willow picked it up.

"Mr. Gordo." The red head's voice was calm. She straightened the pale lavender comforter and put Mr. Gordo the pig back in his spot on the pillows. "He musta got knocked off when Joyce stood up."

"Yes, yes I suppose he must've." Giles' voice held the same strange calm.

"Smooth move G-man."

"Xander, I have asked you repeatedly not to call...me....Oh dear God." Giles voice broke. He was sitting on Buffy's bed, but he didn't know how he got there. He wasn't sure how a sobbing Willow and a silently crying Xander came to be sitting with him. Each cuddled to his chest with his arms around them. Each holding onto the other and him.

He was never sure how long they sat there. How long he held his daughter and his son while they wept for their sister and he mourned his daughter. One of his children was dead, and all he wanted was to bring her back. It was possible, he knew it was. But at what cost?

Would Buffy want to live if it meant living as one of the creatures she's spent her life fighting? Resurrection was possible, but sometimes what came back was wrong. So wrong that it had to be put down. Could he do it? Could he kill such a beast if he knew part of it was Buffy? No. He couldn't take the chance. She was gone. He would have to live in a world she was no longer a part of.

But he didn't have to live here. The hellmouth had claimed one of his children. It would not get the other two. He would drag them to Midian by the hair if he had to. They would be safe there. Far from the hellmouth and the counsel. They would live. Perhaps Willow would make him a grandfather. Perhaps Angel would bring Joyce to visit, or they could spend Christmas in LA. Whatever they did, they would do it away from here.

Joyce's screams for Buffy brought them back to the world. None of them paused to think about the fact that as they raced from Buffy's room to help her mother, it was the last time they were the Scoobies. The Slayerettes

died with their slayer. Now they were Xander and Willow and Giles. A brother and sister who had lost a sibling, and a father that had lost his eldest daughter. Whatever else they became it would be founded in who they were and could never be again.

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The ceremony was simple. Family only by request. Buffy's father sent a wreath and his apologies to Joyce that he was out of the country and could not get back. The local newspaper ran a brief story on the back page of the obituary section. They used the picture taken at senior prom. Buffy smiled out of the page holding a little umbrella with a plaque that's print was too small to read. But a lot of people knew what it said. Flowers and cards came to the funeral home and the Summers' home, all sent in memory of or with gratitude to the "Class Protector."

After Joyce regained consciousness from the sleeping spell Wesley had cast she didn't break down again. She grieved for her daughter with quiet dignity, but the secret she carried in her heart took their toll. New lines had appeared around her mouth and eyes, and gray had begun to creep into the golden blonde she'd passed on to her daughter.

Everyone was a little surprised by her willing compliance in Angel's plans to move her to LA. The house was on the market and her things were in her new room in Angel's hotel before the graveside service was held. Cordelia and Doyle had returned to LA already, Joyce would drive back with Angel and Wesley immediately after the service.

Ethan was waiting in the car with his and Giles' belongings. They would follow Xander and Spike back to Midian. Willow's things were in the uhaul behind the car along with his and Ripper's. She would ride with them to their new home. Riley had called that morning. Boone was eager for his favored knight to return. He wanted to meet the people his friend had spent so much time telling him about. Midian was waiting to welcome them with open arms. The heroes that had finally destroyed Decker and Ashebury, and retrieved the last piece of their God.

Joyce left first. She turned her back on the grave and climbed into Angel's car without looking back. Angel and Wesley shook Giles' hand and hugged Xander and Willow. Spike was a little surprised when Angel hugged him, but he hugged back and he was smiling when he shook Wes' hand. The two dark haired men drove away with Joyce in the back seat. They would not stop until

sunrise, Angel would hide in the trunk and Wesley would drive.

Giles went next. He knelt by the grave and laid a single white rose on the ground. Then he too walked away. Willow hugged Mr. Gordo to her chest. But she wasn't crying anymore. She was red eyed and her face was puffy from too many tears, but she was calm now. She put a small stone on the ground where the headstone would be and then she walked to Giles' car.

Xander kissed Spike softly. He put a tiger lily on the grave and then went to stand by Bane. They were leaving now too. When sunrise came they would wait out the day in a hotel that had already been booked. Their escorts would meet them at the hotel after sunset. They would make the long trip to Midian in campers that were sun proofed.

Spike stared at the brown earth next to Xander's grave. Ethan had planted seeds all around both graves. The chaos wizard had told Spike that the plants would be full-grown in a matter of hours. The ex-vampire could already see shoots of green sprouting through the earth. By sunrise they would be full-grown. Tiger lilies and white roses.

Thanks to Ethan's magic they would grow here year round and would always be in bloom. The seeds themselves carried charms that repelled weeds, and he knew that while the perfume would smell sweet to him, to anyone who came near the graves with the intention of causing harm it would be an odor so foul that it would send them running. No one would be immune, not even things that couldn't smell.

The stone had already been ordered. It would be ready in two weeks, but they had scheduled it to be set two months from now. It would give the ground time to settle, give the flowers time to be fully in effect, give them all time to catch their breath whether they needed it or not.

It felt like years since he had last knelt beside Xander's grave. Years since Xander had returned to him. Years since they'd first made love in his crypt right next to the grave. The whole world was different. And nothing would ever be the same again. He was no longer the man he had been, or even the vampire he had become.

Now he was a child of Baphomet, one of the Nightbreed. He'd taken the call from Riley, and the younger Breed had whispered through the line that Boone intended to make him a Knight. Not only would he be Xander's mate,

but now he would be his partner. A warrior for the Tribes of the Moon. A whole new world.

He wondered how much would change before they all came back here to set the gravestone. Who would he be when he stood here and read the inscription? He already knew what it would say. Buffy's name, the day she was born, and the day she died. At Xander's request one word had been added to the bottom in small letters, Friend.

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The black motorcycle ate the road. It roared into the night. Bane was glad to be getting away from this place. The further they got the happier it was. It never wanted to come to this place again. Yes, there had been a wonderful battle. And the Master had claimed the Pretty One. And the Master had even brought new ones with them to join the tribe. But this place was bad. Bane was happy to leave it behind.

The elemental didn't slow down as they rode past the sign that read "Thank You for Visiting Sunnydale," but it let its engine purr when it felt the Master's amusement. It did not understand why the Master was laughing, but the elemental thought it might have something to do with the Pretty One's complaining.

“But love, it’s tradition. You have to knock over the bloody sign.”

The End