

## Ethan's Reign

Summary Prequel to Gentle Rayne, Giles has got a bug

Warning blood play substances imbibed

Ethan had just made his bed after dismissing the nymph of the night before when he saw an image of Ripper lying there dying. He put his cup down and went toward the bed, he muttered a spell and the image cleared, and the bedclothes were smooth. As he turned away the room changed, posters clad the walls and the sounds that drifted from the street below were from another time. He looked back at the bed dreading, what he was going to see. Ripper was lying there one arm thrown out to the side; his eyes closed. He looked peaceful a syringe embedded in his arm above the fresh tattoo. Ethan packed his bag hastily mumbling wards to himself as he raced down the stairs. He had to get to Sunny Dale. Ripper needed him.

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Willow paced, chewing her nails. She had found Giles staring at the computer screen in the library. She was now de-bugging the mainframe; something had happened. There had been a storm and lightning struck the library. Giles had only agreed to 'play' on the computer because she had finally convinced him that computers were delightful friendly creatures. He had believed her and now this! Buffy was pacing in the opposite direction, picking splinters off a stake. Xander sat on Giles' sofa staring at the blank television, thinking. They needed Giles to tell them what to do. He was upstairs sleeping as the dead.

The doorbell startled them, Buffy answered and when she saw who was standing there she promptly slammed the door shut. "Ethan" she said the name like a curse. The doorbell sounded again and this time Willow answered it.

"What do you want Ethan? Come to gloat?" Willow felt bold in the face of disaster.

"I want to come in; I received an invitation." He stepped over the threshold. Willow closed the door and sighed. Ethan looked round the room. Hostility met his gaze from every quarter. He looked up at the balcony feeling someone staring at him. Ripper looked very young.

"Hello, what's your name? Will you read me a story please?" Giles yawned and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "I can't get back to sleep." Ethan fixed a smile on his face.

"Hello Rupert. My name is Ethan. I'll read to you in a moment. Would you like some milk?" Rupert nodded sleepily and tripped back to his room. Ethan whipped round his burning gaze shifted to each one in turn. Willow was crying Ethan stepped toward her his expression softened as he guided her to the sofa.

"Now, tell me what happened." He asked gently

"He was working in the library. I made him work on the computer while I patrolled with Buffy. When we got back the computers were off line and he was staring at the screen. We couldn't wake him..." She started crying fresh tears.

"Ssh, It's all right Willow, it's not your fault." He hugged her to quiet her tears. Then he

remembered the promised story.

##

The room was dark except for a small night-light. Ethan fetched a pair of folding spectacles from his pocket and put them on hastily. He opened the book and began to read. Willow brought in the milk. She stood at the door and gazed at them; they were sitting close together. Giles' chest was bare and he leant his head against Ethan's arm to look at the pages as he turned them.

"...And off went officer Pat. Press the button Rupert." Rupert's face lit up as his finger pressed the button on the page. The siren sounded and the red LED glowed. Rupert was entranced.

"The siren sounds officer Pat concludes her rounds." Ethan closed the book, took off his glasses and looked at his watch.

"It's six-thirty, Rupert, time for bed. Snuggle down now." He tucked the bedclothes round him and kissed him on the forehead. Rupert closed his eyes, and then they snapped open in sudden fear.

"Leave the light!"

"Of course I will Rupert. Goodnight." He pulled the bedroom door almost closed and went downstairs.

##

He walked into the kitchen and made tea. He poured some of the boiled water into a shallow glass dish and sprinkled a powder that he'd brought with him, onto the surface. The air crackled with static as the water in the dish glowed then solidified.

"Re-play." He announced to the ether and the surface tightened to a moving record of the previous night. "Focus." The picture sharpened and displayed the computer screen and fingers moving over the keys.

"Rewind.... Stop." He peered closer. "Zoom-in." The picture wavered then became still. "Play slowly."

The pound of his fist on the counter top made everyone jump. "Erase. Thank you." The water was just water again and he tipped it away. He walked into the living room with his tea and found himself the centre of attention he smiled pleasantly.

"I know how it happened, I think. There was a storm and lightning struck the library. The computer shorted through Ripper, who was touching the keys and he was infected with a computer virus. Strikes me as a trifle weird but then you are living on the Hellmouth, so I suppose it's all par for the course. If he gets plenty of sleep he'll be fine." He took a long swallow from his mug.

"Ethan I'm de-bugging the computers." Willow looked worried.

"Sorry, Willow you've lost me. What does that mean?" He looked into her luminous eyes; a man could drown in those eyes.

"I'm trying to purge the virus from the system. It's like a brain and I'm burning all the bad sectors out." She was more confident when talking about computers.

"Burning? Bad sectors? How long does this take?" He gripped her arms painfully.

"It varies, depending on how many corrupted files there are."

Ethan stared at her, slowly comprehending what she'd just said. If Rupert and the computer were linked when the short occurred, Willow would be de-bugging Rupert's mind as well as the computers' mainframe. He swore slowly under his breath. God only knew what kind of demons would be given free rein tonight!

##

"Ethan?" He looked up at the balcony. Ripper leant there; dressed in jeans just the way Ethan liked him. He put his mug down and rushed upstairs. Ripper had ducked back into the room to finish dressing.

"We're still going out, aren't we? Are they yours down there? The girls are okay but the fella looks a bit vacant. Not your cup of tea at all."

Ethan held his breath, hardly believing Ripper was back after all these years. Ethan hugged him and Ripper was a little surprised. He ruffled Ethan's hair.

"C'mon, show me the sights. You got anything with you Ethan?" Ripper asked a little anxiously. Ethan smiled and nodded.

"In the car... We're going out, children." He called. "Don't wait up!" With that the two of them thundered down the stairs and out the front door. They ran down the path and jumped in Ethan's car.

The three teens stood at the open door. Willow's expression changed into the infamous resolve face

"I'm going to the library to get answers; I'll bring them back here." She grabbed her coat, "Xander? Eat something, you're making me nervous not eating!"

##

Ripper sat on a gravestone kicking his heels against the granite while his friend danced with the last 'meal' of a vampire. He finished the coke Ethan had given him and leapt off the gravestone. He tapped Ethan's shoulder and he relinquished his grip on the girl. Ripper looked at her face; she looked as though she were sleeping. A small 'flick-flack' noise alerted Ethan to what his friend was about to do. Ethan gazed at Rupert. As the knife he had always carried, ripped down the front of her dress, cut through her bra and then punctured her heart. Ripper held her close and lapped then sucked at the blood that flowed from the fresh wound he had made. Ethan crept closer. Rupert eyes closed as he swallowed.

"Welcome home, Ripper." Ethan breathed.

##

"Anything else, Ethan?" Giles collapsed on the grass next to the car, breathless and beaded with sweat. "I know I shouldn't but I feel as if I haven't had anything in ages. I just want everything."

"Even me?" Ripper looked at him fondly and touched his face.

"Even you, lets get back. Maybe we can share the girls, you know. Boy-girl-boy-girl." He laughed as he opened the car door and they drove off in the direction of his house.

Ethan felt around under the car seat and pulled out a plastic bag. "There you go 'pick 'n' mix'; don't eat them all at once."

##

Soon they were home. Ripper got out of the car and walked unsteadily to his front door he put the key in the lock but before he had a chance to turn it. The door was yanked open by a very angry looking Buffy. Ripper giggled.

"Look, its magic! Ethan did you do that?" He staggered over his threshold.

"Could you all stop tilting for a second?" Then he saw Willow and his face softened. "Red..." He breathed as he walked toward Willow. He plucked her off the sofa and lifted her into his arms. Willow shot a distressed look to her friends as she noticed the blood stain on his shirt. Rupert walked to the stairs, kissing her. Her arms circled round his neck as she started to kiss him back. Buffy protested but Ethan silenced her. He knew hurting Willow was the furthest thing from Ripper's mind.

Suddenly everything changed. Willow squirmed away from his grasp and screamed into his mouth. He dropped her and flattened himself to the wall laughing at the look on her face.

"He tastes of blood..." Willow wiped her mouth on her sleeve and scrambled out of the way as the Slayer pinned Rupert to the wall. He looked down at the stake poised over his heart and idly lit the joint he'd taken from his pocket. He blew smoke in her face.

"I'm not a vampire, love. I just finished its left-overs." She shifted the aim of the stake and drove it into the plaster by his arm. She turned on Ethan.

"What have you done to my Watcher?" Tears were in her eyes. Xander was comforting Willow she looked very small on the sofa.

"I haven't done anything. This is how he used to be, I've always liked him this way..." His speech halted by someone coughing up half a lung by the stairs. Giles stared at the burning object he held in his fingers.

"What the Bloody Hell am I smoking this for?" He looked round and noticed Ethan and his expression changed to one of anger.

"No romp in bed for me then." Ethan muttered.

Giles held his stomach in alarm and fled to the bathroom. Ten minutes later Giles was

back. Freshly showered and dressed in sweats. He sat on the sofa. Willow handed him some tea. He nodded his thanks and drank in silence. He put his mug down and rested his head on the back of the sofa he was soon fast asleep.

Xander helped Willow to light a fire against the early morning chill. Xander was eating again. It was strangely perverse; Giles dozing and Willow looking at the firelight. Even Buffy and Ethan were getting along; they were playing cards. It was pleasant. Peaceful...

"What place is this?" The voice boomed out from the sofa frightening all those present.

"Oh Lord," Ethan sighed. "What is it now?"

Giles rose from the sofa and prowled about the room. Ethan didn't recognise his friend at all. Giles stopped every now and then fingering ornaments and picture frames. He rested his hands briefly on his most recent diary and opened the book leafing through a few pages.

"These words dance; I know them not." He closed the book. "I am the Watcher where is the Slayer?" Buffy stood.

"I'm the Slayer you know that, Giles, how old are you now?" Buffy was unable to disguise the tinge of exasperation in her voice. The Watcher took a step back, aghast at her appearance.

"Hold thy tongue wench, thou knowest me? Cover thyself; thy dress offends me!" Buffy looked frightened suddenly. The Watcher paced around her. He produced a small cross from his pocket and placed it on her shoulder and seemed surprised when it didn't burn. He paused in his pacing and pointed at Willow.

"You... Wench," He pointed at Willow, "What place is this?" Willow cringed before she answered.

"Sunnydale, your house in Sunnydale." She glanced at Ethan and Xander, they looked worried.

Xander tore through the Watcher diaries. He had remembered something he showed the page to Ethan, who looked at Giles as he circled Willow. Ethan was fairly sure that Giles was now a Watcher from the Middle Ages, one that had a sideline as a Witch-Hunter. He got ready. Suddenly the Watchers' expression changed to unbridled hatred and fury. Giles pounced on Willow shoving her nearer the fire he grabbed a flaming log and brought it close to her body.

"Witch!" He screamed at the top of his lungs. Willow's hands flew to her ears, hoping never to hear that sound again.

"Shit!" Ethan exclaimed and jumped on Rupert. Buffy grabbed at the arm that held the log. Giles was muttering in Latin. Ethan recognised the spell and heaved him away from the fire. Willow managed to get away from the flames. Giles concluded the spell and snapped his fingers the flames grew in the fireplace reaching for Willow.

"Burn Witch. Dost thou renounce Satan, thy master?" Giles chuckled evilly. Willow couldn't

move. She stared at the flames licking along the floor and thought of all the witches that had perished at the stake. She glanced back at Giles the handsome face she knew and loved transformed in the fires glow. Tears streamed down her face as she shook her head.

Buffy thrust the burning log into Giles' side as he lunged for Willow. He roared in pain and collapsed backwards. The flesh on his abdomen was blistered and smoking.

Buffy threw the log back on the fire then moved to comfort Willow who sobbed hysterically. She glared at Ethan, who was stroking Giles' head.

"He's getting worse, more violent..." He looked up at Buffy she saw tears in his eyes. He took her hand and placed it on Rupert's forehead. "Feel? He's fighting, but he's not strong enough." Giles opened his eyes briefly and began to murmur again. Ethan caught his breath. "Salt Quick!" Buffy rushed to the kitchen and threw the canister to Ethan who poured it in a rough circle round Giles. He moved everyone out of harms way.

Giles staggered to his feet. "Why?" Giles' voice was full of anguish as his hands held his aching head. "Why have you brought me here again, Ethan? It's not enough that you have to torment me with her night after night? You killed Red; you let her die!" He pointed at Willow who was very much alive and confused. Ethan went to her side to reassure her, but Giles was having none of it.

"Don't you dare touch her body!" He growled dangerously. "Do you think it gives you power to violate the dead? It means you're a pathetic shadow of a man who can only make love to a woman when she's drugged or dead."

Giles swayed and held his head. When he looked up again he saw everyone gathered round the circle. He raised his arm to show them the mark, sniffing back tears and flinching in pain.

"Look. I bear the mark; his mark." He pointed at Ethan. "Do not follow him. He is unclean..." He managed to load the statement with enough loathing and disgust that he looked as though he was about to vomit. "Please... Hurry away from this place."

Rupert closed his eyes and took a long slow breath his lips moving silently. Ethan backed away from the circle.

"No! Please God, not him..."

##

Giles' eyes opened and he glanced over his shoulder into the shadows. "The demon comes." Rupert's head snapped back uttering a horrified gasp he flung his arms wide as a dark fog swirled round his feet, the fire died and a demon smiled with Rupert's lips. He lifted a foot to step from the circle. He couldn't leave. The smile widened "Ethan! Hello, old friend. Only you could stop me here. Your new friends, don't they want to play?"

Ethan gasped. He had hoped he would never see Rupert as Eyghon again but here he was. Buffy shuddered at the coldness of her Watchers voice.

A thought occurred she had to get Giles to sleep, nothing happened when he slept. Giles was still talking. Buffy whispered to Willow who nodded and slipped away to the kitchen.



"...I choose him!" He pointed to Xander and beckoned him into the circle. The young man seemed to have no control over his limbs and nearly broke the salt boundary of the circle. Giles' arm shot out he hissed with the pain of the encounter. He gripped Xander's neck smiling over at Ethan he said, "Break the circle Ethan or I'll snap his neck. You know I can do it!"

Giles shook his head the demon gone for a moment he whispered to Xander, "Sleep Xander; I need to sleep."

The eyes grew cold again and the pressure increased. Willow whacked Giles with a heavy frying pan and he dropped like a stone. She fell to her knees dropping the pan. Xander crawled to the sofa gagging and gasping.

##

"I haven't killed him have I?" She asked anxiously.

Ethan shook his head. He looked like a broken man. "Willow, do you think when he wakes if we took him back to library, would it help him?"

Willow stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. She nodded slowly. Ethan settled back into the sofa cushions and gave himself to sleep.

##

Willow stayed awake at Giles' side while the others slept. She wet a cloth and bathed his forehead. He woke. She smiled at him and his eyes were full of love for her.

"What hit me?" She blushed then shrugged. "Thank you, I didn't hurt you did I?" She shook her head. "Say something Willow, or I'll think I've gone deaf." He laughed gently.

"I don't want to break the spell.... It's so nice having you back. Ethan is here; he's been helping." Giles lifted his head from Willow's lap and looked round. He spied Ethan and Xander at opposite ends of the sofa.

"Now there's a sight you don't often see. Ethan asleep fully clothed." He laughed again, stopping abruptly when it became too painful. "My, that was unpleasant! I sent for him y'know. I didn't know if I could still affect him that way. It seems that I can. Can I wake him I wonder?" He smiled and looked at Ethan intently. The man on the sofa woke suddenly with a smile on his lips. His gaze fell on Rupert.

"Why, Rupert. I didn't know you cared!" He slid off the sofa and knelt beside him. "How are you feeling?"

"Rough. My head feels strange." His eyes rolled back and he fell onto Willow. She shook him. He wasn't going to wake this time. Ethan shouted orders and they all piled out the door. Buffy grabbed some clothes for Giles. They were off to the library.

##

Willow hunted for his keys and opened the door. It was five in the morning and for the most part they'd had hardly any sleep. Ethan and Xander supported Giles between them. They

heaved him through the door and set him in front of the computer. Ethan turned the seat round and stared at his friend. Giles woke with a start. Now would he stay awake long enough?

"Please, Giles. Press the button." Willow pleaded. Giles lifted his hand the fingers were stiff and misshapen.

"Can't.... He broke me... He broke my fingers...Please make him stop Willow. It hurts. I can't." She seized his shoulders and shook him hard.

"C'mon, Giles focus, you need to press a button, any button!" He seemed to respond and he lifted his finger and pressed 'return'

The lights dimmed and a giant shock arced Giles away from the computer. He jolted from the chair and landed dead on the library floor. Ethan was by his side in an instant trying to re-start his heart, all the while muttering to himself.

"Ripper you're a bastard! Don't you dare die on me! Who will I torment? Who will beat me up on a regular basis?"

Giles took a shuddering breath and opened his eyes. He lifted his shoulders from the floor shivering with cold. Ethan crept off to the shadows so no one would see him weep. The Slayer was at his side.

"Hey, Ethan you big softie." Buffy cooed. "Your cover's blown." Ethan smiled.

"I have always been soft on him. On the other hand, I wouldn't mind being hard in you. Wear leather next time we meet and I'll be your friend forever."

Willow helped Giles on with the sweatshirt Buffy had brought. She brushed her fingertips over his nipples as she did so and blushed when he moaned softly, capturing her hands with his own. He dipped his head to steal a kiss...

"SO Willow! Do you fancy some breakfast before school starts?" Xander's voice broke the spell and Giles growled in frustration. Willow smiled and mouthed the word 'later'.

The End.

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