It was that time of day when the great red eye of the sun glared briefly into the world from beneath its heavy eyelid of choking smoke. Like an insane old man peering into a box that held a once treasured but long ago forgotten pet.

And like that pet, pathetic in its continuing eagerness and hope to please, the people of the earth hurried towards their makeshift altars of stone and earth and offered their small green goods to the chlorophyll producing eye of Rah.
At the highest point, near the edge of the cliff, miles-long rows of greenhouses stood, glass boiling orange with reflected sunlight. Common in their materials, rusted metal and pipes, crazed and fractured glass panels. All with the ancient, well-used solar panels hanging crookedly down the cliff’s edge beneath. Each had a shape and style unique to itself. As if made without blueprint. Inside, the light gathered and trained upon tomatoes, zucchinis, vitamin rich vegetables only, much squash and beans, rooted in hydroponic systems that stretched in their polyethylene tubing, twisting and turning along the cliff’s edge as if pieced together by a large, fanciful child.

For a scant hour, though hour was a concept long ago lost to these people, the sun hovered above the horizon, sharing its warmth and life indiscriminately across the carefully tended plant life, the small pale bodies that tended it and the scorched cinder plain of earth that lay beneath the high cliff’s edge. Then it sank and the world fell once more into its accustomed darkness.

They had their brief ceremony. Spurred, perhaps, by the energy absorbed by their skin, they chattered and visited as they climbed down from their glittering temples. Eventually drifting into silence again, they separated into
their smaller group units, and made their way back towards their homes.

One small group passing tiredly behind the tall, reflective surfaces at the top of a hill, carefully skirting the two canvas tents, which sat shielded from the setting sun by the husk of a giant old oak tree. The younger daughter saw something on the ground and lagged behind, stooping to scoop up the bit of shiny metal.

A pair of torn and grayed leather boots appeared almost silently beside her. She saw them, her eyes widened; her gaze followed the boots up long legs covered in the standard loose rayon, the telltale ultraviolet reflective material of the shirt. Her mouth opened, but the stranger was quick and captured her before she could protest, placing his chill palm over her mouth.

Struggle was useless.

The child’s mother looked worriedly around in the thick darkness for her youngest, who always seemed to be drifting from the herd. She sighed and flicked on her solar torch, reluctant to waste its energy, but if Daya would always go missing...

Her torch picked up the silent silhouette approaching. She flicked it off immediately. “Gan,” *no* she said.
She fell to her knees. “Deahel, tabra orma.” * Please, I’m so sorry*

“No worries, luv.” Spike carefully placed Daya on her feet beside her mother. Turned and slipped back into the shadows. Daya clapped her hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying out at the chastisement she saw in her mother’s eyes.

“What had she found?”

“Just a bit of shiny metal. Like monkeys they are.”

“Monkeys.” Angel almost smiled. He wrapped the blanket around himself and stepped up beside the hollow trunk of the old oak, looking off towards some distant spot on the black horizon. “Do you still remember monkeys, Spike?”

“Sure I do.” Spike cast an uneasy glance at Angel. His companion seemed fixed to his spot at the cliffs edge, literally gazing off towards nothing, as not even the few normally visible stars had yet appeared. “Saw a right lot of them in South America or thereabouts.”

“South America!” exclaimed Angel, shaking his head.
“Yeah, think so.” Spike cast back in his mind. “All over the trees and um, think some had big fluffy tales, y’ know?” he recalled, smiling. Getting caught up in it a bit himself.

“Maybe they were lemurs,” said Angel dreamily, gazing into the dark. He frowned. “I had almost forgotten lemurs.” He sounded anxious.

This would never do. Spike huffed and stamped his feet a bit. “Whatever. Made bad eating as I remember and were covered with fleas. You coming, mate?”

Angel drew himself away from the place in which he had been brooding. He pulled the thermal wrap more tightly around himself and followed Spike down the path and across the face of the cliff, by way of the wide steps carved into it. They found their accustomed spot at the bottom amongst the cinder and ash. A little hollow in the center of the wide cliff, already filled with coal. Spike expertly struck flint and a small glow lit the tiny space.

Angel found a seat against the black graphite face of the ledge and sighed. It was warmer now than it had been. A light breeze, seeming to carry the taste of the sun in it, licked up over the edge of the cliff. Angel let his worn thermal blanket fall from his shoulders.
He rested the back of his head against the crumbling wall behind him and shut his eyes lightly, crossing his legs in a loose lotus position and letting both arms fall limply to his sides.

Spike turned his back to him and waited.

It was barely discernible when the visions came to Angel. A flicker beneath his eyelids, like a human dreaming; a little flinch across the cheeks. Sometimes his mouth distorted or he drooled, sometimes his tongue jutted uncontrollably from between his lips and his eyes would open, rolling. It was embarrassing to watch the ancient, reticent vampire so completely out of control. Embarrassing for both of them.

Spike knew when the vision had passed. He couldn’t have said how. But eventually he heard Angel’s shifting legs and hands.

Angel bent his head and pushed his fingers through the long waves of hair that had fallen into his eyes. He tested his throat, but made only a dry sound. Tried it again. “They’ve said to choose another,” he told Spike raspily.

Spike whirled and stared. “No. Fuck. Bastards, Angel! We can’t.”

“We must.”
“Fuck.” Spike ineffectually kicked at the ground and sat down in a protesting heap beside his tiny charcoal fire. “I know you can’t communicate with them proper like, Angel. But can you at least explain to them...”

“I’m sure they know, Spike.”

“Fuck,” said Spike unnecessarily again. He picked at the blackened cinder that was the ground beneath him and threw it savagely into the hot wind that was picking up from the plateau below. “Did they say why, this time?”

“I gave up asking why, Spike. I told you...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Spike sighed, and looked out over the darkness. The hot wind was driving now, the smell of burning following.

They sat for a bit. “So,” said Angel finally.

Spike looked at him suspiciously. “I ain’t contributin’ any more names t’ this, Angel.”

“It’s to be both our decisions.”

Spike didn’t bother to curse. He looked closely at Angel. The vampire clutched the old thermal blanket closely to him. His hands seemed thinner and somehow,
impossibly, more aged. The worry and pain in the young face made it appear gaunt.

“Sorry,” said Spike. He leaned back on his hands, legs stretched out, and gazed straight up into the smoky, blackened sky. “Well, you know my ‘no’ list.”

Angel sighed. “I’ve been thinking again about that, Spike. Slayers are better able to handle the stresses of a situation like this. And she could help…”

“No. For so many reasons…” Spike drifted off, closing his eyes. “Angel, you know why.”

“Yes, but the Powers…”

“Fuck to the Powers. I promised her, Angel.”

Angel nodded. He looked relieved. “I can’t … Spike, there’s no one else I can bear to …”

“Seems so fucking unfair,” Spike said at the same time. “Poor buggers …”

“Such an impossible fate. So hopeless. Who can we…”

“Bloody hell, wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy…”

“Of all the mortals we have known… who do we trust enough? Who do we believe…”
Spike snorted. “Who do we hate enough, you mean.”

There was a tiny beat of silence. And then, with that seemingly preternatural synchronicity that only two creatures who had spent centuries in each others company could achieve, the two vampires’ heads came up and their gazes met.

Something like a twinkle appeared in Angel’s eyes. Spike couldn’t remember the last time he had seen such an expression there. “It would be wrong,” said Angel, a tiny smile playing at his lips.

Spike sat up. “Heh, yeah, rat bastards that we are, though…”

“Shame on us for even thinking it,” said Angel, delightedly.

“Harris,” said Spike. He tipped his head back and grinned at the swirling dark mass of poison and smoke that choked the atmosphere above their heads. “Xander bloody Harris.”

~*~*~*~*~

“Harris,” said Dr. Thompson, referring to the clipboard in
her hand. “Alexander L.” She swung open the door to the hospital room and ushered in her small team of first years. The room’s sole occupant, an elderly man, looked up eagerly as they entered.

“Hiya,” he wheezed past the tube in his nose. His one eye squinted to focus as he surveyed the group, A huge smile, with decent dentures, pulled his face up. His face was a mass of yellow skin and wrinkles. Scars stood out prominently white against the sallow complexion.

“It’s nice to meetchya,” said Xander, cheerfully.

Dr. Thompson read from her clipboard. “Senile dementia with paranoid disorder. The family was attempting care but the last stroke made it too difficult.”

Xander’s kept smiling bravely at the only people he had seen that week, outside of the nursing staff. The students stared back at him, passive and unmoved. The aluminum blinds that covered his window were moved slightly by the new current of air, and he was distracted. He squinted at them as if to bring something into focus. “Willow,” he said suddenly. Then he remembered. Put on the winning smile again. “Have I told you about Willow?” he asked brightly, turning back towards the students, seeming to focus on a young woman standing next to the doctor. He stared at her long enough that she became
uncomfortable, looking to the doctor for some sort of guidance.

Dr. Thompson huffed impatiently and flipped pages on her chart, “Mr. Harris appears, on occasion, to believe he is speaking to remembered acquaintances.”

“Willow,” said Xander, trying to focus his eye on the kids with a promising twinkle, “was a witch.”

One of the first years, one of those who still persisted in thinking of the patients as human beings, dared to step forward. “How are you today, Mr. Harris?”

The patient grinned. “Call me Xander,”

“Xander,” said the young man patiently. He looked at the old man spread out on the hospital bed before him. His withered arms lay on the carefully turned down hospital blanket. An eye trained in the human body could see that the hanging flesh there had once covered a decently developed musculature. The scar tissue from an old wound twisted miserably across the unused, unfilled eye socket. The patch pushed up into the old man’s thin white hair. The intern impulsively reached over to adjust it. A wave of painful pity swept through him as the old man pushed just slightly into the touch. So many of these elderly patients were seldom touched. And he wondered,
as he often had, at an entire life hidden behind failing eyes. What worlds would disappear when this man was gone? It gave him an unutterable feeling of sorrow and loss and he stepped back from the patient, dropping his hands.

But Mr. Harris caught at him with one dry hand. It was a weak, limp grasp and the intern was able to prise his wrist free easily, but the look on the patient’s face held him.

“They took my stake,” said Mr. Harris.

“Your steak?” The intern looked back at Dr. Thompson.

“I made a new one, though,” the patient said in a low, conspiratorial whisper. He nodded towards the little bedside table.

With troubled curiosity, the young man opened the drawer. He found the broken remains of what looked like a bit of molding. He looked up at Dr. Thompson, at a loss.

Dr. Thompson stepped forward and took the dangerous looking piece of scrap out of the drawer. She made an exasperated noise and looked for the nurse. He took the piece from her, wincing at her glance of condemnation, then turned a hostile glare on the old man still pathetically reaching for his bit of wood.
“No! No, I need that,” said the old man, wheezing.

“Now, Mr. Harris,” said the nurse. He grimaced disapprovingly and followed the group as they trudged back out of the room. “I’ve warned you about keeping these bits of trash. You could cut yourself…”

“I need that,” said Xander Harris weakly. He wheezed and closed his eyes. Exhausted by the effort. His lips moved barely, whispering the words. “He’ll come for me. I need my stake.”

~*~*~*~*~

In a small house in Vista, California, a woman, balancing a young child on one hip, propped her briefcase against the door and reached for the phone.

“Yes?” The baby tugged at the lapel of her pristine business suit with a wet hand and she attempted to free herself while still keeping her ear to the phone.

“Yes,” she sighed. “He’s my father in law. Stop it, Ryan,” she pleaded with the boy who was now tugging at an earring. “Yes, I understand. I’ll…” She juggled the phone against her chin and adjusted the weight of the child again. “I’ll tell my husband. Yes. Thank you.” She hung
up. Now even later for work than before, she grabbed her briefcase, levered the door open expertly with one foot and, swinging out, she shouted in the general direction of the house’s interior. “The nursing home called, honey. Your father is making trouble again,” and let the door fall closed behind her.

~*~*~*~*~

“Dad.” James Harris rested his elbow against the driver’s side window and drove with one hand, holding his cell phone with the other. “Dad, they said you were outside again last night. I’ve told you, Dad, you can’t…”

“This is a public place,” said Xander, wheezing excitedly into the phone pressed tightly against his ear, as if hearing every nuance of sound would somehow bring the voice at the other end closer. “You realize they can come into public places, don’t you?”

“Dad…” The car in front of him came to a sudden stop and James’ attention was momentarily taken up with keeping his car in the lane without mishap. He switched the cell phone to the other ear. “Dad, no one is going to come into the Home. There is no one after you.”
“He always hated me. I know it. Buffy thought he had changed ...”

James sighed and almost severed the connection. He held the phone away from his ear, stared ahead at the blocked freeway, and invoked patience. “Okay, Dad,” he said, finally placing the phone back against his ear. “Here’s the deal. Patricia is swamped with work for the weekend and Ryan has had a cold all week. I’ve got meetings all day and a dinner event to go to. We can’t have you getting in trouble right now, do you understand?”

Xander held the phone tightly against his ear. “You said you would come up here soon,” he whined, cursing the weakness in his lungs and his body that allowed his voice to quaver like that.

“I know, and we will. It’s just...” James slammed on his brakes, just barely avoiding a collision with the car in front of him. He rapped his hand uselessly against the horn. Saw the middle index finger on the hand of the motorist in front of him come up, shook his irritation down firmly and sighed again. “Dad, we are so busy...” traffic picked up again, his car slowly passing by the accident that had caused today’s slowdown. “We want to visit, we do...” The cars were picking up speed around
him; soon he’d need both hands to drive. “Dad, I’ve gotta go. I’ll talk to you again soon.” He disconnected.

“James?” Xander clutched the suddenly silent phone. He knew there was no one there but he held the phone a bit longer anyway. As if the call would continue in some way as long as he didn’t replace the receiver in its cradle.

He leaned back into his pillows, his eyes traveling their familiar pattern over the blinds that always covered his windows. To save the air conditioning, he had been told. Heat penetrated the windows and power was needed to keep the rooms cool. *But I don’t need air conditioning*, thought Xander, *I need to see the sun.*

Maybe he could call someone else. Xander Harris cradled the receiver in his hand and could think of no one to call. There was no one left. He set the phone down carefully in its base. Leaned back onto his bed, his arms laid out over the blanket on either side of him. Closed his eyes.

~*~*~*~*~

James focused on the road in front of him diligently. Damned idiot drivers in Los Angeles. What was it about a little rain that made people drive like the end of the
world had come and they were in a desperate race to escape the deluge. He changed lanes as his exit approached and tried not to think about his father.

Sitting at a light, though, his mind slid unhappily back to the Evergreen Retirement home and the lonely old man he had placed there. They had tried, he and Jennifer, they had really tried to care for his father themselves. But the last stroke had been too serious, and they weren’t home enough, couldn’t afford a private nurse. Even with their combined salaries, they couldn’t even afford the private care nearby. The day they had moved his father to the facility, Jennifer had cried all the way home. “Those people don’t know him, James,” she stated sadly. He had nodded, choking back tears himself. “He’s … he’s not demented, he’s just dear old Dad with his stories...”

And she was right. It was a fine facility. It had very good references. But the doctors who had diagnosed the dementia simply couldn’t understand, James reflected sadly. Those people his father spoke to all the time weren’t just random paranoid figments of a senile mind. James had been hearing stories about them all his life, until they were almost real to himself as well. Werewolves and Vampires with funny names. Girls who were superheros. Witches. James had grown up with
legends of apocalypses and the high school kids who had saved the unknowing world again and again.

And he thought that some of the people had actually been real. Not monsters of course, but real. His father’s friend, Willow had come around sometimes, when James was quite young. A spunky, spirited lady with great green eyes and a wonderfully raspy voice who seemed much younger than his father. But his mother hadn’t liked her. There had been arguments. James remembered them because, happily, in his home there had been few arguments. The person, ‘Buffy’ his dad told stories about, he had never met. He guessed she had died because when he spoke of her, his dad always looked so sad.

Now those people were more real for his father than the strange nurses and doctors set to keep his body alive, and James could kind of understand. Because growing up in a home where the monster in the closet was named “Clem” and the thing under the bed was exterminated with ‘holy water’ from the bathroom sink every night, he knew the charm of that magical world where evil was evil and good always triumphed.

James pulled into the Warner Brothers lot and wished with all his heart that his father could be left to
peacefully exist in that world in his head. Old guy has earned it, he thought sadly.

~*~*~*~*~

He needed his stake. The blinds lifted, swished and rattled in a pattern infrequent enough to be suspicious. The soft rubber soles of nurses and doctors and who knew what else passed shadows across the crack below his unlocked door.

He was tied to this bed, with his IV drip and the respirator tubes, the heart monitors and pumps; he was shackled to his bed by the machines that monitored his life and he needed his stake. In case they came.

They could still come. Xander wasn’t sure why he had stopped worrying about them for so many years, raising his family, having a normal life. But as the years progressed and it seemed the shadows moved to follow him, he had become more and more convinced that they were out there again. Perhaps another Hellmouth had opened. He had no one to ask.

Giles was gone years ago. Buffy and Dawn in that accident. Willow. Xander’s old body sent a dull throb of
pain to his tired mind as he remembered that Willow was dead. It was a fact that came and went and the pain was fresh every time he recalled it. She had been the last. He had no one to call; no one would come to protect him. He would fight this last battle on his own. But they had taken his stake, he thought despairingly. How could he fight Angel without his stake?

He clutched the covers, shutting his eyes against the shadows that swayed and encroached. The blinds rattled, then squeaked as if lifted.

“Angel?” he whispered, not opening his eyes. His heart raced, the monitors bipped in alarm, a soft step near his door, a cool chill as if something passed over his bed. Xander lay his hands across his blankets because they had taken his stake and he was an old weak man and there was no one left to help him.

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“What did he say?”

Spike snorted in surprise. “Sounded like ‘Angel’.”

“He can’t be conscious yet. They never become conscious this quickly.”
“Well, we’re ready when he does.” Spike moved to the head of the small cot and expertly checked the soft straps that bound Xander’s wrists and ankles. “Poor bugger,” he said, not sounding at all sympathetic.

He tucked the thermal blanket, that covered Xander’s body, in more firmly at the corners. The Powers always delivered their choices totally nude for some perverse reason Spike could not understand. And the temperature drop that followed sunrise made the average temperature in their tents dip below freezing quite frequently. It didn’t bother him so much, though Angel seemed to suffer off and on, but a human could easily take a chill and possible become sick.

Spike cocked his head sideways and regarded the semi-comatose figure lying under the green blanket. They had delivered him much younger than Spike had remembered him. The last time he had seen Xander Harris had been at Buffy and Dawns... Spike’s mind automatically flinched from that memory. The last time he had seen the man lying before him, Xander had been in his mid thirties. As far as Spike knew, that had been the last Angel had seen of him as well, though the old poof had some mysterious habits. In the past the Powers had delivered the men as the two vampires had last remembered them. The Xander Harris that had appeared
on the cot a few hours ago had looked to be still a young man.

It had been strange, almost a shock for Spike, after all these years of starved, grey-skinned humans, to see a robustly healthy male. To smell the hemoglobin rich blood flooding beneath the smooth, tanned skin. Muscles resulting from a 20th century protein rich diet, that bunched and slid as the delivered mortal began to breathe. Spike had been tempted, before he pulled the blanket over him, to run his hands over that surrealistically healthy body. Just to feel all that life.

What the Hell were the Bloody Powers up to this time?

“He’s coming around,” said Angel.

Spike straightened and stood beside Angel at the foot of the cot. He suddenly had an absurd urge to pull a hand through his hair, straighten his shirt. He laughed at himself, a twisted, bitter smirk, and Xander Harris opened his eyes.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander surfaced slowly from his dream of death. He had had the dream frequently, of late. It wove itself, a black
velvet ribbon, through the Mardi gras fabric of childhood memories, dreams of friends long lost, nightmares. *Old man dreams*, he thought. *Someday, the dreams I won’t wake up from*. He felt the IV drip in his wrist tug painfully. It dragged at his arm. He reflexively jerked at it anyway and had the odd and immediate sensation that his wrist was, in fact, tied. His eyes popped open.

“Hello there, mate,” said Spike, savoring the drama. “Welcome to Hell.”

2

Okay, thought Xander, *here’s a special dream*. Tied to some kind of army cot, apparently. Two Mad Max type vampires gazing down at him. Angel and Spike, he was fairly certain, both with long hair, Spike’s much darker. Both wearing some sort of clinging, shiny material. He wondered if this was going to be a nightmare or one of those *other, interesting* dreams. He jerked again at the restraints. Discovered his feet, too, were tied. Discovered a fear of being bound (you’re never too old for a new phobia). Began to pant.

“Let me go,” he demanded of his nightmare/sexually explicit dream. “I need to … let me go.”

“Do you think he remembers us?” asked Angel.
Spike glanced at his Sire. Angel sounded amused? “Dunno,” he shrugged. He turned and looked again at the struggling boy on the cot, crossed his arms and affected a contemplative air. “Hmm, mebbe we need to remind him?”

They shifted into gameface simultaneously. The effect was less entertaining than Spike had hoped. Xander merely stared at Angel with those big liquid eyes of his, pulling hopelessly at his restraints. “Heh, yeah,” he said. “Okay, now’s when you untie me, right? Because I know this is a dream and everything, but I’ve still gotta pee. And the last time I had a dream where I really had to pee...”

“This isn’t a dream, Xander,” said Angel.

Spike moved forward to release Xander’s restraints. He jumped back quickly as soon as Xander was free, watching the boy for some kind of retaliation or escape attempt. Xander just lay there, breathing, clutching the blanket to him. He looked down dazedly at his covered torso, back at Angel. “I’m naked,” he stated ridiculously.

“Yeah, well we couldn’t dress your fat ass while you were out, could we?” said Spike. He grabbed the pile of clothes readied near the bed and tossed them carelessly onto
Xander’s lap. Xander looked at the clothes. His mouth was open.

“I could wake up now,” he suggested. He wiggled his toes. He shivered. “It’s cold,” he said. He sounded confused. He looked up at Angel again and this time real fear shone in his eyes. “Why can’t I wake up?”

“You aren’t asleep, Xander,” said Angel patiently. Spike tsked at the barely veiled pleasure in Angel’s voice and tried not to smile himself. Wouldn’t do to scare the boy too much, as fun as it would be.

“This isn’t a dream, Xander,” said Angel. “You’ve been called back from the dead by The Powers that Be for some purpose.”

Spike shook his head in disgust. *Way to break it to him gently, Poof,* he thought. He squinted suspiciously at the dark, implacable face. Angel was loving this a bit too much for an evil demon on a path of redemption. In his opinion.

Xander blinked. “Yeah. Right,” and then he grinned. A big jaw cracking Harris original smile and Spike was surprised to recall how white and broad that smile could be. “They told me about these.”

“These what?”
Xander shifted to a sitting position, reaching down to finger the clothing. “Delusions of Grandeur,” said Xander, rubbing the material between his fingers. That fearful look came over his face again and Spike began to worry that they were going to have another one crack. “This... feels so real,” said Xander.

“We’ll leave you to dress,” said Angel. He nodded at Spike to accompany him and exited through the canvas flap. Xander’s eyes followed him, then came back to Spike, seeming to notice him for the first time. “What are you doing here, fangless,” he said. The nature of his words completely belied the confusion and fear in his eyes. Spike felt the annoying prick of conscience. He stomped on it.

“Get dressed, git,” he said. And swept with Angel out of the tent.

~*~*~*~*~

In James Harris’ house, in Vista, California, the phone rang for quite some time before Jennifer was able to snatch it off the hook.
“Yes?” she said breathlessly. She glared at the dripping toilet brush in her hand. She imagined she had just left a trail of filthy blue toilet cleaner down the hallway. But as she listened to the call, the brush fell unheeded from her hand and her face creased in pain. She let the phone drop to her side and looked down the hallway. “James,” she called, when her voice could finally reach past the emotion. “James, it’s the Home. Your father has had another stroke...”

~*~*~*~*~

Xander ran his thumb wonderingly over the material in his hand. Usually in a dream, sensory impressions came in little pushes of thought. They didn’t have this steady, consistent presence. The stuff in his hands, he pushed off the covers and shook out the slacks, studying them, didn’t feel like anything natural. They had that weird, electrical staticy feeling of rayon or polyester. He pulled the pants up over his hips, standing on the frozen floor. His feet arched achingly away from the chill and he had a terrible thought. A thought so enormous in its terror he had to sit down. What if this were real?
What if... and he glanced again at the door through which the two vampires had exited... what if this weren’t a dream? Angel had said...Xander grabbed the shining overshirt and yanked it over his head hurriedly, not bothering to wonder if it was frontwards or backwards. He found something like canvas boots, jerked them over his feet, allowing the long ties to hang about his ankles and he ran to the door of the tent. He looked out. It was pitch black and two demons, dressed in clothes similar to the ones he had just put on, were standing a few feet away, staring back at him.

“Am I really in Hell?” asked Xander.

~*~*~*~*~

James sat beside his father’s bed, numbly watching the breathing apparatus pump air in and out of his lungs, the heart monitor bipping weakly, the brain scan barely above a flat line. He heard the doctor’s voice, the meaning of the words tracking slowly behind their sound. “Severe blood loss to the brain, very little probability of recovery, order to not resuscitate...Mr. Harris?”

Someone, thought James, was addressing his father but his father wasn’t answering. He reached for the cold, dry
hand that lay beside his father’s body. Realized that he was the one being addressed, and looked up helplessly.

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“You said…” Xander nodded at Spike seriously. “You said I’m in Hell. Well,” he looked worriedly around the pitch black plateau, “does anybody tell me why or...”

“You aren’t in Hell, mate,” said Spike, grinning. “May seem that way is all.”

“You’ve been brought into the future, Xander,” said Angel.

Xander nodded again. For the time being it seemed the smartest thing to do. Just go along with the madness. After all, it wasn’t like he and the madness hadn’t met before. Heck, he and the madness had such a longstanding relationship they were practically a common law couple. I, Xander Harris, take thee, madness...

“Okay,” he said. He shivered.

Angel moved forward with some concern. “You should stay inside, stay warm.” He looked at Spike.
Spike sighed and walked back towards the tent, raised an eyebrow when Harris backed quickly away from him, and let him in. “Relax, Harris, ain’t gonna bite ya.”

Xander found he had backed into the cot behind him. “Right,” he said, nervously searching for pockets in the loose trousers he wore and happily finding many. He stuck his hands into two of them. “The soul.”

“Nah, just got better taste than that,” said Spike waspishly. He pulled an odd looking arrangement in the corner open and revealed something very like an adobe stove. It was filled with blackened rocks. Spike lit the stones and seemed to work the small brazier with some expertise for a while. In a matter of minutes it was glowing and the heat soaked the air around Xander. He moved towards it infinitesimally. Spike looked up, tisked and backed away from the stove. “Come sit, whelp, get yer arse warmed up. Me’n Angel’ll go get you somethin’ t’ eat.”

Xander nodded and sat obediently on a small earthen stool near the stove. Spike observed the complacent obedience with a frown, then shook his head and left.

~*~*~*~*~
“‘Welcome to Hell’, Spike?” said Angel as they made their way down the dark hillside. “I thought we were going to try to minimize the shock.”

“I was inspired.” Spike swept his hand absently over the lip of the altars that lined their path. He saw again those wide, shocked brown eyes, and felt once more that twinge of guilt. “Maybe it wasn’t the best idea.”

“He’ll be all right,” said Angel calmly.

Spike absently touched the tops of the terra cotta jars that had been placed on the altars. “I dunno, Angel. He’s awfully quiet. The Xander Harris I remember wouldn’t shut up.”

“He just needs time to adjust.”

“Hell, Angel...” Spike lifted and tipped a jar. A small blossom fell out and he caught it quickly in his hand, studying it with wonder. It wasn’t edible but he still marveled that these people would leave such valuable gifts for them. “I’ve been here all along, and I don’t think I’ve adjusted yet. I don’t know if Harris can hack it.”

“I don’t know who could,” sighed Angel. They had stopped outside the main gate and were looking down the gloomy streets. At this time of day, most of the
residents were still indoors, conserving their energy and meager lighting resources for the warmer, more habitable evenings. “But the Xander Harris I knew had an annoying habit of surviving almost anything.”

The two vampires strode silently down the street.

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Xander sat hunched in front of the intense orange heat and grappled with the weirdness. He fingered the significantly present fabric that encased his legs, its static pulling at the hairs on his thighs in a slightly unpleasant, subliminally ticklish way that did not go away even when he stopped thinking about it. The room around him had more detail than any dream he had ever had. On a scale of 1 to 10 he figured the weirdness factor here was hovering near the 89 mark.

What if he were really dead? Xander tried to remember where he had been before the dream. A hospital, the monitors and … with heart clenching fear Xander realized he might really be dead. He might really be… he looked around the room. That was all he could remember. Old, in a hospital bed, slowly dying of arterial failure and then … this.
There had been something ... the machines’ alarms? Or had it been a dream? Had he died? Xander tried to get past the natural fear of death, and realized there had been nothing after until he had woken here. No tunnel, no light, no reunion with friends. Willow, he thought, with overwhelming sorrow and the renewed feeling of loss he associated with her memory. No Valhalla for Xander Harris. No Heaven.

“That’s it?” he whispered to himself or the gods that apparently did not, after all, exist. “Just... nothing?” He sat for a minute, his hands loose in the lap of his rayon/poly/Buster-fucking-Keaton space age pants and shook his head in disbelieving outrage at the adobe stove. “Aw man, that blows!”

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As they ascended the last few feet to their tents, Spike could see Angel’s steps beginning to lag, the broad shoulders seeming to shrink. More and more of late, he felt Angel’s exhaustion, his fragility. It was a new and disturbing quality that had crept up on his Sire, like the old age the two vampires frequently witnessed but had never experienced.
In body Angel was a twenty-seven year old, robust undead man. In his mind, however, he seemed ancient and very, very tired. Spike jumped forward and easily slipped the bundle from Angel’s shoulder, pulled it over his own.

“We should talk to him, calm him down.”

“Yeah.” Spike studied the door to the tent in which they had left Xander, glancing surreptitiously at his Sire, trying to judge his exhaustion. “Listen, Angel, you go ahead and lie down for a mo, yeah? I’ll talk to the whelp.”

Angel gave Spike a look. “Spike…”

“Fer fuck’s sake, Angel, I’m not gonna do anything stupid!” Spike shifted the sacks on his shoulder a bit and tried to sulk. “It’s almost sunset,” he said reasonably. “Get some rest and talk to the boy after the ritual.”

Angel looked at the tent flap before them. Some wisp of relief blew over his features. “All right, then.”

“Right then. Go on.” Spike watched Angel until the older vampire had disappeared into the other tent, then pushed the flap open with no greeting and heaved his packages inside.

And was hit over the head by something large and hard.
Leather was almost impossible to come by and all of it was very old, so Spike had been quite proud when he had managed to devise the half suede/ half rayon handcuffs with which they had bound Xander’s resurrected body and by which he was now, apparently, hogtied in the middle of the floor. A distastefully old rag cut into the corners of his mouth.

He glared at the untied boots on the floor before him, followed the legs up and glared into Xander Harris’ face.

“If you yell when I take the gag off, I’m just going to bash you over the head again,” said Xander reasonably, demonstrating this intention by hefting the iron scroll over his head which he had apparently used the first time on Spike. “Will you keep it down?”

Spike glared and nodded. Payback could come later.

Xander’s fingers, as they roughly loosened his gag, were obviously shaking and Spike’s anger was tempered somewhat by the annoying compassion that had been plaguing him all evening. He spat when the gag was free. “Damn it, whelp. If these bindings were damaged I’ll...”
“Shut up, Spike,” said Xander. He hefted his iron scroll meaningfully. “I have some questions.”

“Circulation is being cut off,” growled Spike, ignoring the threat.

“You don’t have circulation.”

“Lot you know, how d’ya think I get it up?”

Xander’s pupils swelled wider. “That is definitely not one of my questions, fangless.”

“Ain’t fangless any more either, pet,” spat Spike.

“Hence the tying up,” said Xander reasonably.

“I could break these, you know. Just, I might need them later.”

“I don’t mind limiting your practice of tying up humans, Spike.”

Xander blinked. “After I’m dead?”

Spike could have kicked himself.

“I…I thought you said I’m already dead,” said Xander, those dark eyes huge and reading Spike’s face. He let the iron scroll drop a bit. “I thought you said I was brought here…”
“The Powers that Be,” supplied Spike.


“Don’t know,” said Spike. He wriggled his shoulder against the hard floor uncomfortably. “Look, Xan. Luv. Let me up, then, won’t you?”

“You don’t know?” Xander set the scroll down on the low cot on which he sat and stared at Spike with a darkening expression. He was starting to breathe quickly again and from his angle on the floor Spike thought this time it was less panic and more anger. Fuck it. He was going to have to break these bindings wasn’t he? Damned boy was as big a nuisance as ever…

“How can you not know? I mean, what is this place? You’re … you’re all living like some ‘Beyond Thunderdome’ post apocalyptic army with the tents and the bleakness and the cliff with the dead trees...”

“You went outside?” Spike couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of this. All their other humans had remained in the tent in a panic. “You… you shouldn’t have done that Harris. There’s demons out there.”

Xander snorted. “Yeah? You think? Like maybe vampires?”
Spike tisked and found the movement brought wet dirt into his mouth. He spat again angrily. “Bloody idiot child, we shoulda known this was a mistake. Look, Harris. I’m not the bad guy, here. We brought ya food. Untie me and let me give ya somethin’ ta eat, yeah?”

Xander regarded him for another long moment. He looked over towards the bundles Spike had dropped when Xander knocked him unconscious. Looked again at the man bound at his feet. “Okay,” he said finally. He knelt on the floor and reached for the bindings. Hesitated. “So. Uh, no hard feelings, right Spike? Just…” he yanked the bindings free and sat back. “Just a little dis o… ooof!” He was laying flat on his back with an incensed and gamefaced vampire sitting on his chest and snarling into his face.

“Liar,” spat Xander.

“Moron,” answered Spike. He slid back into human face. Sat back and finally rose from Xander’s chest, offering a hand up as he stepped away.

Xander ignored the hand and struggled painfully to his feet. He could feel the bruise already where his elbow had slammed the hard-packed earth. He’d never bruised himself in dreams before, announced the counter in his mind that was still tracking the events set before him. He
had never felt this hungry in a dream before, either, he realized as he watched Spike dragging odd-looking objects out of his sack.

“What is that?” Xander edged towards the low table near the stove, on which Spike was setting out small rolled objects.

“Mostly vegetarian diet around here,” said Spike, expertly unrolling and pushing the ingredients of each roll together in a bowl. “Don’t know the names of everything, actually. We haven’t found anythin’ like salt yet so the spice might seem foreign.”

“Haven’t found salt?” Xander sat down on the low stool by the fire.

“No reason t’ believe it isn’t still out there. But it would have to be harvested from underground and Christ knows we haven’t got that kinda manpower.”

“Spike,” said Xander wearily. “You really have to start at the beginning, I think. I’m kind of having trouble keeping up.”

Spike mixed the ingredients carefully in the bowl, turned them out and began kneading them, like a tortilla, over a small square burnished surface that seemed reserved for
that activity. “Yeah, ‘s a long story. I’ll take ya on a tour once you’ve eaten. Easier to show than tell, I reckon.”

“Maybe wait till daylight?” suggested Xander. “Don’t have the cool night vision, you know. I couldn’t see anything beyond a few feet from the tents…”

Spike cast a quick look at Xander. “That why you’re still here?”

Xander shrugged.

“This is daylight, whelp,” said Spike. He watched that news trickle into Xander’s brain. Boy was taking this well, he thought. Slow, of course. Harris wasn’t any genius. But maybe that was for the best in this circumstance. The Watcher had snapped in less than eight hours.

“Kinda dark.” Xander stated the obvious. “Sort of defies the definition of daylight. There being none. Light that is.”

“Not much sun, any more.”

“It go the same place as the salt?”

Spike’s eyebrows went up. Whelp was joking? He pressed his small tortillas into a container and put the whole thing in the stove, shut the grate and turned.
“Okay, eat somethin’ and I’ll give you the short version, ‘kay?”

~*~*~*~*~

“So basically what you’re saying is the world burned down?”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Oversimplistic. But, yeah.”

“And there’s some race of Ubervamp like demons running amock on the planet?”

“Basically.”

“And you and Angel are working for these Powers that Be to stop them?”

“Or whatever you call them,” amended Spike. “Yer probably more familiar with them than we are, Harris. Same blokes running Heaven I expect.”

Xander was silent. Then, “Yeah,” he said. “Heaven. So, uh, what did the Powers that Be drag me out of Heaven for? What am I supposed to do?” He grinned. “Stake a couple of vampires and then,” he snapped his finger, “poof back to Heaven. Or... is it some,” he wonderingly
looked down at his own young, strong hands, turned them over, “some kind of test, maybe?”

Spike didn’t notice his tone of voice, absorbed in his own confused feelings. “Sorry ‘bout that, Harris,” he managed to choke out.

Xander’s eyes slid sideways to take in the morose vampire sitting beside him. “Of all the myriad and dastardly things you have to feel sorry about, Spike. And I’m only talking about the ones, I, personally, know about, which specifically are you apologizing for?”

“Draggin you out of Heaven.”

“Ah.” Xander curled the fingers up on his palm. “That.”

Spike stared into the stove’s glowing grate. “She was never the same, really,” he said as if to himself.

_Oh_, thought Xander. “Geez, Spike,” he sighed, “Can’t you leave her alone finally?”

“Fuck you, arsehole,” said Spike mildly. He couldn’t believe how easily they were falling into their old roles. A role he, Spike, hadn’t played in centuries. Xander was silent again, and that was disturbing. These long silences were not normal.
“So what was it like?” asked Spike.

“What?”

“Heaven,” said Spike. “White fluffy clouds and halos? Or ya know, that sublime white room? Did you...” He paused and took a breath because he hadn’t realized the thought would make him ache until he had thought it. “Did you see everyone you knew there? Were they all happy?” he added softly.

“Geez, Spike, what are you, five? That’s not Heaven.”

Spike played with his hands and was silent.

“So where are all the people?” Xander asked, to change the subject.

“They come up at sunset.”

“Come up?”

“To see the sun.” Spike waved a hand. “We stay inside, they see the sun, have a service, you know, and then they leave.”

“Sounds like a party,” said Xander. “Well, should I introduce myself or will you?”
Spike laughed. “Harris, those people out there, they’ve evolved somewhat you know?” He shook his head. “They don’t speak anything resembling English. Even that disgusting hybrid of it you yanks used ta speak.”

“Oh,” said Xander, a chill feeling sweeping over him. “So the only person who will know what I’m saying is you, technically NOT a person, and … and”

“Angel.”

“Fuck!” Xander started having his fiftieth or so panic attack of the past three hours. Talking was what he did. It was his little sword, his fail-safe.

“I might be able to teach you some phrases,” suggested Spike.

“Great,” said Xander. “How do you say, ‘I’ve been kidnapped by vampires and taken to another time, please save me.’?”

Spike dipped his head to hide his smile.

“What?” said Xander.

“Yer takin’ this better than most,” said Spike.
“Better than... better than who else?” asked Xander, suddenly getting and latching onto this piece of information.

The tent door opened with a great flapping of material and Angel walked in. He stopped and stared at Xander and Spike, saw Xander’s whole body tense up, his jaw clench, eyes wide and alert.

“It’s starting,” said Angel.

3

Xander stood just outside the door of the tent. The flap was tied open so that Spike and Angel could sit safely inside, but Spike could remain close enough to prompt Xander should any of the people speak to him. The silvery rayon material of the shirt he wore, covered only with the thick poly stuffed vest, shone with the red lights of the sunset. His face was solemn and still, the sun’s deep golds enhancing the tan, glinting off the shining black hair. Spike watched Xander watching the remaining peoples of earth and grappled with his own odd emotions.

It was as if Xander alone had not been resurrected, but the entire Scooby era. As if the boy’s body carried the atmosphere of that time period with him. Watching him
standing there, nervous with who knew what fears, Spike saw not just Xander, but an Age of Mankind. Xander’s extreme health and vigor, a quality long lost to the people’s of earth, only served to remind Spike of so many other qualities long lost. The spirit of heroes and heroism. A certitude of victory against all odds. He imagined how the young man must appear to those people trooping by him. Xander would be at least a head taller than the tallest man of the area. His skin the color of precious metal, his musculature intimidating and impressive. He would be as a God to them. And for a moment, the sun making the shadows on his face and his eyes dark as night, Xander Harris looked like some mythic star god to Spike as well.

“They’re looking at me,” Xander whispered, his eyes on something distant. “Is it okay to wave?”

Spike was surprised at his question. “Sure. People still wave.”

Xander raised his hand in a small, tentative gesture of greeting. Spike saw him react slightly and then that impossible grin stretched across the solemn face, transforming him once again into a seventeen year old boy. “They waved back.”
“Good on you, whelp,” said Spike, something deep and dark and soft like earth turning inside him.

Xander stood in the doorway throughout the entire ceremony, occasionally waving again, the grin flashing across his dark features like heat lightning across a dark sky. Once, apparently, some people passed close enough to hear and he whispered to Spike urgently, “How do you say hello?”

“Dia dao,” said Spike. Xander called it out to the night and Spike heard several voices calling it back. He felt an odd sensation across his scalp. A sweet prickling thrill. Xander laughed lightly and the thrill intensified. He turned his glance to Spike and the vampire felt a shock of something run up his spine as the black eyes, dancing and full of delight, smiled into his own.

Xander turned his face back to the night. As he watched, the sun disappeared, light slipping down his face and away. “It’s over, I guess,” he whispered to Spike reverently.

“Yeah, they’ll go home now,” said Spike, still floating in the endorphin of that peculiar sensation, seeking to make it last. “Hey, maybe I can teach you some more words tomorrow.”
Xander turned back to answer him, his face full of shadows but mobile with excitement. The thrill traveled across Spike’s scalp again.

“We should go, Spike,” said Angel, from the other side of the tent.

Spike jumped and felt weird. He had completely forgotten that Angel was present. He stood up, feeling that lovely sense of anesthesia dissipating with a kind of wondering disappointment.

“Where are you going?” asked Xander. Sounding like he was trying not to sound worried. Not to sound like he was about to be left alone on an empty ridge in the dark in a foreign land.

“You can come with us,” said Spike unthinkingly.

Angel frowned and looked a reprimand at Spike, which he pretended not to see, gathering up the thermal blanket and pressing it into Harris’ arms. “Gets cold…”

“It’s too dark for mortals, Spike. He won’t be able to get down the side of the cliff.”

“Cliff?” said Xander, looking from Spike to Angel. “Dark?”
“Won’t let him fall, Angel,” said Spike. He looked up at Xander who was, in turn, looking back at him with very little confidence in his expression. For some reason this lack of faith stung a bit.

“Fall?” said Xander nervously. His gaze settled on Angel and he swallowed noticeably.

There was that look again, Spike observed to himself. Harris got that frozen, fuzzy animal in the headlights expression whenever he looked at Angel. “I’ll wait here,” said Xander, still hugging the thermal blanket. “I’ll... uh...” his eyes skated around and came back to Spike. “That invite thingie works in tents, right?”

Spike shook his head. “Not tents of the undead,” he grinned wickedly, rapidly moving from delight in Harris’ discomfort to dismay that he had caused said discomfort. He frowned.

“Xander, demons very rarely approach this area. They know it’s guarded. I’m sure you’ll be safe. Now, Spike,” Angel slid the blanket around his arms and made for the door, “we have to hurry...”

“Wa ... wait,” said Xander. Spike looked back at him with some pity.
“Look,” he said as he walked out. “There’s water in the box, and stakes on the shelf there. Make yerself at home.”

“Stakes?” Xander wandered over to the indicated shelf and found the small arsenal. He slid his palm over one smoothly carved stake.

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It took longer than usual. Angel leant heavily on Spike as they made their way back.

“Did they say when?” Spike waited patiently for Angel to ease his weight from Spike’s arm and sit down on the small palette bed inside the empty tent. Spike moved over to the stove and lit a fire, gathered another blanket from a shelf, and sat on the bed to carefully wrap it around Angel’s bowed shoulders.

Angel gathered the blanket gratefully around himself. “About a week from now.” He lightly touched Spike’s hand as he would have moved off the bed. “No. Stay,” said Angel, not looking directly at him.

Spike hesitated, as always unsure of what was happening. Angel’s hand closed over his and he turned
his head halfway towards Spike, eyes downcast. “Stay,” said Angel, part command, part plea. He lifted his other hand and closed it lightly around the bones of Spike’s wrist.

“Sure,” said Spike. He shifted on the mattress and waited to see what Angel would do.

Angel’s head bent towards him. As if seeking something blindly. Spike would have reached up helpfully and pulled Angel into a hug, but he knew intuitively that Angel had not yet made a conscious decision.

The hands that clasped his wrists moved slowly up his arms. Angel’s head came up slightly, his eyes had a sleepy confused look, as he gazed beyond Spike to a spot on the bed slightly behind him, his hands moving as if they had their own will. Then, finally, Angel closed the space between them, making a small needy sound, pressing his entire torso against Spike. Spike let his body be pushed backwards onto the mattress. His senses swam in the scent, emotional need and sheer weight of the torso pushing down against him. Angel carried a lot a muscle mass. Spike’s mouth was pressed into the long thick hair as Angel's head rested against his neck, breathing audibly. After a second, Spike felt Angel's face turn against his skin, his soft wet mouth sucking at him
hypnotically, as Angel’s hands slid up and down his arms, slowly peeling loose Spike’s shirt.

Hands traveling down, running now over Spike’s cock, his erection, unenthusiastic but willing to be encouraged, and Angel moved down, untying the laced crotch, slipping the fabric easily from Spike’s hips. Spike felt the dark head moving in slow circles over his abdomen, moving down further still, and felt oddly reluctant.

“Angel,” he hissed, hesitantly touching the soft hair of Angel’s head. “Don’t ya think I should go make sure Harris is okay first?”

Angel murmured, and Spike felt definite blunt teeth close gently on either side of his cock. He gasped and arched and grabbed Angel’s hair. The pressure eased. “Fuck Xander Harris,” said Angel and released Spike’s erection into the cold air.

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Xander heard someone approaching and rolled his stake in the palm of his hand, backing into the corner from which he had ambushed Spike. He could not make out who the voices belonged to and wished tents came
equipped with windows. And flashlights. And crossbows. Yeah, crossbows would definitely be nice right now. Xander looked around the room, wondering how Spike and Angel could have so few weapons.

“Oi!” he heard quite distinctly outside, then a flutter of material and more voices. He relaxed a bit. Then became annoyed to realize that he was eager to see Spike and Angel. Then became even more annoyed when he realized they had entered the other tent without stopping into this one to check up on him.

Still clutching the stake, he nevertheless gave up his position of advantage by the door and sat down hard on the pallet. It thumped hard with the force of his weight.

Somebody yelled. Xander jumped to his feet, stake ready.

“Ah! Yes! Angel!”

Xander’s stake wielding hand dropped; he stared at the wall adjacent to the other tent.

“Aah!” yelled the voice. There was a loud moan. And despite the adrenaline rushing through his brain, Xander registered that those cries were not of men being attacked and injured. The fear still moving his feet on the floor, pumping his lungs to breathe, Xander paced, his
fist clenching around his stake, his brain clenching around this new Fun Fact. Until, unhappily, Xander could hear flesh against flesh, an increasing rhythm, grunts and short exclamations. His own breathing quickening as the sounds crescendoed. He was backing away but there was not enough room to get away from those sounds, not enough space in here to put between himself and whatever new reality he was being sent to deal with. He looked desperately around the tent one more time, whirled, and ran out the door.

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Angel was curled on his side, his back to Spike, the blanket tucked over his shoulders. He stared at the wall of the tent. Spike sat on the bed, still partly undressed, cum and a variety of other liquids still drying on his chest. He watched his withdrawn Sire, “So,” he said. He thought of putting his hand on Angel’s shoulder, even lifted said hand but then thought better of it.

“So, guess I’ll just go check on the whelp.”

There was no answer.
“Yeah,” Spike sighed. He relaced his trousers, pulled his shirt closed and stood with a little grimace. Angel’s enthusiasm had been rather strenuous. “I’ll...” Spike was startled as a vast loneliness swept through him like a wind. Angel looked so small lying there on the palette under his brown blanket. Spike felt so cold. He stumbled for the door. “I’ll, I’ll sleep over there, yeah, Angel?”

“Thank you, Spike.” Angel’s voice sounded very distant.

Spike could not understand the tears now pressing behind his eyes. He threw his vest over his other clothes and made the two-foot walk to the other tent.

“You decent, Harris?” he yelled as he entered, glancing towards the corner Harris had sprung from last time, just in case. But the tent was empty.

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Xander stumbled over something on the ground and fell forward, feet tangled, coming down hard and at a bad angle on one hand. He felt something wrench in his shoulder and was just able to squelch a yell of pain as he messily collapsed against the cold muddy ground.
He lay there, panting and trying to see the area around himself. He had absolutely no idea where he was. No idea how long he had been running. A few minutes? Longer? Nothing was familiar. The air smelled like sulfur, no like soapy water. The ground was slimy and gritty. Xander pushed himself up, the sharp pain telling him he had actually done damage to himself. All around him was pitch black. No starlight, no moon, no reflected city lights. Not even the sound of small animals or insects to give him a sense of orientation. Xander felt very like ... he started breathing hard; his shoulder was throbbing, that must mean something, right? This endless darkness, nothing on nothing, hanging in the dark. But his shoulder ached, his palms stung where the ground had scraped him, he couldn’t be dead, right?

He shivered suddenly, violently as the cold of the ground began to work through his trousers. He hadn’t grabbed the vest Spike had given him which, he now realized, had actually kept him quite warm before. His boots were undoubtedly not meant for outdoor use, they were leaking moisture against the soles of his feet already. Chill seeping into him, the dislocated shoulder shouting periodically into his brain, Xander felt himself numb nevertheless with fear and confusion. He would have shouted for help but who would hear him? The demons
he avoided? He was lost in the dark and there was nowhere to go, nothing to be done about it. Xander lay back on the cold, damp ground and felt the chill reach up and wrap itself around him.

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“James?” Jennifer’s soft hands, her voice full of pain and concern, Warm. He turned and let his wife comfort him. “Honey,” she said softly. He felt her cheek against his hair, the soft wool of her coat.

“I remember he used to tell me,” said James, softly, “that girls were soft as kittens on the outside and tough as nails on the inside.”

Jennifer hugged him and caressed his head. They were sitting on a small couch outside his father’s room. The doctors had asked them to leave while they removed the tubes.

“He told me a story once,” said James, watching the door to his father’s room. After the tubes were removed, his father would begin to die. They would be allowed back in then. He watched the door. “I was going to break up with my girlfriend in High School. And he told me a story
about a girl who became a vengeance demon because a man broke her heart. He explained about girls,” he took a deep breath, “about how all they want is the truth.” He wrapped his arms around his wife.

Jennifer was crying.

“Give them the truth and someone to love, and a woman can save the world,” quoted James quietly, watching the door to his father’s room.

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“Harris?” The hands on his face were so cold. Xander turned away from them. He was cold already, filled with the cold. He needed heat. But the chill hands pursued him. Tapping, they were tapping at his skin as at a closed door. “Harris, damn your sorry arse to hell, wake up!” Xander turned from the coldness and told them he wasn’t there.

“He said something. I think he’s coming to.”

“He’s delirious with fever, Angel. He’s been sayin’ all sorts of meaningless shit.” Something else cold. And damp, pressed into his brain and it was so perfect. This
cooleness was bliss. Xander pushed into the cool, damp cloth.

“Mmm,” he whispered. “That feels good.”

“Harris? Fuck, Xander, can you hear me?”

Xander? Spike never called him by his Scooby name. Xander smiled to himself and felt terribly silly about that for some reason. He giggled.

“Somethin’ hurtin’ him. He’s crying. Fuck, Angel.”

“There’s nothing you can do, Spike, just let the fever run its course.”

“Done enough already, haven’t we, ya giant ape. He was a good fifty yards down the side of that hill and soaked through when I found him. We musta scared the holy shit out of him, you stupid fuck!” The coolness that soothed his brain disappeared, but then was back again and better. Xander hummed happily.

“... ridiculous to run off into the night like that.” Angel’s voice. Xander wanted to growl at it. Angel was the Indian Chief, thought Xander giddily. Stomping around in his big robe.
“Just a kid...” Spike’s voice. *Spike was a cool, dark thing*, thought Xander, drifting. *Like a stream. Full of trout.* He smiled to himself.

“Ah...” Angel murmured something and Spike’s hands were gone, the cool cloth slipped away. Xander’s head turned, seeking the comfort again. And now there was shouting. Words loud and sharp, like shards of glass piercing his brain.

“Stop,” whimpered Xander, and discovered he had a mouth and a tongue somewhere below the burning of his brain. “Stop yelling,” he managed to say louder.

“Harris?” The cold wet cloth back on his forehead and now the cool hands too, running over the top of his head.

“Keep doing that,” begged Xander.


Xander obediently tried to open his eyes and found them sticky and stinging. Spike’s face was very close to him, those intense blue eyes peering at him. Through the tiny cracks of his barely opened lids Spike looked like he was trying to peek into Xander’s brain.
“Hiya,” whispered Xander, his throat hoarse and dry. “You have anything to drink around here, that didn’t come from an open vein?”

Spike had a cup to his lips and his arm under Xander’s shoulder, urging him up, almost immediately. Xander found it very interesting how he kept discovering body parts. He hadn’t even remembered he had shoulders and now he was delightfully aware of them. Spike was cool and firm as he rocked Xander upward. All marble and soft, rayony silk. Xander wriggled against him. Spike laughed again.

*Spike’s laugh was like that stream falling over rocks,* thought Xander. He could feel himself drifting again, the idea of a boat, floating on a stream of strong, soft vampire. “Sleepy,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, Xan,” said Spike’s dark voice. And there it was again. The coolness on his head, his brows, brushing behind his ear. “Fever’s breakin’, you’ll be fine. Rest, Xander.”

~~*~~*~~*~~

He woke later, very warm and with a huge weight on his
chest. He inhaled and it sounded like bagpipes warming up. He exhaled and the same bagpipes squealed and died. His hands were firmly buried under that same mass of blanket that weighed down on his chest and Xander rediscovered his fear of bondage when he realized he couldn’t move. He hands jerked, and he desperately pulled his arms out from under the mountain of blankets, pushing back the heavy stacks on his chest.

“Hey, hey, stop that now, you idiot.” Spike was over him, his shirt hanging down in Xander’s face, pulling the blankets out of his hands and trying to tuck them firmly around Xander again.

“I’m hot,” said Xander, his lungs wheezing musically.

“Yer still sick and stayin’ in bed until the infection’s gone.”

“Infection?” Xander’s lungs accompanied his words with another bellows wheeze. He batted at Spike’s shirt as it fell annoyingly over his face. Registered that the shirt was flopping so horribly because it was hanging open, Spike’s bare chest underneath, and Xander’s eyes followed the little track of abdominal muscles, a foot from his face; Spike in boxer shorts? Xander shut his eyes.
“You’ve got the ‘flu. The same ‘flu you had back in your
day, but trust me its gotta a hell of a kick now.” Spike was
pushing pillows up under Xander’s head. Pulling his
shoulders and head up, Xander twisted away
uncomfortably and realized that he was naked under all
the blankets.

“Spike,” his wheezing was so loud in his ears it hurt.
“Stop it. Just.. just, God, don’t touch me.”

The hands and arms completely and absolutely
disappeared. Spike stood looking down at him, his
expression unreadable. “Okay, whelp,” he snapped
finally. And he turned away towards the little stove.

Xander lay and focused on his difficult breathing, trying
not to think about how foolishly he was behaving. “Why
is it so hot in here?”

“Cranked this thing up as high as it’ll go,” said Spike. Now
Xander could see him standing in front of the stove,
loose open shirt, short rayon shorts, no shoes. His curling
hair tied high off his neck, skin flushed with the heat.
“You could bake bread in this room most likely,” said
Spike. He donned huge oven mitts and poked at the door
to the stove, which was glowing bright orange with the
heat. There were piles of the weird wrappings Xander
had seen the food come in stacked next to the little
table. Blankets and a messy heap of shirts and pants spilling from the stool in the corner. General untidiness everywhere.

“How long have I been sick?”

“Few days.”

Xander adjusted slightly under the covers and felt the sudden insistent presence of his bladder. “Spike,” he said, the flush on his cheeks brightening just a little bit more. “I gotta pee.”

Spike hopped over and matter-of-factly produced an adobe bed pan. Xander stared at it. “Uh,” he said. “I choose ‘no’.”

The irritation Spike had been quelling rose in him again. “Whataya mean, mate, you can’t get outta bed now, yer weak as a kitten I’ll bet.” He could see Xander testing his limbs, feeling the truth of Spike’s words. “Besides, you’ve been using it for three days now,” said Spike. Not admitting the sting of the previous incident and so perhaps being just that much more nasty. “Been peeing like a good boy for me.”

“Shut up, Spike!” Xander’s breath wheezed in and out so fast he sounded like a cartoon donkey. Hee haw Heeee
“Just,” he pulled the covers tighter to himself and reached for the bedpan angrily. “Just turn around then.”

Spike shrugged and did as he was told. “Seen it all anyway, Xannderrr,” he simpered. “Nice little piece a man flesh you got there too.” He couldn’t think what he was doing, he couldn’t think why it angered him so that Xander Harris jerked away from his touch or closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to look at him. And he couldn’t stop. “Not as nice as Angel’s, but...”

“Fuck! Shut up, Spike!” Xander squeaked and wheezed and started to cough hard. He kept coughing, desperately dragging air past the phlegm and clogging throat, trying to fill his lungs as they hacked and spat mucous into his mouth. He leaned on the pillow and tried to stop coughing, tried to breathe.

Spike peeked over his shoulder. “You okay, whelp?”

“Shut, ::wheeze:: up, Spike.” Xander took in a huge amount of air, coughed a few more times, collapsed against the pillow. “Just shut the fuck up and leave me alone,” he managed to say, past the coughing.

“Sure,” said Spike, confused by his irritation, confused by his annoyance with himself. Annoyed at his concern for the ungrateful Scooby and generally feeling like a right git
for standing about listening to the prat a moment longer. “You got it.” He strode across the room, began pulling on random pants from the top of the clothing stacked on the chair. Hopping and shoving his legs into them. Scanning the room for his shoes, he could see Xander watching him out of the corner of his eye. The sight pulled at him, he couldn’t seem to find his things without looking directly at Harris.

Finally he just stopped in the middle of fastening his shirt, threw his arms out to the side and stomped. “What?”

Xander lay, perched up on his elbows, those huge dark eyes, his sweat greased hair sticking up in peaks above his head. He stared at Spike. “Have you been taking care of me the whole time?” he said, his voice nasally and hoarse.

“Yeah, well who else? Oh.” Spike advanced, pointing. “Oh, I get you, you’re afraid Angel’s been checkin’ out yer package as well, is that it? Well...” he thought briefly of telling Harris that, yes, the big Poof had been in here drooling over the dark morsel of a mortal but then he just didn’t have the heart. He stopped, finger still pointing, like it didn’t know where to go.

“Th .. thank you,” said Xander. He wheezed.
Spike’s hand dropped.

Xander took another labored breath, the blanket slid a bit down his chest, shiny with the medicinal salve Spike had slathered there and three days of sleep sweat. “Guess I could have died,” said Xander, looking at Spike. “So, thanks. And,” he shrugged and indicated vaguely the bedpan, himself, Spike, whatever. “Sorry for bein’ such a dickwad. I’m not usually intolerant.” He inhaled noisily and coughed again. “Just a lot to take in.”

Spike rubbed at his neck. “You should cover yerself up,” he said gruffly. “Not out of the woods yet, ya know. Need ta stay warm.”

“Yes, mother,” Xander said stuffily, “but first turn your back again.”

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“Is he feeling better?”

“Yeah, think he might make it.” Spike distastefully kicked at the emptied bedpan. His hand slid to his pockets to look for the cigarettes that had stopped being manufactured long ago. He remembered, shrugged irritably, and cracked his knuckles instead.
“He should try to be present this evening.”

“Why, Angel? Why are you so dead set on Xander Harris bein’ privy to the darkest side of this world right from the get go?”

Angel looked at him oddly. “Why are you trying to protect him?”

“Protect?” Spike crossed his arms, “What the hell do you think, Angel? The Powers wanted him here, right? Just doin’ what I’m supposed to do… protecting… yeah, protecting their interests.”

“Good for you, Spike,” said Angel.

Spike grit his teeth and shot a quick glare at his Sire. “Gotta get back inside,” he said. “If yer gonna make him stand about in the cold all night. Gotta make sure he’s ready for it.” He stomped back towards the tent.

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Xander wasn’t sure why Spike was being so surly. But he was still congested, weak and ill. His brain wasn’t working very well. And truthfully, Xander had never really bothered to examine Spike’s behavior in depth, so
he didn’t feel he knew the guy. Angel, Xander hated, and could explain in a detail of well-thought out psychological evaluation, the reasons for his hatred. Spike, well Spike had been more an irritant. An excessively persistent and loud irritant. Xander had endured Spike, he hadn’t really tried to figure him out.

Spike shoved the container of half eaten tortillas back at Xander. “Finish yer meal, Harris,” he said.

“I can’t, Spike,” said Xander. “My stomach is so full, I feel like I’m going to hurl.”

“Make yerself.”

“Obviously,” said Xander, rolling onto his back to take the pressure off his distended abdomen, “you have completely forgotten what it’s like to be human.”

“Obviously you, fat git, haven’t ever had to go hungry. People gave up food for you. ‘s a sin ta waste it.”

Xander became very still, the healthy glow that had risen to his cheeks fading, his eyes brows lowering, his mouth small. “Hungry people had to give me their food?” he said in a little boy’s nasally voice.

Spike wondered how many more centuries he would have to live before he learned to shut the fuck up.
Xander blinked. His mouth turned down unhappily. “Can we ... can I give them something?”

“Give them something?”

“Back. You know, payment?” asked Xander hopefully.

“Not much as valuable as food, mate,” said Spike succinctly. “You saw them the other night with their little greenhouses and their solar lights, yeah?”

Xander nodded solemnly, staring at the ceiling.

“That’s their food. It’s hard to grow, hard to keep.”

“Oh.” Xander lay there. Spike could have sworn he was thinking nothing. The soft phlegmy breathing, the black eyes staring sleepily upwards, occasionally blinking, then, “Spike?”

“Yeah?”

“You said they’re vegetarian?”

“Sure. Can’t keep grazing stock alive without somethin’ to graze, right? There’s fish if you can get safely to the water areas, but those are demon infested, so...”

“No animals?” said Xander slowly. “Like, no cow, no pig, no...”
“Right. Mostly vegetarians.” Spike looked at the boy and almost reached to touch his forehead to see if the fever was rising again.

“Spike?”

“Yeah?”

“Where do you get blood?”

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They stood above the ritual area. Xander wearing the two shirts and down vest under the blanket Spike had insisted he drape over him. He stood with his chin tilted up, mouth slightly open to enable easier breathing. His eyes slowly traveled down the candle lit, altar lined path, watching the villagers as they ascended.

“I saw a horror movie like this once,” he said. He pulled the blanket up around him and when Spike moved to assist he dipped away from his touch.

Spike ground his teeth. *Stupid, narrow-minded boy.* “It’s a privilege, they are ... honored to do it,” he said.

“You’ve got quite a little con job going here, Spike.”
“It’s not a … fuck, Harris. It’s not like that!”

“Not like what, Spike? They’re starving to death and you’re sucking their blood. That’s basically what it is, right?”

“We feed them well. And we only take from them once every six weeks.”

“You give them food?” Xander looked at Spike for the first time since he had been told how the vampires survived.

Spike found he didn’t like to look at Xander when his eyes looked back like that. There was something there that made the old vampire see himself as what he was, all the trappings and careful rituals aside. A demon sucking life from people. An evil thing protecting its herd of food. He looked away, back at the group who had been chosen this time. They were entering the small enclosure now. “Yeah, we give them food to take back.”

“And where do you get this food?”

“Its stuff donated.” Spike nodded ahead of himself. “People leave it at the altars.”

“So you give them back the food they gave you to begin with,” Xander’s voice was gaining in volume as he spoke,
“in exchange for fucking nothing except the privilege of having their fucking blood sucked by a couple of fucking vampires,” he finished loudly.

Below, a couple of people looked up at them in startlement. And behold, the gods are angry, thought Xander.

“Interesting use of adjectives there, pet.”

“Fuck you, Spike,” said Xander quietly.

“Look, it’s … it’s like a feudal thing.” said Spike. “We protect them…”

“Right, cuz otherwise they’d be getting their blood sucked by vampires.”

“They’d be getting dead and possibly turned by vampires, pet,” said Spike, angrily. “Look, you humans did the same sort of thing when you donated blood, in the day.”

“That was for humans.”

“Why do you bloody think this is not? That’s what we’re here for, to take care a them, to protect them.” Spike swung about in his rage. “They see that, why don’t you?”

“Maybe because I know you,” said Xander.
Spike wanted to shout at him. Wanted to point out that Xander didn’t know him, Spike. That he had never known him, never even bothered to take a good look and see how far the demon had come, how much he had changed. He wanted to grab his shoulders and make him look at Spike now and see it. See that there was something in Spike besides hunger and loneliness and a cold wind blowing through a dead body. Except Spike was afraid to look into those dark mobile eyes again and see that he, himself, was wrong.

They stood for a long time in silence watching the grey-skinned people trooping forward.

When Xander spoke again, his voice had changed to a taut hateful thing, as if he spoke to Spike only because he had no choice. “Tell me how it works.”

Spike slid easily into game face. “Give ya a little demo if you want, pet,” he hissed.

“Not if you were the last fucking vampire on earth, Spike,” said Xander calmly. “How does it,” he gestured towards the people. “How do you know they aren’t coming too often? Does someone keep track? How often do you do this? What about pregnant women or the ill?”

“They have a shaman who does all that.”
“Like a doctor?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t the doctor come while I was ill?”

“She did, pet. You just don’t remember it.”

Xander absorbed this new tidbit. “Stop calling me pet,” he said absently.

Spike grit his teeth.

“I can’t just stand here and let this be done, Spike. I can’t just stand here and let you do this.”

“There’s no choice. This is not your choice,” spat Spike, angry for too many reasons than he could think about. “This is the way it is. Sorry it doesn’t fit your sensibilities but maybe the world wasn’t meant to be the way you thought. And there’s nothing you can do about it, pet. So suck it up.”

“There’s always something a person can do, Spike.”

Spike had half a mind to walk off and leave the boy to freeze here. But the other half wanted desperately to explain somehow, to show Xander the perspective that made this okay. That made Spike’s actions okay. “They
call it ‘the wound that heals’,” he said, rubbing his neck self-consciously.

“The what?” Xander cast Spike a disgusted look. “Well, that makes it better, doesn’t it?” he said in a voice light and sharp. “Pretty words.”

“’S a quote from someone famous,” Spike babbled on, uncontrollably. “Angel said it’s from some religious…”


Spike stewed. Fretted. Stamped his chilled feet a bit on the ground. He kept glancing at Xander. The impulse to stomp off and leave him battling continuously with the desire to force him to understand.

And Xander stood, ignoring Spike’s discomfort. Watching the line with that righteously rigid expression. He gestured toward a smallish, teenage girl in the group. “Let me take her place.”

This came at Spike from far left field. “What?”

“Give her her food, but let me take her place.” Xander was carefully unlacing the rayon sleeves of his shirt. He strode forward to join the line.
“Whoa, wait. Harris…” Spike trotted up behind him and grabbed Xander’s shoulder. “You can’t … you’re ill and …”

Xander had gone complete still at Spike’s touch. “Take your hand off me, Spike,” he said in an even voice.

Spike tightened his grip on Xander’s shoulder.


Spike tightened his grip, lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes as well.

Xander was struggling for breath again, his congested lungs trying to pump blood and oxygen to feed his barely contained rage. His cheeks were white with two bright red circles standing out on each. His eyes were pitch black.

And Spike was spun back hundreds of years. To a cold night filled with stars, those same eyes filled with the same anger. Puffs of white smoke issuing from both their mouths and flared nostrils, like cartoon bulls facing off in a field. Two pigheaded men. Yeah, well, I’m here, pet, thought Spike, his thoughts wild with anger, severely tromping whatever other feelings he was unwilling to examine. Know that pisses you off, but I’m still here. Deal with it.
It wasn’t the force of the punch as much as the angle at which it was thrown. Spike lay on the ground, fingerling his barely bruised chin and watched Xander trotting down the slope towards the ritual buildings

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The room had already been prepared. The sterile, stiff white fabric laid out over the high palette bed, towels draped over a spotless and ancient metal bar. Tall, thick candles, reeking slightly of the amber resin used in lieu of beeswax, a kind of myrrh mixed with vanilla smell, encircled the ten foot radius of the low ceilinged room. Thick, inedible rushes strewn at the door, to catch dirt, to keep the room clean. All precautions against the infection of open wounds, but still giving the space a cleansed and holy air.

Spike slid into the robes of the same stiff fabric as lay over the bed. Hunger, emotion, all had him tight and edgy. The thought of Harris out there waiting to enter, waiting for Spike to drink from him... Spike sat down suddenly in the ancient, sacred wooden chair, as the image in his head sent such a surge of desire to his groin he was, metaphorically at least, breathless. “Bloody
Hell,” he whispered to himself. He pushed the sleeves of his robe higher and noted with amazement that his hands were shaking.

The sound of feet on the rushes, Spike’s head jerked up.

“Bannu,” whispered in a low voice, an unfamiliar blonde head bowed. She looked up at him cautiously, still in the ritual position. Spike shook himself free of whatever possessed him.

“Ta fal,” *Greetings* he responded with the formal ritual, “Kahd is am?” *what is your name?*

“Thalaa,” whispered the young woman reverently. She bowed again. Spike stood and approached her and she came forward to the small pad on the ground there for the purpose and knelt before him. All very regular. But suddenly Spike saw the whole scene through Harris’ eyes. Imagined him standing just outside the door even now, watching. ‘quite a con job you’ve got going here…’

Spike actually glanced at the doorway. Saw the next participant standing in the line, properly solemn with bowed head. He touched the woman’s shoulder and motioned for her to stand, to follow him to the other side of the room, where the palette was situated. Perhaps his movements were a little rushed, the woman
looked temporarily concerned, as if she thought she had done something wrong.

Spike took her hand. A non-standard but acceptable form. It was a huge compliment. She stared at him and followed in a kind of joyful trance as he led her to the bed. As she lay down before him, gazing up with fear and awe in her eyes, Spike struggled to treat her with the attention and singular concern she deserved. This was an ecstatic moment for these people, surrounded with parties and gifts and a sense of goals obtained, boundaries passed. He wanted to do it properly. But he was obsessed now with the inner vision of a dark haired teenager watching his every move. Constant sarcastic and overly verbose commentary following him as he sat beside her, cleansed her arm with the precious alcohol. Lifted it to his mouth and slid into gameface.

She gasped and stiffened involuntarily as he sank in his fangs. No matter how often he and Angel urged it, these people insisted on participating in the ritual without taking painkillers. And no matter how gently he tried to pierce the skin and the veins, a vampire's fangs were not a surgical tool. They were made, in part, to inflict pain. And it was simply impossible to insert them deep into someone’s arm without hurting them. The woman he held moaned like a small child and Spike lapped gently
around the wound as he fed, sometimes the sensation of his tongue helped soothe the ache of the suction. One hand stroked softly up and down her upper arm. To comfort, he could have said, but the dark eyed Scooby in his head reminded him that the stroking encouraged the blood to flow.

Next door a sharp cry. Whoever was in Angel’s room had not been able to quell their voice. It wasn’t uncommon. And it wasn’t a shameful thing, though there did seem to be a point of pride amongst these people in remaining silent during the bite.

An habituated and controlled clock in Spike’s mind told him that he had to stop now. He withdrew his fangs, blood still laying on his lips, and was suddenly violently assaulted by the vision of himself, a toothy, demonic beast, feeding. He licked his lips, put her arm gently down. Said the ritual words. Stood to fetch her little bundle of food.

The air was rich now with the smell of her blood, her fear, the light tang of arousal. Spike felt himself slipping into the comfort the ritual gave his demon. As seductive to himself as it was to the people lined up outside. The weird nausea he felt was new, though. She sat up. He held her hand, waiting. She stood slowly. He waited
beside her patiently. Sometimes they fainted. Finally she was able to turn, take her bundle, look up at him with dazed and pale eyes.

“Thank you,” said Spike absurdly, sincerely. She stared at him amazed, confused at the words. “Dahank,” said Spike formally. They both bowed again. He walked her to the door. The next participant walked in and Spike saw Harris standing in the line. Much taller than the others, his head unbowed. He looked directly at Spike with black, unreadable eyes.

Spike tried to urge the young man that entered and bowed before him to come in further, but the boy had been well trained. He waited patiently for the ritual words. And suddenly Spike couldn’t recall them. He looked again at Harris, saw everything he had feared staring back at him. Was frozen in time and silence. He saw the dark head turn away, and then Harris, walked over towards Angel’s room.

Spike fulfilled the rest of the ritual in a kind of insane dream. He spoke the words, held gently the thin young flesh, counted the seconds of feeding. All the while every sense in his body tuned to the sounds next door. He imagined Angel’s face, his surprise, suspicion and then… satisfaction. He imagined his Sire taking the boy’s arm in
his hands, Xander’s face turned grimly away, the bite. Spike groaned and dropped the arm in his hands. The boy he held almost jumped off the palette in his shock and panic and Spike immediately lay a soothing hand on his shoulder.

“Yahm et,” he said. *it’s okay* The boy lay staring at him and breathing hard. Spike repeated the phrase, petting the small bony shoulder repeatedly until the boy calmed, that familiar blood loss glaze in his eyes. Spike turned to fetch his bundle. Led him ritualistically to the entrance. And schooled himself not to look around for Xander.

Twenty four people per vampire. Six quarts of blood apiece. It took six hours and when they were through, Spike was exhausted. His body was flooded with rich, warm, fresh blood, his muscles pumping, his energy high physically, but his mind was a mess, running in circles of maddening thoughts. Why had Xander chosen Angel? What had Angel done to the boy? Xander hadn’t known the ritual; had Angel taken advantage of that, harmed him in some way? Angel could prance about all he wanted with his forgotten Eastern philosophers and ratty redemption story, thought Spike in a now rare fit of jealous pique, but he was still a demon and he could just imagine the pleasure Angel might take in savagely ripping into Xander’s arm. Maybe taking too much of the rich,
sweet blood. Leaving some ugly, life long scar on that perfect, silky skin...

Spike tore the robes off over his head and ran out the back door of the enclosure, and up the hill to their tents.

It was silent at the top of the hill. The warm evening breeze not yet blowing. The two tents standing solid and glowing with light side by side. Spike could hear his own footsteps crossing the grit and mud, hear Angel in his own tent fussing with something metallic. Sharpening the swords, then, he thought pausing outside the door and trying not look at the other tent.

“Spike?” Of course Angel had heard him, also. He half opened the tent flap and peered out. The older vampire’s face was dark and vivid with blood, and his eyes glowed. “Are you coming in?” he asked. Spike could have sworn there was something more catlike and satisfied about Angel’s face just then than he had ever seen it.

“Nah ah,” said Spike, surprised at his own words as they emerged from his own mouth. “Gonna go check on the patient first,” a shrug towards Xander’s tent.

There. There it was. The tiniest of smiles. And did Angel just surreptitiously lick at his lower lip?
“Alright then,” said Angel, eyes unfathomable. “But don’t waste time, we have a lot to do before morning.” He disappeared back inside, taking that damned inscrutable satisfaction with him.

Xander, of course, wasn’t in the tent. Spike popped outside as soon as he saw this, looking around in a fresh panic. “Damned stupid puppy,” he growled. “Gonna have ta get you a leash.”

“Funny thing.” The soft sarcastic voice came from just the other side of the tree. “I used to say the same thing about you,” said Xander, not turning to address Spike as he ran up.

“Yer sittin in the damp idiot,” said Spike, for want of something better to say.

“Yeah.”

“Git yer ass inside, whelp. You’re gonna have a relapse.”

Xander continued sitting, back against the tree, one leg bent up, the other thrust forward so that the foot, just barely, dangled over the cliffs edge. He looked straight forward towards the nothing that was their night sky.

“You know, not to sound overly dramatic,” said Xander slowly, blinking at the dark, “but I really don’t care.”
In Spike’s mind a new awareness arched its back, and pranced lightly towards him sideways, like a defensive cat. He took in the scene before him. The young man limp in his apparent apathy. Long body stretched across the tiny expanse of space to the edge of the cliff. One hand resting on his knee, the other tightly clutching the root of the tree. His foot dangling, occasionally twisting experimentally. Spike hadn’t smelled tears in a long time. Xander reeked of the candle’s incense, blood, the spice that pervaded the food and the medicinal salve that coated his body, but underneath it Spike could smell the long ago familiar scent of human tears. Like fresh mown grass, or Christmas pine, it was a scent that brought back another time.

Xander shifted his position. His grip on the tree root loosened somewhat.

“You know I could easily stop you,” said Spike, his entire body a coiled spring of forced inaction.

“Maybe,” said Xander. “This time.”

“Coward’s way out,” said Spike.

“You know,” said Xander conversationally, “I am so over that posturing male bullshit. I did my heroic stint. I think of it as merely a choice.”
“Powers brought you here, Xan. You might not go back to Heaven you do somethin’ they don’t like.”

“Heaven,” said Xander as if surprised. “Right. I’d forgotten about that.” He laughed.

Spike shifted his weight carefully, watching every hint of movement now in the young man’s body. Xander turned his head and then Spike saw it. It startled him so badly he forgot for just a second the danger of the situation.

“That bastard!”

Xander’s head dipped and turned partly back towards him. “What?”

“That fucking bastard! I’ll fucking kill him!”

Xander finally turned fully to look at Spike, his mouth wide with amazement. “Huh?”

“He fucking bit your neck.” Spike stomped and pointed and fumed. “That bastard!” He stomped again.

Xander blinked. “Yeah,” he said. “I asked him to.”

“You?” Spike’s outrage was inexpressible. He opened and closed his speechless mouth.
“I asked him to,” repeated Xander patiently. He turned his head again to look out at nothing. “I didn’t want to copy them, because I don’t... I don’t think of it like they do, you know? It would have been wrong. For them,” he shrugged minimally. “So I asked him to bite me on the neck instead.”

Spike’s mind was spinning. “Stupid git.”

“No argument here.”

“It’s such a dangerous spot, Harris. So easy to ...” he sighed. “Well, the old poof has more control than most but still...”

“Yeah, I had a few seconds of serious rethinking,” said Xander. “And then... and...then ...” he inhaled deeply. The fingers of the hand gripping the tree root clenched and loosened, clenched and loosened. And Spike suddenly got it.

“You tellin’ me you’re sittin’ out here trying to push yourself off a cliff because you got turned on by a little vampire bite, Harris?” said Spike with that blunt honesty for which there was apparently no cure.

Xander laughed once. Was silent for a moment. Then, “You make it sound so cheap, Spike.”
Spike shook his head with disgust. “Feckin’ child…”

“And it was my first time…” said Xander, laughing again.

“Harris,” said Spike. “Xander…” He took a step closer, saw the boy allow it. Another step. “Come inside, pet. Yer hungry, cold, tired, I bet. I’ll make ya some more to eat…”

Xander was still laughing. The laughter was like tiny bubbles spilling from the edge of the bubble wand. Nervous, foamy, dissolving to liquid. Spike smelled the tears again and wanted to turn away but couldn’t take his eyes off the hysterical boy. “Don’t call me ‘pet’, Spike,” said Xander, through his laughter. “I will fucking kill you if you call me that again.”

“Duly noted,” said Spike, surprised.

“I’m not an animal. I’m not a fucking girl.” Xander got control of himself. Took a deep breath. Spike noticed the hand now moving back up the tree root. Tightening and seeming to pull the boy’s body closer to the tree.

“I hate that asshole.”

“Yeah,” said Spike nodding. “I have noticed that.”
“Just... his mouth... his...” Xander shook his head. His fingers picked at the bark of the tree.

“Vampire bite’s supposed to be seductive, Harris,” said Spike, quickly. “Keeps the victims quiet while feeding. Like drugging them naturally. That’s why it hurts a bit too. Endorphin’s a powerful aphrodisiac, you know...” He paused. Xander was staring at him. His face damp, eyes swollen.

“Thank you, Spike, you can stop now.”

“Right.”

“You have successfully convinced me that suicide at this time would just be another pointless humiliation.” Xander jerked his whole body upright. Held himself steady against the tree for a second, then turned and stepped easily down to stand in front of Spike.

He stood there, hands in pockets, just gazing at him. Probably thinking, in such utter darkness, that he had a certain invisibility. Spike saw the curtain Xander usually dropped between them lift, the emotional blind open just a tad. Saw a yellow wedge of light to hint at an open sunlit room living inside the boy.
Xander smelled like rich healthy blood and salty tears. His lip turned up at one corner cynically and he sniffed. “I keep thanking you.”

“It’s gratifying,” said Spike, that helpless, hypnotized sensation falling over him as if someone had dropped a net.

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” Xander rolled his eyes, the whites still shining with tears, and laughed again. A healthier laugh, that spoke of newly turned fertile earth and warm, electrically lit rooms. He looked towards the tents and the slight glow fell across his damp cheeks, outlining the uptuned lip and heavy brows.

“Never thought I’d see any of this again,” he said.

“What, the future?” Spike laughed. “Missed you last time you were here, mate. You shoulda called.”

Xander looked back at him and raised an eyebrow. “Never thought I’d see you, bloodbreath,” he said, “and your little dog, too.”

“Dog?”

“It’s a Wizard of Oz reference,” explained Xander. That little half smile still on his lips. His eyes reading Spike’s face. Quizzical. Searching. Xander’s gaze was like a touch.
As if, somehow, he was finding his way across Spike’s face. “Remember Wizard of Oz?”

“Sure,” lied Spike. He was thinking about how it would feel to put his fingers on the damp places still on Xander’s face.

Xander raised a hand and whapped Spike’s shoulder in a friendly way. Once. Twice.

“Wanna go in?”

Spike nodded numbly.

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“All gone,” groaned Xander, pushing away his bowl. “Xander’s a good boy.”

Spike smiled and leaned back, watching the boy raise his shirt and scratch happily at his distended belly. “You’ll be on the New Diet soon enough, Harris,” he said.

“Okay,” said Xander. “And hey, maybe someone can teach me to garden.”

Spike raised an eyebrow.
“What? Are we the leisure class or something? Okay, listen...” Xander scooched closer to Spike where they sat cross-legged on the bed. “How do you say, uh, you are very pretty?”

Spike snorted. “I ain’t helpin’ you seduce the native virgins, mate. Yer on yer own there.”

“Don’t want a virgin, Spike,” said Xander, laughing. “Too much work. Just lead me to the local hostelry.”

“Just a note, pe... Harris,” said Spike. “Taboo’s a bit strict nowadays.”

“Taboo?”

“Whole bunch of courtship rules.”

“Then you’ll have to teach them to me.”

Spike was silent.

“Oh come on, you don’t expect me to spend the rest of whatever the heck this is completely celibate, do you? Christ, I’m technically seventeen, Spike. I’m a walking hormone.”

“I don’t know the rules, pet.”

“Xander,” Spike said carefully, trying to think how to explain something that he himself did not understand. About need and pain so deep nothing could dig it out. About answering that need without question as if unable to say no...

“None of my business,” said Xander. There was a short, awkward silence.

“So,” said Xander. “You have any alcohol?”

Spike snorted.

“Porn?”

“Geezus, Harris.”

“Fuck, what kind of girly futuristic place is this anyway?” laughed Xander.

Spike smiled lazily. “Well, we do play somethin’ like poker,” he said, tipping a wicked squint up at Xander. “If you have anythin’ to wager.”
“Oh man, let’s just play for points, okay? C’mon, Spike!” He punched Spike’s arm again with a soft round fist. Pushing into the hard muscle just below his shoulder. Little puffs of energy burst across Spike’s arm with every tap. On the last one, he leaned into it as Xander pulled back. Saw something flicker in the boy’s eyes before he set his hand down beside him.

“Teach me,” said Xander. He licked his lips.

Spike was caught by the action. He found himself dwelling on the nervous twitch at the corner of Xander’s mouth. He looked back up into his eyes.

The tent flap billowed and Angel pushed inside. “Spike,” he said.

Xander’s heartbeat was suddenly the loudest thing in the room. He looked straight ahead at his own feet.

“Xander,” said Angel politely. Xander nodded without looking up. His heart hammered.

Spike felt suddenly unaccountably annoyed with Angel. He knew he was getting to the kid, but he had to twist it, didn’t he? He jumped up and stepped across Xander’s legs to stand between him and Angel. “What’s up, Angel?”
Angel blinked. He looked at what he could still see of Xander’s legs, looked back at Spike. His eyes narrowed. And there was that cat-that’s-got-the cream look on his face again, thought Spike irritably. “We have preparations still, Spike. Remember?”

Oh. Spike shrugged. “Right.” He looked down at the boy behind him who was still studying his feet. “Lesson’ll have ta wait, mate. Gotta do my chores.” He strode out pushing Angel ahead of him.

“Lessons?”

“Cards, ya old poof. Kid’s bored and who can blame him?”

Angel’s tent had been transformed in the past few hours into an armory. Across an ancient oiled cloth running the length of one side of the tent, an array of shining metal and old cast iron glowed. Spike picked up a battle-axe and swung it through the air in a swirling figure eight. It made a lovely sound like scissors. Angel had brought forward a large table on which were a polishing stone and various bottles. He picked up a short sword sitting beside it and drew it swiftly and expertly across the stone. Spike picked up a cloth, doused it with oil and applied it to the ax.
“So. We know when now?”

“Just after sunrise.”

“Great, we’ll be exhausted.”

“I’m sure that’s how they planned it. We’ll have to try to get some sleep.”

“I don’t understand it Angel. Bloody sun is nowhere to be seen, but the fecking demon still insists on frolickin’ all night.”

Angel shook his head and shrugged.

They worked away for some time. Angel explaining the strategy, such as it was. Any details he had been told. The general location of the latest outbreak. They were mostly silent, though, focused on the serious task of making their tools ready for war. Finally they rolled the arsenal back up in two separate cases. Set them at the back of the room. Spike dusted his hands symbolically. He was feeling strangely eager to get back and teach Harris cards.

“Well, if we’re all set then...” He turned to the door.

“Spike,” said Angel. “We should try to get some sleep.”
“Yeah, I know, Angel. I’ll try. Don’t expect much luck though...”

“I thought...” Angel sidled closer. He looked up at Spike almost shyly.

Spike inhaled. They were both hard. The blood they had consumed, the impending battle, and of course just being vampires. Normally he would have been relieved and a little pleased to have Angel approach him so overtly. No accidental fumble, seeming almost unconscious groping and forcing with no eye contact. Angel was actually looking at him. Smiling and stepping slowly towards him in what would pass, in the old man’s head probably, as a flirtatious manner.

But Spike wanted to teach cards to Xander. He took a step back. “Thanks, Angel, guess I just wanna...”

Angel stopped. “Oh,” he said, his eyes widened and his gaze dropped to the floor. Like a man who had been caught in a giant social gaffe. “I’m sorry.”

“Heh, don’t be sorry Angel,” said Spike, suddenly feeling badly again for Angel’s awkwardness, his embarrassing neediness. He walked up and patted him on the arm. And when Angel’s hand slid up and shyly grasped his arm
back, he didn’t pull away. “I guess I’m still on edge,” said Spike.

Angel’s other hand came up swiftly and caught Spike around the waist. He pulled gently, bumping himself against Spike. His eyes still lowered he increased the pressure, pulled Spike against him harder. Very, very hard, thought Spike, wriggling. Then Angel bent over Spike’s face, and raised his eyes, inches from Spike’s and intense. “I can take the edge off for you…” he suggested.

Spike laughed and pulled and found that Angel had him held tight. “Heh, bet you could,” he said, his resolve weakening. Angel leant forward, his lips inches from Spike’s mouth. Spike found himself leaning into the contact.

“Okay,” he said quickly. “But keep it down, right? The brat’s just next door.”

Angel chuckled and tumbled them both to the palette bed easily. Their combined weight made a loud rumble and crash and Spike winced. “Quiet! Sheesh. Poor kid.”

“Since when,” Angel bit hard on Spike’s shoulder and smiled when he elicited a harsh cry, “do you care,” he pulled the ties loose from Spike shirt, morphed and ran a
sharp talon down Spike’s chest, grinned when this caused another yelp, “what Xander Harris thinks.”

His head came down and began working the skin of Spike’s neck,. His torso covered Spike’s and his hips writhed against the other man’s in a sinuous pressure. Spike moaned.

“I thought you hated him, Spike,” said Angel.

“I do,” whispered Spike, amazed to be talking during sex with Angel. “But ...” he groaned and Angel laughed and did it again.

“Take off your pants, will you,” Angel was sitting up, stripping off his own shirt.

“Angel, just keep it down,” Spike pleaded, tossing his pants to the floor.

Angel grinned down at him. “God, Spike you look so hot,” he said in a clear, loud voice.

Spike froze. “Fuck you, Angel.”

“C’mon, Spike,” Angel’s hands came down and fondled Spike’s balls gently, squeezed his cock. “I’m just kidding around,” he murmured, lowering his head.
Spike arched into the contact, biting his lips against the moans he would normally be voicing. His hands ran over the smooth, cool skin of Angel’s shoulder, neck, surprised at how cold his skin suddenly felt, how strangely dead.

A cold tongue wiggled its way over his balls and Spike giggled as Angel pushed his legs slowly up to his own shoulders.

“Something funny?” breathed Angel against his skin, that cold tongue lapping at his perineum, circling his hole.

Spike wriggled and giggled again. “Heh, gah, Angel you’re so cold,” he whispered.

Angel stopped moving, and the grip on Spike’s thighs increased uncomfortably. “I’m no colder than you, Spike,” he said stiffly.

Spike looked up into the eyes that had gone blank. The face stiff and guarded. “Christ, Angel, I’m just ticklish tonight. All that blood, you know.” He wiggled and whispered very low. “Cmon, do it, Angel.”

Angel’s expression didn’t relax. He continued to stare down at Spike with that rigid dark face as he lined his cock up against Spike’s prepared hole and pushed.

Spike grit his teeth against sound and pushed back.
“Ohh,” moaned Angel a bit loudly. He shoved in.

Spike gasped, reached to stroke himself. “Yeah, God, quiet, Angel.”

“Ooooh,” moaned Angel even louder, his tempo increasing.

Spike slapped at him and laughed, “Hush, you giant wanker, he’ll hear...”

“Oh God, Spike, you’re so tight. Oh. God. Oh. God,” yelled Angel as he slammed into him.

Spike twisted and tried to push away, but the sensation was too much and his balls were tightening and his hand flew on his erection as Angel continued to fuck him now, screaming out endearments, descriptions, curses.

“Come for me,” yelled Angel. And Spike arched and cursed and did.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike waited a long time outside his own tent for the tempo of Xander’s heartbeat to die down. It seemed the young man would be awake all night, though, so finally Spike pushed into the tent, head down, jaw clenched and
made his way to the stove without looking in the direction of the cot. He stood staring at the stove.

“We’re out of water,” said a low voice from the corner that held the cot.

“Sorry,” said Spike without turning. “I’ll get some more in the morning.”

“Okay.”

After several minutes of silence during which Spike took a great deal more care than usual with the fire and the folding of his clothes, he turned enough so that he could glance in Xander’s general direction.

The boy lay on the cot, back to the room, several blankets piled so high on top of him, that Spike could just see the top of the back of his head. Spike could hear his heart beating very fast.

“I’m ... sorry, Harris,” said Spike finally.

The dark hair didn’t move. “For what,” the voice said from under its heap of blankets.

“Maybe I can get you a tent further away from us. Not so...” he drifted off.
“I think they could hear you on the Moon, Spike,” said the blankets.

Spike felt miserable inside. He noticed it and realized he had felt it for some time, and wondered how long that feeling had been there without him having known it. He poked at the miserable-ness experimentally and found that it was much larger than he had thought. Those mysterious tears rose and tried to push from his eyes again and he stomped confusedly around, laying down the huge polyfill bag that he had been sleeping in during Xander’s illness, throwing pillows down, plopping himself harshly in the middle of his little nest and tearing the tie angrily from his hair. Tossing his head about on the mattress had caused a snarl in it and it tore a little as he pulled. He found he liked the feeling and yanked again, hard. Now the tears that stung in his eyes had a reason. He sniffed.

The blankets heaved upwards and moved as Xander rolled over. Spike blinked rapidly.

“You know, you don’t have to sleep on the floor.” Xander’s voice was muffled by the blankets. One eye peeked out.

“You’re still sick, you need the bed.”
“It’s big enough for two,” Xander pointed out reasonably. “I heard ... I heard Angel say you need sleep. I don’t want you to be tired because of me.”

Spike sat and gazed at the one eye peeking out from beneath the blankets and tried to organize the slew of questions that Xander’s last two statements had engendered. “You heard that?” he said finally. Thinking how low Angel’s voice had been when he had said that. Thinking what else had been said at that volume.

“You guys are two feet away from me with nothing between us but a polyester sheet, Spike. I could hear Angel’s brain trying to work.”

Spike was silenced completely. “I thought you hated Harris?” “I do...”

The miserableness seemed to have condensed into a cloud in his chest. It felt like Xander did when he breathed, stuffy and phlegmy. No wonder it made his eyes wet. The one brown eye blinked at him and then, unbelievably, turned up at the corner with a sparkle. The blankets lifted, revealing a fully clothed Xander Harris, with a smile that flashed across the room and smote the miserableness like a bolt from Neptune. “You coming to bed?” asked Xander, grinning.
Spike scrambled towards the bed. Xander rolled onto his back, wriggled his arms up behind his head as Spike settled in, blankets firmly packed down between them.

“Oooohhh,” moaned Xander loudly. He snickered.

Spike hissed. He propped himself up on his elbows and stared into those evil black eyes with delight.

“Ooohhh, baby!” yelled Xander, grinning at Spike. He quirked the eyebrow of challenge. “Aaaaahhhhh,” wailed Spike in a voice that would have frightened a banshee. “Peeeett!”

“I told you I’d kill you if you called me that again, Spike,” hissed Xander, punching him once, hard, in a well-blanketed ribcage.

“Oh God, Xander, you’re killing me,” howled Spike and they both collapsed into giggles.

“Ah!” Xander worked one leg free from the blankets and kicked at the tent wall fiercely, until it billowed and flapped. “Ah, ah, harder!”

“All right, you’ve made your point,” came Angel’s surly voice from the other side of the wall. “Now can we all just try to get some sleep?”
The rising sun woke Spike. He wasn’t sure how it happened but every morning and evening, like the World Clock at Greenwich, Spike’s internal alarm went off and told him that the world indeed had turned on its axis and exposed or hidden the constant sun.

Normally, though, sun exposure meant sleep. He wriggled further into the hot nest and pressed his nose into the warm pillow before he remembered that today, sunrise meant battle. He growled and banged his face in protest against the pillow.

“Ow,” said a voice about six inches from his ear. “Your nose is pointy.”

Every nerve in Spike’s body flicked on as if he were a string of lights. “Huh,” he said into what he now realized was the poly of Xander’s shirt and the warm, musky muscle of Xander’s shoulder. His awareness flew down his body, checking each point in the series as if he were a Vegas sign. Where were his hands, he thought crazily, and his legs? Calmly he drew his palms, which seemed safely full of material and nothing else, towards his own body. One knee, he could tell by how cold it was, was pressed into the mattress. The other knee; Spike rocked slightly backwards and felt his kneecap hit something
hard, like bone. His other knee was wedged between Harris’ legs. He froze.

“Rrhaaaaerrrr,” yawned Xander hugely, stretching his arms over his head and shaking his legs free of Spike. He appeared not to notice his companion desperately scrambling away from him and off the bed. Xander sat up in the dark, rubbing the hair back and forth on the top of his head and smacking his gummy lips. “Cold. Thirsty. Gotta pee. Wow, it’s like perpetual camping isn’t it?” He rolled and slid sideways to the floor, found his feet and stood swaying and scratching. “Used to like camping a lot, took James and …” Xander stopped as if struck.

Spike was lighting the fire. “Yer shoes are by the door, Harris,” he said helpfully. He turned and saw Xander standing in an apparent daze in the middle of the floor. “Go on, go on, go do yer disgustin’ human functions and I’ll get the place warmed up for you.” He waited a second. “Harris?”

Xander sat down hard again on the palette bed. “James.”

“Huh?”

“My son.”

“Ah.” Spike didn’t know what to do. Angel had spoken about Connor, of course. At length. And Spike had
watched humans and their children for centuries now. He understood the significance of the relationship. But he couldn’t feel it. He may have once, in that other time before he was turned, had vague romanticized thoughts about fatherhood, but those memories had entirely faded. And he had never had a creation of his own body to protect and nurture. So he just didn’t feel it.

“I guess,” said Xander slowly, “of course you think they will go on after you and of course he did…” He exhaled in an almost laugh. “Except somehow it doesn’t seem like it, since I’m here. And he isn’t.”

Spike wished he could think of something to say.

“I wonder how he... Oh. Fuck.” Xander sat, hands clasped between knees, head bowed.

“Harris?” Spike approached him slowly.

“I’m okay, Spike,” said Xander, head still bowed. He sighed. “Just... just give me a minute to adjust, alright?”

Spike nodded and watched the mortal steering around this new emotional orange cone. The fire was cranking up in the stove and he slipped on a mitt and tried to close the door silently.
“He was a good kid,” said Xander after a while. He still gazed at a place off in space. “He was gonna be a great dad. My grandson...” He stilled and Spike watched as the vehicle took out the next cone and skidded to a stop.

Xander flailed in the dark. Yes, he was seated solidly on a hard palette, his fingers wrapped around the edges, gripping, his feet planted on the cold floor, but he felt himself like a spectral sheet suspended in space, jerking madly at each corner.

And then the arms were around him, silky, cool, vampire arms again. And the memory of their comfort turned him thoughtlessly into the embrace.

“There, there,” said Spike, awkwardly patting Xander’s back with the flat of his hand. Xander clung to him, his whole body stiff as if caught in a permanent gasp. He shuddered all over, then stiffened again. Shuddered all over. Spike hugged him harder, patted. What did one do with them when they came apart like this? He had never known.

He wished that, when the Powers delivered them, they would slip in a little envelope of instructions. The Care and Use of Humans or some such. He patted and was relieved when the shuddering became more constant and he once again smelled the tears. Xander rolled his
cheek against his shoulder and Spike lay his head instinctively against the side of Xander’s, still murmuring ‘there, there’ and patting.

Time in the tent melted into nothing. Xander’s sobs eventually abated, but he still lay against Spike’s shoulder. Spike stopped patting or even speaking, kept rocking, and occasionally still squeezing the now relaxing body. Rolling his cheek against the warm silky hair, he turned his mouth into it, slid down.

It was instinctive. Spike was in comfort mode. Holding a body. Suddenly soft wet lips so near his mouth. He merely pressed his lips chastely to them and Xander shot straight up in the air, legs and arms and a well-aimed foot catching Spike hard in the shin.

“Hey,” yelped Spike, as Xander’s fist clipped his chin. He grabbed the offending fist, held it fast. “Hey!” snatching Xander’s other fist from the air as it arced towards him. “What the fuck, mate?”

“You kissed me!”

“I did not!” Spike stared. Blinked. Remembered lips. “Not really,” he amended. He noticed he was still gripping both Xander’s wrists as the furious human attempted to both pull free and kick him in the crotch. He shoved him
away. Pointedly wiped his lips with his sleeve. “That wasn’t a kiss, you idiot.”

“Your lips were on my mouth!” Xander said, still bouncing with agitation. Pointing at the offending lips.

Spike made a derisive noise. “Not a kiss.”

“Lips and mouth, Spike,” yelled Xander, dancing about.

Spike stilled. “Not,” he said. He considered Xander for a minute, strode forward, grabbed his arms again.

“And not...not...” Xander pulled at him, tried that trick with his knee again, but Spike merely took advantage of his superior strength, clasped the helpless boy firmly against him, wrapped the fingers of his other hand around the back of Xander’s neck, pulled his face forward and kissed him, soundly, wetly, and with as much tongue as he could. Then jumped back, grinning.

“That was a kiss, whelp,” said Spike, bouncing on his toes, grinning at the staring boy. He puckered his lips at Xander. And smooched the air. “Wanna ‘nother?” he teased.

Xander’s eyes widened further, then narrowed to slits of black, he advanced on Spike, pointedly brushed right past
him, swooped sideways to grab his shoes and pushed violently out through the tent door.

Spike danced on his toes, still grinning. He touched his mouth, and stilled. His brows lowered. Angel came marching into the tent, looking off to his left as he came in. “What’s with him, now?” He took in Spike in one sweeping look. “You’re not ready.”

“Had ta sort out the brat,” said Spike, dropping his fingers from his mouth and looking thoughtful.

Angel sighed. “Get your gear, Spike. We still have to take Xander down to the village and we’re running late.”

Spike snatched up his shirt and began dressing hurriedly. “Down to the village?”

“He can’t stay here alone. And in case... well, he needs something.”

In case we don’t come back. In case the demons attack and there is no defense available. At least the kid wouldn’t die alone. Spike nodded solemnly. “Yeah, in case he needs somethin’.” He grabbed the weapons harness Angel had carried in for him, slung it over his shoulders and cinched it tight. Strode over to the tent flap, flung it open. “Harris!” he bellowed into the chill, wet air.
“How do you say, ‘thank you’ again?” Xander trotted behind Spike and Angel down the path. He was desperately combing his fingers through his matted, stringy hair. Tucking in his shirt and repeating the phrases to himself.

“I told ya, whelp, ‘Denke’.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Denke, Dia Dao, Blumenta,” Xander enumerated to himself. “Er, blumenta or blumeen?” He caught up closer to Spike. “Which was it, Spike?”

“I suggest hand signals,” Angel put in dryly. “Easier to remember.”

Xander trotted behind them for a few minutes, sulking. Then, “Okay, except, how do you say ‘I gotta use the facilities’?” And at Spike’s amused and questioning look, “Well, I don’t want to have to use hand signals for that!”

Angel had stopped, now, outside a residence just next to the town gates. “Dahla knows a bit of Ancient English,” he said. “Her accent may sound odd, but I’m sure you’ll be able to indicate your basic needs.”
“Dahla?” Xander jittered nervously, as Angel knocked on the plate of fiberglass like material that appeared to be the door.

“She’s the doctor I told you about, Xan,” said Spike. He looked around the village. Curious eyes were peeking out here and there. The kid was in for a major group groping while they were gone. “Just remember the taboos,” he couldn’t resist it. Xander looked so completely flummoxed and Spike was still twisting a bit that the kid was so angry about his little slip. “Don’t kiss anybody.” He stuck his tongue between his teeth and grinned at Xander wickedly.

Xander didn’t appear to take the bait. He looked at Spike with some solemnity. Those tactile eyes of his stepped over Spike’s face thoughtfully. He opened his mouth. But Spike never heard what Xander had been about to say because the door swung open and the doctor was standing there. Xander turned. “Oh,” he breathed. “Dia Dao,” he said.

Great green eyes, long black lashes, a tiny woman with very, very white skin, like the stem of one of those plants that grows on the floor of a deep forest. Her thick black hair plaited in complex braids and beads all over her head. A very thin complicated swirling tattoo traveled
from just behind one ear, down her neck, disappearing beneath the neckline of a glittering white polyester silk top. “*welcome*” she said.

Dahla had eyes like Xander’s, seeming almost to touch the things they rested on, but hers were filled with a kind of wisdom. One saw the thought following the touch. And the thought always seemed to lead to sadness. Her eyes took in Xander as his took in her and she smiled gently. Stepped back for them to enter.

Angel, apparently, did not need an invitation. Xander followed in a trance. Spike hung outside, leaning in the doorway, hands in pockets. He had been inside the doctor’s house many times but he suddenly felt disinclined to enter. A mysterious irritability and eagerness to move suffused him. “Hurry up, now, Angel,” he said.

Dahla bent to pull a chair closer to the fire and Xander leapt to help her. Spike twisted his face away and looked up and down the street again. “It’s gettin’ late,” he announced to the room behind him.

He heard Angel coming back towards the door, pushed off and headed down the path without looking back. Dahla and Angel exchanging the farewell words and then Xander’s voice.
“Spike!”

Spike turned, eyebrows arched in affected surprise. The boy was leaning out the doorway, hair falling into his face. He raised a palm to his mouth, kissed it and blew the kiss, dark eyes dancing, in Spike’s direction. “Good luck,” called Xander, waving his fingers in an effeminate manner. He rested against the doorjamb and folded his arms across his chest. His face became ineffably solemn. “Come back soon,” he said.

Spike grinned, nodded, turned, hopped forward a little on the path, and settled his pack firmly again to the center of his back. He found himself still grinning and shook his head as Angel fell into step beside him. “Idiot boy,” he said.

Angel smiled to himself.

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Xander had seen a painting once of The Lady of Shalott. A tragic Arthurian heroine, Willow had explained, who died of love for Lancelot. In the picture, she lay in white damask in a boat, her blond hair trailing, with her hand in the water as she drifted down a river. Her face was very
pale and very sad. She was actually an elfin queen in the older stories, Willow had told him. A faeirie who died because she had dared to love a mortal.

Dahla reminded Xander of the lady of Shalott. She wasn’t blonde, but she was pale and fragile. The long white dress was clinging and shiny, not rich damask, but it wrapped around her elegantly and the sleeves draped over the arms of the bizarre, carved stone chair she sat in, like a medieval lady’s sleeves.

Xander thought he should be sitting at her feet playing a lute. It made him, therefore, feel twice as clumsy and stupid. Dahla indicated an earthen looking stool and Xander perched on it, hands clasped uncomfortably between his knees. She sat back and regarded him. He smiled nervously, looking round the room.

The light in the room was a cool blue, as if from a fluorescent bulb. It shone on walls hung with a gauzy material, covered in patterns of color. A low row of shelves along one wall held very delicate looking vases and bowls. There were no photographs, no paintings or pictures. No books that he could see. Dahla rose and lifted one vase from the shelf, she rotated it gently with one hand and poured the contents into the palm of her hand. Small, pearly beads. She lifted a bowl and placed
the beads into it. Smoke whispered up, and the air was filled with the scent of vanilla.


They sat there for some time. The scent made Xander think of his grandmother’s kitchen. An easy, uncomplicated feeling seeped into him.

After a while Dahla stood again and approached him. One slim hand reached out and gently touched the raw vampire bite on his throat. Xander flamed red and looked away. But Dahla captured his chin in her hand and turned his face back. She pulled at the collar of her dress, turning her head strangely until Xander looked closely and saw the telltale white scar.

“Oh,” he said. The hand on his face was warm, Dahla was breathing. Not a vampire then. “You were attacked?” She looked at him quizzically. He frowned thinking. Made a growly face with bared teeth and claws. Then indicated her throat again.

Her eyes rested on him in wonder, then she laughed. A silvery bell-like laugh. She shook her head. “Naya,” she said, still laughing. “Es Angela,” she smiled. Pressed both
hands to her heart. “Angela,” she said in that musical voice.

*Oh, you have got to be kidding me,* thought Xander.

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“D’ya think the whelp will be alright?” Spike mulled out loud.

He and Angel had reached the thickest part of the wood and were slowly pulling apart the wet black branches that blocked their path. The trees were so damp, that their branches felt like roots, clinging and sticky. Spike swiped his hands distastefully across his trousers for the hundredth time.

“Those people will seem so strange to him, you don’t think he’ll do a runner again, do ya?”

“Dahla will make sure he stays calm,” said Angel distractedly, tearing two small branches free of each other.

“What?” Spike straightened and looked hard at Angel. “She gonna do one of those elven magics on him, ‘cuz I don’t think he’ll appreciate that much.”
“Dahla isn’t elven,” said Angel automatically.

“What you say, but I can’t help but wonder,” muttered Spike. A branch had wrapped itself around his trousered calf. It stuck as if it were attached by tiny tentacles. He stopped and bent to work it free.

Angel waited patiently for him. “I’d know if she were not human,” he said in a sad voice.

Spike shook his head in exasperation, still plucking away at the sticky branchlet. “Just ‘cuz they taste human doesn’t make it so, Angel. I still think it’s a mite odd them showing up like they did. This one little group of humans.”

“I’m telling you, Spike, I’d know.”

Spike straightened and studied his hand just to avoid meeting Angel’s eye. There were subjects that the years had taught them to avoid. He shrugged, dropping it, and pushed forward.

“What do you care what Dahla does to Harris, anyway?” Angel pushed along beside him, trampling the branches down with his feet. “Personally, I’m rather enjoying seeing Xander Harris out of his depth.”
“Bet you are,” said Spike. He tore loose a branch and tossed it to the ground, close enough to Angel that it bounced and landed on his foot. “Bet you enjoyed it…” he stopped, a wave of anger surprising him. He turned slowly, there in the damp muggy wood, and faced Angel in a confrontational posture he hadn’t assumed in over a hundred years.

Even after the last apocalypse, finding themselves possibly alone together in the remains of a world of ash and darkness, Spike and Angel had still had their rivalry, their long-standing jealousy. So many issues; the lost shanshu, love, revenge.

Where had they been? That last day of the earth? Ireland, Spike thought vaguely. He believed they had been in Ireland. He remembered as through a veil of impressions, like a patient coming out of the anesthesia, standing on a burial mound glaring down at Angel’s dark wet head, the older vampire howling with grief. And Spike just wishing to pick up the great cap stone and throw it down onto the suffering hero. Just to finally shut him up.

And of course it had been Spike, who took the first steps towards reconciliation. Angel was too far gone, too buried in that place he hid when suffering. Spike, loud
and demonstrative and shouting into the teeth of the storm, broke through the pain and found himself shoulder to shoulder with a broken hero.

He looked at the remains of that hero now. Standing in the lowering dusk of, perhaps, the last days of mankind. Angel was speaking to himself in Italian again, quoting that weird old poet of his. “You thirsted after blood; with blood I fill you,” Angel said a bit louder. He turned back towards Spike and he had a touch of the vision madness in his eyes.

Sometimes, thought Spike irritably, he thought Angel knew exactly how his weakness affected Spike. How it dissuaded Spike from disagreeing with him or resisting his wants. He narrowed his eyes. “Angel, you know what that did to him? He was ready to...” Spike paused. Perhaps Angel was only confused, or perhaps he was truly enjoying his little game with Xander, but Spike suddenly felt disinclined to tell Angel how violently his bite had affected Harris. His anger dissipated like smoke. “Just leave him alone now, Angel,” he finished lamely.

“What?” Angel straightened a bit. “Maybe, next time, he should come to you.” Spike felt the unfamiliar anger surge up again.
“What are you talking about? What... what are we sharing him like some...” Blank desire, overwhelming in its power, washed through Spike’s brain at the thought of biting Harris. He shook physically as if he could shake off the confusion this caused as well. He stomped and glared at Angel. “Next time?” a flurry of thoughts, emotions, a reaction that if it had stood alone and slowed down Spike would have recognized as jealousy. “No! No more of that Angel. It was a mistake. It’s not.. not what he’s here for.”

“We don’t know what he’s here for,” pointed out Angel, suddenly reasonable. He turned, pushing down the last of the obstructing branches, and looked out over the dark plain that now was spread before them. Spike distastefully tossed aside the remaining clinging branches and stepped up beside Angel, scoping out their pending battlefield.

"Con tanta sospeccion fa irmi novella visaon ch'a sé mi piega, sì ch'io non posso dal pensar partirmi." said Angel, sounding so lost and alone that Spike instinctively put a hand on his shoulder. *1

Across a damp, Moorish plain, bits of mossy green pricking out highlights on the dark mud, the unnatural
glow of the demon camp reached towards their vantage point.

Across the sky, the grayish turbulent undersides of clouds could be seen rolling and boiling as the puny light of the rising sun temporarily spread from the horizon. Spike and Angel stepped back unhurriedly behind the trees as the light surged weakly once in the sky, then winked out.

Across the field, movement around the various small structures. In the brief death of sunrise, Angel and Spike had been able to see a cliff’s edge somewhat beyond the demons’ camp. Now long bolts of sunlight, almost white in their purity, could be seen poking through the masses of clouds that hung over the valley beyond.

“Fingers of God,” whispered Angel.

“Holy Shit,” said Spike reverently.

“Yes, pretty much. Dahla told me about them.”

“Dahla did?” Spike glanced sideways at his Sire, opened his mouth with the immediate question. Closed it. Saw in his mind’s eye Xander’s besotted face as he followed the small woman into her house. Felt a surge of the new blood rise uncharacteristically to his cheeks. “So you and her still havin’ those private meetings?” he growled, switching his gaze to the sodden ground.
“Dahla and I are in love,” said Angel pompously to the person with whom he regularly had sex.

“Right.” Spike ground his teeth and looked across the field, a great weariness settling in his chest. He watched the activities afield for a scant moment and was distracted once again from his personal issues

“’s that fire they have there?”

“Doesn’t seem to be,” said Angel uneasily.

“Don’t fancy trying out any demonic sunlight, Angel.”

Angel didn’t answer, he pulled the ultraviolet deterrent hood of his shirt up over his head. Spike did the same. Then slouched unhappily. “Powers didn’t say nothin’ about this?”

“No.” Angel began finding his way stealthily around the periphery of the forest, edging towards the encampment. “And I’m sure I would have been told if there was immediate danger.”

“Right,” said Spike. “Same time they told you why we need to bring these humans here. Same time they told you what the fuck...” He stopped, stared intently at the encampment once more. “They’re movin’ about Angel. I think it’s started.”
Angel raised his hand in an imperious demand for silence, and stopped, listening.

Spike mumbled one more quiet protestation, as a matter of form. He wouldn’t have been able to say when it had become clear that Angel was the Captain and leader of their little centuries’ long adventure in world saving, and Spike his first mate. Or when he had begun to acquiesce so easily to many of Angel’s decisions. But he felt protest necessary on occasion, just to be clear. This was a choice for him, he didn’t have to do this.

Angel looked back over his shoulder. His eyes beneath the crackling, metallic hood were alert. He waved a hand expressively, with an odd twist of the fingers that was part of the silent code he and Spike had developed.

“You go that way, I’ll come around the rear,” said Angel’s fingers. Spike looked in the direction in which he was being sent. The weird light was spanning back and forth across the ground there, occasionally lifting to reach in an arcing, all-encompassing flare illuminating an expanse of the forest beyond. He shook his head vigorously.

“Bugger off,” said his fingers very clearly. It was an old symbol and one they hadn’t needed to invent.
Angel dropped his arm and glared his irritation at Spike. Spike folded his arms and glared back his determination at Angel.

“So what do you think we should do?” said Angel’s fingers with an exasperated snappishness to them.

Angel had been watching the camp muster as they had been speaking and was already moving off towards the left, pulling a bizarrely rigged crossbow from the pack across his back. Spike followed him.

The light that the demons trained across the field was apparently not ultraviolet in nature, as several noticeably vampiric soldiers could be seen standing directly in front of a huge spot, conversing and pointing at the brackish forest beyond.

Spike thought it might be nice, if they survived, to bring one of those spotlights back to Xander. Let him figure out how it worked, maybe.

He fell in behind Angel as the elder vampire circled carefully behind the camp and slipped below the rim of the cliff behind. A large and very alert guard snapped to a straighter stance and whirled to face them, but Angel took him out with a swift punch before he could raise a cry. Spike slid ahead of him and broke open the skulls of
two additional sentries even as they had just registered the odd sound of feet scrabbling behind them. He and Angel quickly shoved the unconscious demons over the cliff and looked about them. There seemed no other rear guard.

Creeping very very quietly up to the edge of a steep path, and peering towards the back of the camp, they utilized their sign language again to discuss the battle plan.

“They are going to go up the right face,” commented Angel, waving towards a small group gathering gear to the right of the camp. From their vantage point they could see the tall cliffs that led to the beginning of the human’s realm. It was steep clay and coal and difficult to climb, especially if defended from above, so there was undoubtedly a plan to dispense with the early warning sentries. What the demons didn’t know was that the Powers that Be had already warned them and that the sentries crouched behind their camp, watching their movements.

“We should let them go, finish them last,” signed Angel.

Spike waved his fingers to indicate disagreement. “If it takes us too long, they’ll head straight for the town.”

“Dahla has prepared the village,” said Angel calmly.
Spike watched the small group as they shared out rope and grappling hooks. A group of about thirty or more, consisting of vampires and Vespat demons. The Vespat demons were eight foot tall, at the shortest, heavily muscled, with skin like thick rubber tires. “There must be another way,” his fingers pleaded.

“We’ll just have to be quick,” signed Angel with that dispassionate expression of his.

Spike set his jaw, adjusted his pack and checked the crossbow he carried. “Okay then,” he signed at Angel. “Let’s go for it then.”

They waited, as only creatures who have lived centuries can. Unmoving, crouched in the silting gray darkness, until the group across the field had risen on the cliff to the side that was out of site of the camp.

Spike imagined that the group had some sort of signal they would dispense when their objective had been reached. He figured that the camp would muster and move out when the signal went off.

He signed this opinion to Angel who nodded. If they waited until then, they would have a better chance of taking the disorganized and stretched apart demons out one at a time. But that would close the window of time
between their attack and their ability to rush behind the fore guard and destroy them before they approached the village.

“We’ll wait,” signed Angel finally. Spike nodded unhappily. It was the best plan. He found that Xander’s face as he leant out the doorway, solemnly bidding him goodbye, rose in his mind’s eye. It made him feel a kind of base level anger and determination. Something he could dig his toes into and propel himself forward from. It gave him a reason to fight these bastards. He bounced infinitesimally on the balls of his feet. Lack of circulation was a blessing when one had to crouch unmoving in the cold for this long. Angel glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. Spike had that battle glow in his eye, that eager hunger flickering over his face. It was something he hadn’t seen in the other vampire for many years. He wondered what had engendered it.

Finally, the camp disassembled, the troops milling, a comet of the same nature as the spotlights flew through the air. The camp immediately jumped alive and spread across the field before them, heading for the far cliffs.

Angel and Spike sprang to their feet and ran to the left and the right, crossbows firing into the center of the camp.
They had counted on the confusion that their attack would cause. And it worked. Spike had counted at least twenty fallen demons, before their companions began to register an attack. He had reloaded the machine-gun like band of bolts into his weapon and shot another twenty before any kind of rallying cry was heard in the camp. To his right, an answering shout and he glanced that way long enough to see that Angel had cut a swath between the dispersed troops and those still remaining encamped. He was plowing his way though those demons. Obviously those that remained were meant for Spike. The counter in Spike’s head told him the odds were about fifty to one. That he had another four rounds of bolts wrapped around his shoulders. That the fifty now armed and screaming as they attacked demons did not look at all happy.

He shot off the last round into the approaching throng. Took out another ten. Turned and ran, spun, ran back and shot right past the front line of attack, pulling his double headed axe out as he ran. He spun about again and began attacking from the center of the group.

Angel and Spike were the oldest demons still walking the earth. And it did seem there was a certain magic to aging amongst vampires. Or maybe it was just the weakening of the blood that the newer vamps took. Spike had the
advantage of strength and speed over the other vamps and was quite able to destroy them with little effort.

Those that survived the initial onslaught withdrew quickly and headed for a tent. The counter in Spike’s mind told him to watch out for crossbolts in about two minutes. That gave him two minutes to take out the remaining twenty or so Vespat demons.

He whirled and sliced, running and turning back, using his smaller, more agile and faster body to confuse them as he darted forward and back delivering what he hoped were lethal blows with the whistling battle axe.

Distantly he heard demons screaming. The sound was filled with pain and rage. He couldn’t spare a second to glance in Angel’s direction, but he knew that if he heard a shout of victory, he would be alone in this battle.

Sudden vicious pain ripped up his left leg and pierced his abdomen and chest. He looked down as he fell and saw the row of crossbolts there. He forced himself beyond the pain, a skill he had honed over centuries, and rolled as his traitor leg would not hold his weight.

He forced himself to his feet, the short sword from his belt now in his hand, holding the encroaching eight remaining Vespat demons at bay. He spared the time to
look around desperately for the position of the owner of the crossbow. Happily, wood was so scarce that bolts were not plentiful and the shooter would most likely find a better position before he shot again, to save precious ammunition.

But, surrounded by unfamiliar structures, and feeling quite assuredly herded in a particular direction by the surrounding enemy, he imagined the shooter would be in an optimum position very shortly. He used a mental technique Angel had taught him. Controlled the muscles in his injured leg fiercely, crouched and sprang over the encircling demons, hit the ground, rolled and found cover behind a polyester and tubing type structure.

The anger and dismay in the voices that followed told him the surprised demons had not seen where he had gone.

More silent than air, his feet ran the circumference of the structure he hid behind. He peered out and saw the Vespat, and the small group of vampires, standing flummoxed. Their silhouettes clear in the glare of one of the spots. The odds were now about thirteen to one. He reached behind his right shoulder, dropped the crossbow into his left arm, released its safety and began firing with
a practiced, silent ease. The visible vampires fell while the Vespat demons whirled in shock.

But Spike had already run behind another structure. He quickly approached the spotlight. Its glare was blinding. Running up behind it, he fired his remaining ammunition into the light-blinded faces of the Vespat. Some of them were so thick skinned the bolts just bounced off. They stumbled blindly and bravely towards the spotlight. Spike took advantage of their light induced slowness, and drew two long knives from the belt across his chest. Each found its mark, buried deep in the throat of a Vespat demon. Six to one, said the now cocky counter in Spike’s mind. And he heard a crossbolt trigger engage behind him.

It was the sound Spike had always imagined would be the last one he ever heard. Oddly, though, he was still standing there thinking half a second after he heard it. He turned slowly and looked into the pleased face of the vampire that held the crossbow.

He and Angel were probably fairly famous, thought Spike oddly, waiting to become dust. The demon’s face was pleased and arrogant but also somewhat awed. He was about to destroy the famous whatever-the-heck they called Spike. It was a weird thought to have just before
being sent to Hell. And then, even more oddly, Spike saw once again Xander’s face. And he felt strangely sorry.

The arrogance in front of him burst into a shower of dust. The dust cascaded down to reveal a bloody, muddy Angel with an equally arrogant expression on his face, and a crossbow in his arms. Spike reflected that hubris seemed to be a standard in demons, whether they fought for the light or the dark. The two who fought for the light stood regarding one another for a minute, as silence settled around them.

Spike was very surprised to find himself glad to be alive. Or still undead. He grinned and smeared mud across his filthy face with his sleeved arm. “’Bout time, old man,” he said softly.

“Oh, I thought I’d watch for a while. See if you were getting any better at all this. Sadly, you are just as sloppy as ever, Spike.” Angel was grinning. Spike noted the thick blood oozing from his throat. He gestured.

“You up for the next phase?”

Angel felt at his wound. Shrugged and tore off a bit of sleeve with a claw. Tied it around his throat. Spike grinned. Angel now looked like the ghost of a man garroted for some crime.
Xander imagined he felt a bit like Dorothy might have in the Land of Oz. Dahla had led him to a larger building. Literally led, he might add, as he simply could not adjust to the absolute darkness in this place and had had to stumble behind her, gripping her small, cool hand.

As they entered the building, the light in the place almost blinded him. Squinting his bedazzled eyes he made out the group of small folk standing in utter silence gazing at him. He waved a hand. They gazed back. Dahla pronounced something weird in that rapid musical language of hers and the tiny pale folk bowed.

Xander stood flummoxed for a second, glanced at Dahla for guidance. Then bowed back. A murmur rippled through the little group. Xander glanced again at Dahla and saw her eyes tilted up with a kind of sad amusement.

One of the persons approached him and hesitantly held out a white hand. Xander looked down at him. He was taller than the rest, but still a bit smaller than Xander. His small boned, gaunt face and translucently white skin in stark contrast to the shining black hair that swung below his ears. His eyes were enormous and gray and very
serious. A tattoo similar to the one Dahla sported stood out in high relief from his jaw, swirling across his neck and dipping into the v-neck of the loose overblouse he wore. His grip was firm but very cold.

Xander squeezed back with as much friendliness as he could put into a handshake. He saw the strength of his grip register a kind of amusement in the expressive gray eyes, and loosened it somewhat with a shrug of apology.

“Berynn” pronounced the man, a tiny smile tipping the corner of his mouth. Xander bowed again, and saw the surprise in the man’s eyes. Maybe bowing was out, he thought, desperately wishing for the handbook. He glanced again at Dahla. She was still only watching him.

“Uh, Dia Dao?” he tried. And the man murmured the greeting back. A woman approached. She was so much like the man in coloring and body structure, she could have been his twin. She held her hand out also.

“Ta fal,” she said in a low sweet voice.

Xander took her hand and shook it as he had Berynn’s. Spike had said there were taboos. And he saw a difference in the manner of dress and hair, but he wasn’t sure that a distinction in manner of greeting for men and women would go down very well. Though the impulse to
bend knee and kiss the hands of these elegant and medieval looking women was overwhelming.

“Deahel,” he said, amazed that he could remember the words. “Kahd is am?”

“Pleetla,” said the woman, smiling, and Xander wondered at the perfection of her teeth. This thought led to wonder at the perfection of all of them. His eyes scanned the group of people as they surged infinitesimally towards him. Pasty skinned and gaunt, they nevertheless seemed almost exquisitely perfect. No scars, unsightly features, signs of illness.

They closed in on him, gray, blue and green eyes gazing up at him, hands reaching forward to shake his. Some lingering to touch his arm, and he saw their wonder and curiosity. He was the only one with brown eyes, he realized with a start. The only one with a tan, with barber styled hair, with no tattoos. His eyes sought and found Dahla once again.

She was watching him with an almost clinical expression. It made Xander suddenly cold and very aware that he was now hemmed in by these people. They reached towards him, like the aliens in the Spielberg movie had reached towards the human man, and led him gently
towards a long low table on which many bowls of the now familiar rolled tortilla like food were spread.

He sat down obediently. Discovered he was not at all hungry, though he had not yet eaten that day. Discovered a kind of clammy apprehension stirring in his belly. He looked around the room beyond the crowd of folk and saw that the walls of the room were lined with weapons.

Mostly crossbows, he noted, though a good share of short swords and axes. He saw no guns, no bow and arrows. He wondered what sort of things these people battled. He wondered a great many things in rapid order and looked around again for Dahla, who had disappeared. Berynn sat down next to him instead, a friendly hand on his shoulder. And Xander wondered idly about the taboos. And the proclivities of the men in this tribe. For some reason this thought led to the memory of Spike’s face, taunting and flashing with insult as Xander had pushed past him in the tent this morning.

Berynn put a plate of food before him and Xander regarded it with a kind of nausea. The ribbons of reaction and emotion over which he bravely stepped minute to minute, surged up in him and overwhelmed him again for a moment. He felt he was in mourning, in a way, for the
world and the life he had left behind. He had been dead, so it wasn’t as if he wouldn't have lost those things anyway, but he still felt bereft.

And the foreignness of the environment. That bleak sense of the age of man in decline. The utter hopeless feeling and the darkness. The isolation of being an alien in this. He rubbed his face uncomfortably and wished he could just go somewhere quiet for a few minutes where at least the foreign language, as beautiful as it was, wouldn’t be adding to the confusion in his chest.

Berynn had stood. He touched Xander’s shoulder and pointed meaningfully towards a small curtained door. Xander stared up at him, hoping this wasn’t a proposition, not really knowing what to do if it were. He shook his head, ‘no’. Beryinn frowned, looked frustrated, touched Xander’s shoulder again, then let his hand slide up to Xander’s neck. Xander flinched away.

“Hold on now, pal,” he said gruffly. And would have moved away completely except a sudden feeling of peace washed through him. He gazed into those huge gray eyes again. Saw something there without malice. And let himself be raised and led to the small room.

It was a little alcove. With a chair, a narrow palette, a table and not much else. Berynn led him inside. Placed
his bowl of food on the table and left with a swish of the
curtain. Xander heaved a huge, relieved sigh, sat down
on the palette, then let himself tip over to rest on his
side, staring at the curtained doorway for quite some
time.

He was feeling that syrupy shock that came and went.
Here he was in a completely unknown land, with people
whose names he had only just heard and already could
not remember; his closest connection to sense and
reality, two demons he had hated almost all of his mortal
life. And he was worried that they wouldn’t return.

He imagined himself adrift alone in this place of no light,
no warmth, no sense of history or self. He fought against
that nothingness with all the muscle of his will and his
heart, even as exhaustion took him and he closed his
eyes.

~***~***~

“James, you should lie down and rest.” Jennifer’s hand
passed across the back of his head in a familiar gesture.
Her fingers lifting and sliding through the thick, soft,
black hair. His father’s hair, thought James, his eyes
traveling over the freckled skin of his father’s scalp where hair had once grown.

Jennifer rested her hand over his where it lay in his father’s. “Honey…”

The monitors bipped weakly overhead, a metronome counting out the seconds of a man’s life. And yet they went on; long after the doctors had predicted, his father hung on. His mind most assuredly gone, his frail old body barely breathing, his father hung on. “He is the strongest man I ever knew,” said James.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander woke from his nap to find Dahla standing in the doorway watching him. Her sleek shiny gown wrapped against her slim body with something that looked like an ammunition belt. She held a cross bow in either hand.

“Kum,” she gestured. She hefted one of the crossbows towards Xander. He rose and took it, gazing at her questioningly. She waved him out of the alcove by way of answer. Outside, the people he had met that evening stood in the room now emptied of table, chairs and meal, they were armed, man and woman, to the teeth.
“Vampeer Kum,” said Dahla melodically. Xander felt another rush of the shock that was his constant companion. The vampires were coming? Did that mean, he felt a staggering blow inside and became dizzy enough that Dahla caught his arm in concern.

“Spike and Angel?” breathed Xander, desperately reading her face.

She smiled and shook her head, and he closed his eyes as the relief almost blinded him. But then he was being urged out the door. Feeling large and clumsy and incredibly conspicuous, he pounded behind the lithe shadowy people with whom he was apparently going to fight vampires.

Berynn, thank God thought Xander, appeared beside him suddenly. He pulled on Xander’s arm and Xander no longer cared what Berynn’s intentions were. They found cover behind some damp black fabric and hunkered down. Ostensibly watching the grove of weirdly elastic looking vegetation across a small clearing. As they crouched there, Berynn’s small agile fingers quickly pointed out the crossbow mechanisms to Xander. He handed Xander a long fabric pinned with rows of small well-used looking wood. Counted them, then held his ten
fingers up twice to Xander. Cocked a meaningful eyebrow and looked at him seriously.

“Ah, I get it,” said Xander. “I’ve got the twenty shots and then I’m dinner, huh?” He looked off towards the fibrous mud puddle that comprised the wood across from him. “Or worse,” he muttered. Berynn busily readied his weapon and Xander followed suit. When they were done, the villager reached beneath his shirt and drew forth a stake. He offered it to Xander, with some sense of ceremony. Xander took it from him slowly, studying his face. “Dahank,” he managed cautiously. He studied the stake. It was very old and heavy. Like solid oak. Its surface was cool and slippery. It was practically petrified with age. Some kind of family heirloom he imagined. He settled it carefully in the deep pocket sewn into the inside of his shirt. Hoping he wouldn’t get close enough to need it.

They were there for some time. Xander wondered again at the silence. No birds, crickets or overhead jets broke time into bits, gave a sense of its passing. His own heart beat seemed excessively loud and labored. The silence so profound that the push of air through the vegetation and buildings acquired a strange, almost musical sound to his ear. As if the air of earth were being blown through a large primitive flute. He wondered whose fingers pressed
the stops and ran his thumb nervously across the trigger of his crossbow.

Once the ear became attuned to the wind’s music, it was easy to hear the demon’s approach. Not noticeable in origin, the sound nevertheless didn’t belong there and as Xander became alert, he saw Berynn simultaneously slide into a ready posture. They pointed their crossbows at the space across the grove.

Xander’s first bolt was wasted. He had aimed directly at his target, not accounting for distance and air friction, and the bolt dropped uselessly to the muddy ground. He grit his teeth, mentally subtracted one from twenty, and raised his sight and calculated trajectory as he might when playing basketball.

This time the bolt found its way into the demon’s shoulder. A cry of pain and the eyes of the vampire sought and held Xander’s, marking his target and advancing towards him.

Xander took a deep breath, called forth the courage of ancient Sunnyhell and let fly another bolt. The demon stopped stunned and exploded in the air. Xander shakily lowered his weapon. He now noticed the horde advancing across the grove as a whole picture. The air thick with cross bolts and some very bizarre looking long
spear, thin ropes attached. Vampires exploded here and there and now a phalanage of young men, running as quickly as Olympic sprinters, surged onto the field, weaving harmlessly between the vampires. After a minute Xander realized they were retrieving fallen crossbolts.

One runner was caught by a quick demon, and Xander saw two bolts hit the body of the demon before a third apparently found its mark and the vampire burst to dust. Too late for the young villager, though. Another vampire had caught hold of him.

Some irrational rage surged in Xander and he leapt up, crossbow left on the ground and stake in hand and sprinted the few yards to the vampire, coming up on his left rear flank, he plunged the stake in. He hadn’t had the pleasure of feeling a vampire die by his own hand in some time. He paused a scant second to savor the rush.

He grabbed the stunned young man’s hand and dragged him back to the spot he and Berrynn occupied.

All around them chaos was exploding. A phalanage of about five vamps had managed to breach the village boundary and Xander heard one scream cut off. Berrynn dropped his crossbow and clutched his head and Xander stopped his shooting long enough to lean over his
companion, checking for injury. The man was staring, his pupils pinpricks, his face bright red. He was shaking all over.

“What? Where is it? Where are you hurt?” said Xander desperately feeling the man over for the location of his wound. The man shook and collapsed into his arms. As if having a seizure. There was no blood, no apparent injury. He lay the man carefully down and continued to defend their position as best he could. When he ran out of crossbolts, he took up Berynn’s gun and emptied it into the throng. When that was gone, he once more hefted the stake. He couldn’t carry the man and he couldn’t leave him here. So this was where he would have to make his stand, he thought, staring quickly around their surroundings, watching for encroaching vampires.

But the young man he had rescued, who had skittered away, was suddenly back. He lifted Berynn’s feet and gestured for Xander to grab his shoulder. Xander stuck the stake handily into the waistband of his pants and complied with relief. They dragged the still unconscious man into a tent. The other villager gestured to Xander that he was going to go off again and that Xander should remain with Berynn.
Feeling only a little bit safer, Xander nodded and took out his stake. Berynn was no longer crying in pain, now, but was still unconscious, his eyelids flinching and bulging with REM’s. Xander found a pile of clothing and blankets in the corner and piled them messily over the young man's slender body, under his head, trying to warm him. Then he crouched there, stake ready, trying to listen to the battle.

It was still mostly silent outside. The walls of the tent billowed and their sound practically overwhelmed the occasional screech of an enraged demon, the pounding of feet.

After what seemed an interminable time, even those sounds ceased. Xander braced himself in front of Berynn’s now apparently sleeping torso, when the tent door opened. But it was only one of the villagers. He dipped in something like a curtsey in Xander’s general direction, skirting him shyly, nodding his head and gesturing at Berynn. Xander moved away, allowing the boy to attend to his patient. He pushed his way out of the tent as the young man began lifting the blankets from Berynn.

All around, villagers hurried back and forth busily. There were no sign of demons. The dead, he supposed, would
have dusted. He allowed himself, once more, to wonder about his particular demons. The he heard a familiar voice.

“Harris,” bellowed Spike’s dulcet tones. “Where the bleedin’ hell have you got to?”

Xander scrabbled around a corner. Spike stood in the midst of a chaotic mass of villagers. A demon was bound between them and being led off. Spike stood, bloody, torn and leaning heavily on one leg, covered with mud, looking around the area in a state of high dungeon. “Why can’t anyone tell me where they’ve stashed the whelp?” he was bellowing.

Xander found himself running forward. “Spike!” He was warmed at the look of relief on Spike’s face. For an instant he was so relieved himself to see the vampire, he almost wanted to embrace him. He settled, instead, for a big grin and a friendly wack at a seemingly uninjured shoulder.

“’Bout time you showed up, buddy. We had to fight the war without you.”

Spike’s insides relaxed at that huge smile and he shook his head happily as Xander manhandled him and pushed him towards one of the buildings where it appeared
injured villagers were being housed. “Glad to see you hidin’ away from it. Angel told Dahla to keep you safe...”

“What? I’ll have you know...” a young woman ran up and went berserk when she saw Spike. A half dozen villagers were summoned and Spike was dragged dramatically away.

Xander followed feeling so many degrees of relief and a kind of static electric excitement, his skin was buzzing with it. He also felt suddenly hungry.

A cold strong hand on his arm and, amazingly, the bite on his neck throbbed. He jumped a foot and yelled.

“Sorry,” said Angel, his dark eyes seeming anything but. “Just wanted to be sure you’re alright.”

For some reason Angel’s concern for Xander’s safety did not give him the same warm feeling as had Spike’s. He jerked his arm from Angel’s grasp, seeing Angel relinquish control only after a second during which he told Xander with a steady look that he only did so out of choice. Xander spun away and stomped off looking for Spike. His bite itched.

1) "What makes me move with such misgiving is a new vision: it has so beguiled me that I cannot relinquish thoughts of it." Dante, from Purgatorio
Xander wandered about the small village, weaving his way through crowds of villagers so busy with post-battle recovery, that they barely noted him. There didn’t seem, to him, to be all that much surface damage. Some of the tall poles had been knocked sideways, and the occasional nylon net they used for fencing hung limply where its supports had been broken or pressed into the wet ground. But some deeper, more urgent damage must have been done, because the villagers swarmed about him in an apparent state of high emergency. There were none he felt comfortable stopping and attempting to communicate with. He found his way by himself, back the way he and Berynn had come. The largish building, in which he and Dahla had met the villagers, had both doors open and he saw several prone bodies inside. He imagined it must be some sort of Town Hall, now being used as an emergency hospital. He stepped inside and looked around the busy room for signs of Spike.

There seemed to be quite a few wounded. Xander hadn’t realized how deeply into the village the demons had penetrated until he saw all the injured. The desire to help, almost a physical ache, that always rose up in him at the sight of trouble, was ignited, and he bent to assist a woman as she struggled with a jug of liquid. She smiled
at him with some gratitude and Xander felt a kind of barometric shift in his body as he immediately acclimated to the familiarity of usefulness. He put the jug on an indicated table. Looked around the room, trying to find a place where he could lend a hand.

As was his way, Xander merely did what he could, and found himself busy. He had no knowledge of medicine, in his own time let alone in this odd place, so he stayed out of the way of the ‘doctors’ and helped lift heavy patients, brought blankets and pillows down from high shelves. Sorted out traffic patterns through the crowded floor. At one point, he found himself sitting on the floor next to a distraught woman, patting her on the back as she babbled something into his uncomprehending but obviously sympathetic face.

He looked up from where he sat and saw Dahla bending over a prone villager. She straightened, turned and looked directly at him. She could sense him, Xander realized. He felt his Hellmouth perfected internal adapter find its balance as he accepted this. He waved. She nodded and pointed towards a smallish alcove like the one in which Xander had rested. Xander nodded back, and rose obediently.
Wondering what task Dahla had sent him to do, he wove his way around the activities on the main floor and gently pushed aside the curtain, poking his head into the small space.

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In the gold arc of candlelight Xander saw two bodies twined together on the bed. He jumped back and would have withdrawn immediately, but dampish brown hair moved in such a way in the low light that he suddenly recognized Spike as half of the couple. And was unable to move.

Spike’s was naked except for those silky boxer shorts, his skin as pale as the small male body he curled over. His hands ran, in a soothing, sensuous, constant motion, up and down the small boned face tipped back in agony or ecstasy, dark lashes and brows bent, mouth open, panting. Spike’s long, sensitive fingers threading through the dark hair.

The man’s head was tipped back to arch his neck, an offering over which Spike bent. There was a wet, sloppy sound, a sucking noise, like a little kid messily drinking a slurpee. The young man moaned, and Spike’s head
moved. The drinking sound stopped. He murmured in that lilting language, something soft, something gentle; his hands ran over the face lightly, slid down the neck and up and down one arm. Then he bent to the boy’s neck again.

Xander found his glance catching on things, like sharp tacks snagging at a silken cloth. He couldn’t seem to stop it. The boy’s arm; a sheen of moisture over the perfect, marble white skin. The hand splayed then grasped, as if trying to hold something. Spike’s back; purplish puncture wounds marching down it, to the silken shorts that moved in the low light in a subtle rhythmic motion. With the distinct sensation of something tearing, Xander forced his eyes away.

This was the reality in which he would now live, he told himself fiercely, and forced himself to look back. To watch Spike feed. The boy moaned again and Xander felt himself shiver as Spike also moaned and moved his head slightly over the white skin. The sight should sicken him, he thought. He should feel a compulsion to stop it. But he felt more like a voyeur watching an intimate coupling than a man coming upon a demon attack. He watched in a growing confusion of feelings as one of Spike’s hands slid downward and covered the young man’s crotch, softly kneading the obvious erection. The boy cried out, a
high sound of pleasure and joy, his hips thrusting up, spasming against Spike’s hand.

The curtain flipped lightly behind Xander as he spun around, away from the alcove and out of the building.

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Angel was leaning against a carved arch that led out of the village when Spike found him. The elder vampire’s clothes had been replaced, and the wound on his neck almost healed thanks to the blood gifts of several villagers. His skin in the dim light was still slightly flushed with warmth and as Spike approached him, the dark eyes that met his were noticeably lustful.

“Where’s the brat, Angel? I saw him,” Spike looked about the still busy streets. He wanted nothing more than to get far away from this place, but he wanted to see Xander safe and well before he did. “hours ago and then he took off.”

Angel sighed. “I’m sure he’s fine, Spike. Lets get back to the tent,” he said urgently.

“Where would he have got to...?” Spike frowned.
“Spike, I…” Angel cast a quick sideways glance at Spike, then frowned at the ground in a confused embarrassment that Spike had come to identify as Angel flirting. “I really would like to go home now.”

Spike had an ache so deep inside, it was like a glass shard embedded in his bones. “Not in the mood, Angel,” he said.

“I… I don’t know what you mean,” said Angel, the whites of his eyes flashing as he cast a surprised and slightly panicked look at Spike. “I’m just… tired and I want to … to go home now.”

“Right. Listen, Angel, I’ve gotta find the whelp.”

“Spike.” Angel’s voice was becoming peevish. “He’s either safely bundled away with some village girl or he’s back at our tents. Either way, I’m sure he’s fine.”

This silenced Spike, who suddenly had a vision of the tall, dark boy standing amidst the small men of this village, literally picking from a throng of willing young women.

He kicked at a puddle as he strode through the gate.

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Xander was cold, wet, and exhausted, but he couldn’t stop moving. Reaction, and the remnants of the ‘flu, had weakened his robust, teenaged body. He noted his hands shaking as he bent to help a woman lift a pole back into place. His head was spinning with the weirdness, and despite his Sunnydale roots and familiarity with the macabre, he was still having trouble accepting half of what he saw around him. It felt as if he were walking a tightrope and at one end a mad clown periodically grabbed and shook the line.

That was why he was feeling this way, he told himself, shoving the pole, with a great deal more force than necessary, back into the muddy, sucking hole. He was confused and off-balance. Totally dependant on his two least favorite people, or rather, non-people. He stepped back, shrugging apologetically at the woman he was helping, who seemed a bit taken aback by his vehemence.

The thing was, Xander pondered, watching the villager expertly lashing the pole back in place, his Spike hatred was more a matter of principal. He had begun to feel a degree of empathy for the blond menace ages ago, while he was still a young man, and had only clung to the hatred because it was convenient and unchallenged.
He had last seen Spike at that horrifically depressing funeral for Buffy and Dawn, and had actually felt sorry for the guy. Not the first time he had pitied the heart-on-his-sleeve monster, but definitely the oddest. Given that he, himself, was pretty much overcome with grief it was weird that he had noticed or felt a twinge of sympathy for the demon hovering, like a pale memory, in the dark vestibule at the back of the church. His agony was palpable. Sitting next to his expectant wife, towards whom he felt an almost painful protectiveness, Xander recognized Spike’s agony as that of a male unable to save those he cared for.

Angel had been more flamboyant in his distress, and so received the lion’s share of sympathy. Even Giles, overcome as well, had shared a hug with the brooding vampire.

It was as if Spike’s feelings, because they had not been returned, were insignificant. As if Spike himself were merely an afterward in the story of Angel. Xander got how that was, how it felt to be a footnote, a sideline. A mere sentence in a great story. Like that sister of Moses that no one remembered. And he got the truth of it. That love is not lessened by its not being wanted.
He thought of his wife. How it had felt to look into eyes that loved back in equal measure. And he thought of his son. He knew, somehow, that Spike had never had that.

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Spike sucked harder on Angel’s cock and wished he would hurry up and come. Spike had lost all enthusiasm for this blow-job and was now only seeking to finish it. The inside of his mouth felt dry and rough, as if his own saliva had run out when his taste for Angel had dried up. His jaw ached and his lips and tongue felt almost bruised. He had been giving head to the other vampire for what seemed an interminable time and still Angel lay almost silent, arm flung over his eyes, fingers lightly tangled in Spike’s hair, his hips shifting vaguely now and then. Spike could feel Angel’s balls, tight against his chin, ready to explode, but Angel seemed stuck there. Eternally frustrated.

Spike began stroking the insides of Angel’s legs, and then running his hands up and down the muscled abdomen. Relax, you great lummox, he thought with irritation, relax and let it happen. He caught Angel’s left nipple between two sharp fingernails and pinched hard, more with
impatience than a desire to please, and Angel arched suddenly, crying out in surprise, and flooded Spike’s mouth with cold cum.

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The people around him were grappling with a great muddy knot of nylon netting and Xander stepped up to help again. They were becoming accustomed to him, he realized gratefully. The men, no longer hesitant, would tap his arm and gesture with familiarity when they wanted him to do something. Their shyness gone, Xander was thrilled a little by the clarity of those beautiful eyes, the lack of dissemblance there.

The women were all beautiful, with that clean, precious beauty of porcelain. Xander expected he was still out of balance and shocky, because he didn’t feel particularly drawn to any of the females who appraised him with openly speculative, yet somehow innocent, looks.

Actually, he just kept finding himself thinking of his vampires and wanting to get back to them. The village seemed to have settled down somewhat. The air of urgency tempered. Most of the solar lights were back up and the dim glow showed Xander streets orderly and
almost empty. Yet he stayed on, chilled with the damp, coughing frequently; he longed to return to the vampires’ camp and so fought that longing. Wondering at it and poking at it in his mind.

He offered to carry the mass of torn netting back to a building, and as he settled it in an indicated corner, he tried once more to fathom his sense of connection to Angel and Spike.

He needed Spike and Angel in order to survive. Of course he was concerned for their safety. And Spike had tried, was trying, to make things easier for him. Had even offered a kind of awkward comfort. Xander’s chill abated somewhat, a warm flush spreading across his skin at the memory of that comfort. Spike’s strong arms clasped steadily around him. Spike’s lips gently pressed to his. And who would have expected the gentleness? And once again, for an unfathomable reason, Xander’s mind flashed before him the picture of Spike across the young man, feeding from him. A sudden rush in his groin and tingle down his legs, and the clenching in his belly was not the disgusted feeling he had expected. It felt like desire, he realized, putting one hand out to a nearby wall as if needing the support.
He was out of his depth, he told himself fiercely again. In an adolescent body and dependent on Spike and Angel, of course he felt drawn to them. Xander shifted uncomfortably as parts of his body refused to accept this explanation and worked in evil collusion with an imagination that now put himself in that pale young man’s place, that now put Spike’s lips, soft and surprisingly warm, traveling over his chin and down his neck. Spike’s fangs, not Angel’s, piercing the skin of his throat.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike gazed down at Angel’s massive, naked body, and felt that he saw him from a great distance. Angel still lay, legs spread, satisfied penis flaccid against one thigh, arm across his face, not breathing.

“Well,” Spike dropped the word into the absolute stillness, “all sorted then, mate?”

Angel lay unmoving. His lips barely opened. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Spike growled the lie. He shook off the feeling of malaise that always followed these acts now and slapped his knees, ready to rise.
“Spike,” whispered Angel, his hand barely moving but the gesture effectively staying Spike’s movements.

“Yeah, Angel?”

“Does it still matter to you?”

Spike looked at his companion with a softness in his face that would have shocked and embarrassed them both, if either had seen it. “Course it does, Angel.”

“Why?” The question was breathed so softly only Spike would have been able to hear it.

He lay a hand on the cold, hard muscle of Angel’s thigh. “Yer tired, old man. Had yer head practically cut off and I’ll bet you haven’t slept for two nights. Rest. We’ll talk when you wake, okay?”

Angel made a noise that Spike decided to take as acquiescence.

“Right then,” He pulled a blanket gently over Angel’s unresisting nakedness and stood. His thoughts hovered there, over the still form and then, like a heat seeking missile, he found them eager and lively, wondering about Xander Harris.
“Think I’ll go see what the whelp’s been up to,” he told the apparently unconscious Angel.

But Angel was not asleep. And his arm slid from his face as he gazed up at Spike with something dark in his eyes. “We should never have brought him here,” he stated.

Spike thought he would have agreed with Angel, a day ago. But now he wasn’t so sure. “Might be okay,” he said.

“No,” said Angel. He actually raised himself up on his elbows, seeming to have become suddenly re-energized. “No, he doesn’t belong here and we... we should send him back.”

“What?”

“I should speak to the Powers, we should ask them...”

“What? NO!” ‘Could they do that?’ Spike wondered to himself. *Now that the kid was here, could they take him away?* “No, Angel, that’s not fair, that’s not...”

“Fair?” Angel’s face seemed to go almost maroon with blood as if barely masking a deep rage. “What’s fair about any of this?” he said loudly. He pushed himself to a sitting position.

“You want to kill him?”
“He’s already dead.” Angel’s smile was more a baring of teeth.

This enraged Spike enormously. “So are you, you great hulking poof!” He couldn’t catch up with the thoughts and feelings he was having. Emotionally breathless, he chased them wildly. “You can’t just take him away. Now that he’s gonna make it, maybe. Now that I…” he stopped, confused. He found he was breathing. Breathing hard, standing over Angel with his fists clenched.

“God, Angel, just piss off, would you?” he yelled and stomped out of the tent.

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“Damn it, Harris, get a grip,” Xander hissed to himself. Like a cold shower, the chill air had shocked his body out of its fantasy. With relief he felt his erection subside. But, shivering and shaking and once again enervated beyond bearing, he found his mind still stuck on it. He took off towards the hill that climbed back to the vampires’ tents; arms clasped around himself, stomping hard to keep the blood warm in his legs, teeth clenched uncontrollably with the cold. He ran the last few feet up the hill and
heard their voices, arguing, just before Spike’s hand drew back the tent flap and he appeared in the door of Angel’s tent.

Their eyes met. *God,* thought Xander with an internal groan. *‘our eyes met’, what the Harlequin Hell are you thinking, Harris?* But he still was frozen there for a tiny moment. Then both he and Spike seemed to simultaneously get hold of themselves. Xander looked down, shivering violently. Spike stepped forward and waved Xander to precede him into the empty tent. He followed, pointedly gesturing towards the stove.

“Want me to start that?”

“Yes, would you please?” said Xander to his shoes.

“You’re wet through.”

“Yeah, its cold.” Xander coughed.

Spike tisked. “Shouldna tried ta come out again without proper clothes.” He studied the fire grate and did not think about Xander getting dressed, Xander somewhere getting undressed...

“Wasn’t really in, Spike. Nowhere to come out from.”
Spike felt a little of the tension in his belly subside. He hadn’t even known it was there, but he found himself relieved to have it gone. Then he grasped what Xander had just said. “You’ve been outside all this time? It’s been hours since I last saw you, Harris.”

“Yeah, well.” Xander felt ridiculous. An old man’s brain shaking its head at an adolescent boy’s foolish emotions. “Well, I was trying to help out, and then walking around and, um, looking at stuff.”

“Walking around.”

Spike was looking at him with those piercing blue eyes. Xander twitched a shoulder uncomfortably. He marched over and gathered up a pile of blankets, then awkwardly tried to drape them around himself.

“Why didn’t you come find me?” asked Spike, watching Harris obviously avoiding his eyes. Xander shrugged again. Spike regarded him. The little boxes in the crossword puzzle began filling in.

“I did,” said Xander, his voice rising. He became interested in the blankets. “You were busy... so I ...left.” He felt the heat on his cheeks now. From the fire, of course.
“I was busy?” Spike said, a sudden sharpness in his voice. He studied Xander intently. “What stuff were you lookin’ at, then, whelp?”

“I… I saw you feeding,” Xander began. He glanced up, saw the flare in Spike’s eyes, took it for anger, shame, something not good. “Dahla told me to,” he said childishly. He looked away. He stood for a moment, head turned away, imagining he could feel Spike glaring at him. “Look, I know. But I can’t like it. I just can’t.” He turned back and was surprised to see Spike staring blankly at the fire grate, his shoulders curved in, his head bent.

“Oh, I see. I have your official disapproval then, do I?” said Spike wearily. He sat down heavily. And to Xander’s growing amazement, he buried his head in his hands. “Well, can’t expect you to understand, but I don’t think of it that way. I … I can’t.”

Xander could not remember, in this life or any other, having ever seen Spike looking so vulnerable, so utterly lacking in arrogance and braggadocio.

“You shouldn’t have seen that, whelp,” Spike finally said from within his hands. “She shouldn’t have sent you to see that.”
“Yeah, that’s why I left, I guess,” said Xander, trying not to let the mental image rise up in his mind again. Fearing his own body's reaction, and Spike’s.

“Was a private thing. Just for the boy.” Spike sounded so emotional, Xander found himself wondering briefly if the vampire had a relationship with one of the humans? It seemed unlikely.

“Woulda had his parents there, but he lost them in the raid last year,” added Spike softly.


“Uh. What?” said Xander in his adolescent, squeaky voice.

Spike turned and glared at him, then jerked to his feet. Xander felt he had deeply angered him and had no idea how. He gathered the blankets around himself, losing one side of the heavy drapery.

Spike automatically caught the corner of the blanket as it fell away from Harris’ shoulder. He felt the boy’s body stiffen as his hand made contact with his back. A rush of fresh hurt bit into the pain he was already feeling. He bit his lip and turned back to the stove.
“Hungry?” he said after a few stiff minutes.

“Yeah,” breathed Xander, watching Spike in a wonder of perplexity.

Spike slammed the stove door shut a bit harder than necessary. Flipped open the fiberglass box in which the food was kept, a numbness in his hands as he blindly tossed a few of the objects out onto the preparation board and then he slammed his fist hard onto the surface.

“Fuck it, Harris, it’s just the way it is.”

“What?” Xander had jumped at the sound and now stared at Spike from the midst of his little mountain of blankets.

“It doesn’t bother anybody but you, so you’ll just hafta suck it up.” As he began kneading out the doughy filling, Spike noted his own hands shaking. He grit his teeth and slammed the breadboard again.

Xander stared at him. “What the hell did I do now?”

“You know.”

“No I don’t. I have no fucking idea. I haven’t done or said anything.”
“It’s not that, its yer attitude.”

“My attitude?” Xander’s voice almost squeaked with outrage. He pushed free of his blankets and stood, hands spread in disbelief. “What? You mean the attitude that I have been brought here against my will by the two guys I hate most in the world? Forced to watch you f…feed. And ... and listen to...” he waved his arm expressively in the general direction of Angel’s tent. “And do I say anything? I’m trying...”

“Oh here we go with that old whine. Give it a bloody rest already...”

“Nobody to talk to, fucking freezing cold all the time, couple of pre-menstrual vampires and...”

“Oh!” Spike leapt to his feet and advanced across the floor, jabbing a floury finger in Xander’s direction. “Look who’s talkin’. Least I don’t go stampin’ off like a bloody drama queen every twitch.”

“Oh pulleeze...” Xander waved an expressive hand in Spike’s direction. “Who is calling who a drama queen?”

“Right, you didn’t run screechin’ off cuz I accidentally touched you, and ... and I try to help and you act like I’ve got the bloody plague.”
“What? What the hell? I did no such thing!”

Spike advanced on Xander, right into his personal space and grabbed his shoulders. Xander stiffened but glared into Spike’s eyes and didn’t step back.

“Makes you wanna run, don’t it?” said Spike fiercely, watching the boy’s pupils dilate, feeling the muscles under his palms bunch with tension. “Makes you sick to think of it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re paranoid.”

“You can’t stand to have me touch you!” Spike yelled into Xander’s face.

Xander tried to jerk away from Spike’s hands. Found he couldn’t. He felt the wild confusion of the entire day crashing around him like a gigantic wave.

“I don’t want to do it,” said Spike, shaking him in frustration.

Xander stared.

“He... he was in pain,” said Spike. Trying to read something in Xander’s eyes. Some kind of understanding, compassion. “They want it, Harris, d’ya understand? It’s
...it’s easier and I try to make it dignified. I’m just a fucking demon... I ...

Xander’s body was seventeen, but his mind was eighty-three. He had had pets put down and watched men let their sons be arrested for possession of drugs. He had been the responsible adult upon whom others relied. And he had known how weak and frail he truly was, while still trying to be strong. “He was dying?” he asked.

Spike stared up at him, blinking. His lashes glistened with moisture. Xander wondered how long it had been since someone had eased Spike’s suffering. He wondered if anyone ever had.

“Let go of me, Spike,” he said gently, easing the painfully gripping fingers from his shoulders, but softening the request by keeping Spike’s hands between his larger, warmer ones.

Spike stared backed at him, groggily. He allowed his hands to be held, then finally extracted them. He turned back towards the stove. Xander thought he saw him surreptitiously dashing moisture off his cheeks with quick jabs of his hand. “It’s my job, Harris. Angel can’t do it. He’s too... he’s just...” Spike sighed. “He just can’t.”
Xander nodded, though he figured Spike couldn’t hear his head bobbing up and down.

Spike played with an oven mitt. “It’s hard sometimes. When they’re young or... or so full of that weird religion.”

“You’re trying to help,” said Xander. “I see that.”

“Yeah?” Spike sounded doubtful.

“Sure. I was surprised. And confused. I...I get confused.”

Xander’s voice faded. He thought about the bite again. Felt that stirring, despite the knowledge that he was now remembering a young man’s death. “God,” he said. “God, Spike, I’m so confused.”

Spike sniffed hard. “Yeah, I know, can’t blame you. It’s hard here sometimes. And I’m used to it.” He glanced at Xander; saw the pathetic, frightened face. Without thinking he slid one arm over Xander’s shoulders, gripped him in a firm hug. “We okay, now?”

Xander felt that steady reassurance in Spike’s arm again. Let himself lean into it. “Sure,” he said finally. “Moving forward.” The languid, rippling electricity that streamed out from where Spike’s arm wrapped around him was strange, but it was comforting. “I’m all about the moving forward,” said Xander.
“So,” he continued after a moment, straightening and clapping his hands. It was a thin sound, but it was the intention that counted here. “What’s for dinner? Veggie burritos? Or, uh, veggie burritos?” He tried a grin. Spike, gratified, managed some kind of smile back.

“’S about what the menu includes, Harris,” he said. Striking a pose as if suddenly having an idea. “Course, there’s a lotta dead Vespat demon down on that lower plateau now. Bet, if you marinated it long enough…”


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After Xander had eaten, they sat on the bed, blankets curled around them in two identical nests, and Spike finally taught Xander the card game that he knew.

Xander frowned at his hand. “How many points for an ace again?”

Spike slapped his hand down in frustration. “Lemmee guess, Harris. You got aces?”
Xander looked up, cocked an eyebrow. “Maybe?”

Spike shook his head, grinning. “Okay, whelp, play yer little head games. We’ll see who comes out on top.”

“Hey, I always end up on top,” said Xander, trying to look cocky.

“Would have taken you fer a bottom, myself,” growled Spike, re-arranging his cards.

Xander was quiet. Spike glanced up at the boy in mild surprise. Harris could usually out-spar Spike verbally five for five. But there was a touch of pink in the boy’s cheeks and at the end of his nose.

“Oh, fer Satan’s sake, Harris. I was only kiddin’,” said Spike in disgust.

“Course you were, Spike. I know. I was just ...” Xander played with his cards. “Thinking about my hand.”

“First time fer that, I guess,” said Spike. He lay down a card, dealt himself a new one. Dealt the kid the two more he signaled for. They were both quiet for a minute.

“Can I ask you something, Spike?” said Xander finally.

“Sure.” Spike squinted at his cards. Three aces. Maybe the kid really was learning to bluff.
“How’d you and Angel end up … uh, how’d you guys end up, you know…” Spike looked up in amazement. Xander’s entire face had now gone pink. His head was ducked down so that his chin rested practically on his chest and his brows met each other as he glared hard at the cards in his hand.

“It’s okay to ask, Harris,” said Spike gently. “I’m an old demon. I don’t feel embarrassed about much.”

Xander nodded. Tried to shrug nonchalantly. Spike wasn’t fooled.

“I don’t mind tellin’ you,” he said roughly, trying to make a joke of it. “Just cuz I have a soul, don’t mean I’m a prig. Little late for that,” he laughed, and watched Xander for a clue as to what the whelp was about, here.

“It was just him and me for so long,” Spike began, thinking it through himself for the first time. “Not that that’s the reason you know. Just. There was a point where it all seemed so endless and I felt like…” In a rush the memory of that time came back to him. The sense of Angel drifting away, literally disappearing into his memories and despair. And Spike alone again, helplessly trying to make contact again, had finally just crawled into bed with Angel one night. And Angel had rolled over and curled around him. “And it was just comfort, I guess. Just
a way to know we were still really here. Not alive, of course, but not gone. Not really dead.” Spike sighed and lay down a card. “Guess it must sound pretty damn sick to you, huh Harris.”

“No,” said Xander softly. His chin still pressed to his chest made his voice sound smothered. “I guess I kind of get it.”

“Coupla blokes together. Mebbee you kids didn’t think nothin’ of it, but back when I was turned it were somethin’ no one even spoke of.”

“Yeah, well, times change,” said Xander. He fiddled with his cards. “Guess all guys kind of wonder, huh?” He glanced cautiously up at Spike.

Spike raised a carefully neutral eyebrow. “Guess,” he said, noncommittally.

“You know,” Xander laughed, shortly. “We’re guys. We think about it with everything and everyone. We just think about it. Cuz, you know. We’re guys.”

Spike lay down a card. Dealt himself a new one. It wasn’t his turn, but he needed something to do with his hands. “You ever tried it with a bloke, Harris?” he said finally. Pleased at how simple and casual the question sounded.
Casual. Just a conversation between men as they played cards.

Xander shook his head rapidly. “Nope,” he said brightly. He accidentally dropped a card, grabbed it up. Spike pretended not to notice. “I, uh, you know, one woman man and all. Happily married and…” He closed his fan of cards, re-fanned them. Closed it again.

“Sure, course, expected as much,” said Spike in a voice that feigned boredom.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with it,” babbled Xander fiercely, “I mean, I am totally okay with guys, you know… uh…”

“Shagging each other?” suggested Spike.

“Huh,” squeaked Xander. “Yeah, that. And well, live and let live, of course. But I just … I thought you guys hated each other,” he blurted.

“Well, yeah, of course we do. What’s that got to do with it?” said Spike, tossing down another card. His cards were shit and he felt uncomfortably aware of Xander. His smell, his body heat, the size and movement of his hands just inches from Spike’s knees. It made him want to move, want to do something. He looked up at the boy again, sitting in his uncomfortable slouch and chewing at
a full, red, lower lip in an agony of embarrassment and in a rush Spike realized what he wanted to do.

He wanted to kiss Xander.

“Bloody buggering fuck,” he pronounced. And threw down his cards.

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After his stupid question and subsequent babble, thought Xander miserably, the whole evening had gone to hell.

Spike had pretended to be unashamed and generally blasé about Xander’s curiosity, but had been obviously faking. He had thrown his cards at Xander suddenly and jumped up. Ranting about the mess in the tent, poking at the quite adequate fire, and generally fussing about everything and nothing.

Xander was so embarrassed and angry with himself he couldn’t respond. He couldn’t think why he had even asked that question, and hearing in his own ears the accusatory nature of it, he had tried overcompensating in his eagerness to prove his acceptance and liberality. These attempts had apparently only embarrassed Spike
further, though, and they were soon reduced to sitting in their opposite corners, sighing and plucking at the threads and bits of dust on their clothes.

Xander wished for television and beer like he never had before.

“You guys ever play football?” he asked, seeking safe subject matter desperately.

“Football?” repeated Spike, daring to look up at Xander. “You mean footie? Or that bloody mess you Americans had on tellie all the time?”

“Either one,” said Xander, so relieved to have something to say that he ignored the insult to the noble game of football. “You ever play?”

Spike imagined Angel running down a field kicking a ball, loudly quoting dead poets as he went. He laughed. “Never did,” he said.

“Too bad,” said Xander. “I was a coach, you know? But got too old, things were gonna break, I had to stop. It might be kinda fun...” He stretched out his long, muscular legs and grinned at them appreciatively. “Bet I could kick your ass, now,” he said.
There was much ass-kicking to be sure, thought Xander, face down once more in the mud. He grinned, his teeth gritty with wet dirt, rolled, clutching the ball of rags he and Spike had fashioned into a lumpy elliptical approximation of something like a ball. He raised and shook the mass in the air above him, victoriously. “Touchdown,” he announced.

Spike wiped his forearm across his face, clearing enough dirt off his mouth to spit. “What the bloody hell do you mean, whelp? That weren’t no touchdown or goal or anythin’. You slid halfway on yer belly!”

“Still in possession of the ball, Spike.” Xander waggled the ball once more in the air above him.

Spike rose to his feet and stalked forward slowly. His smile menacing. “We’ll see about that,” he said.

Xander scooted back along the ground, slipping in the mud, trying to get up and moving before the preternaturally quick demon could pounce. “Re...re...remember, Spike, there’s a first down penalty
for the improper use of demonic speed and strength,” he panted.

“Bugger that,” said Spike, across the field and pinning Harris before he could finish his sentence.

Only Harris wasn’t pinned. He had feinted a zig and then pulled a zag and landed a few feet away, rolling up on one knee, laughing and shaking that damnable ball again. “First down,” chortled Harris, his muddy teeth flashing in irritating mockery at Spike. “It’s a head game, after all, Spike. Mind over muscle, mind over...ooof!”

He hadn’t even seen him coming that time. Only heard a kind of ‘pop’ in the air, and the demon was sitting astride his chest grinning down in game face, holding the ragged ball. Xander’s arms were pinned to either side by Spike’s thighs, and he could feel a definite sore place across his chest where there would undoubtedly be bruising in the morning. He inhaled with a great effort. “First down again,” he squeezed out, from lungs barely able to draw breath. And managed another grin.

Spike tipped back his face and laughed. He dropped the ball onto Xander’s chest and laughed some more. Having a hundred eighty pound vampire sitting astride you, laughing in glee, had never been on Xander Harris’ wish list, but he found the sight to not be as disturbing as he
would have expected. Actually, Xander shifted a bit as Spike loosened the grip of his thighs and suddenly became aware of the stiff presence pressing inside Spike’s thigh against his chest. And suddenly realized that he was hard as well.

It was fucking disturbing after all. “Get off me, Spike,” he hissed suddenly, wiggling furiously. Spike, back in human visage, looked down at him, his face all taunt and smirk.

“What’s the magic word, pet?” he sneered.

“Fucking don’t call me that,” said Xander, struggling with even more ferocity. His anger and fear permeated Spike’s amusement and he shifted off him rather quickly.

Not quickly enough, though. Xander slithered out and shoved him away hard. Spike fell, unresisting and surprised, with a wet thump, onto the muddy ground.

“What the hell’s gotten inta you, Harris?” he asked.

Xander shook his head, and turned to stand, praying that Spike with his nocturnal vision, wouldn’t see the raging hard on now pressing through his damp trousers. He stood so that he mostly had his back to Spike and tromped towards the tent. “Just sick of it, Spike,” he called back angrily. “You cheat too much.”
Spike blinked after him in amazement.

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It wasn’t until they were back in the tent, cleaned up and warm again, that Spike finally got it. The pheromones were rolling off Harris in waves now. He remembered the kid’s comments the other day about the age of his present body, and the desires that presented, and figured the kid was just needing really badly to get laid.

Well, hell, Spike could use a little something himself, the gods knew. His body had been through the gamut that day. The battle, the sorrow, the sex without stimulation with Angel. And finally, some kind of insane attraction to the warm man now pumping his scent into Spike’s air. He was pitched right to the edge and hardly needed the temptation of a horny teenager just a few feet away from him.

He circled the room, keeping his distance from Xander, gathering their things.

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Xander felt Spike circling him, predatory and sleek. It was chilling. It was also erotic. Xander furiously tried to tromp on the images now dashing across his mind’s eye. He fought with the material of the blankets as he straightened them out. Jerked angrily at his laces as he shed his shoes after disposing of the water and doing his human thing off the edge of the cliff.

He sat on the bed, gritting his teeth and thinking of frogs. Wet, shiny frogs with bulging eyes. They had always grossed him out. His whole body felt tight and tingling and awake.

He looked up and saw Spike watching him with eyes of a blue so intense they seemed to be lit from within. “Time fer bed, I guess,” announced Spike.

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They lay on the bed side by side. Each rigidly on his back, hands bunched up on their chests, eyes on the ceiling. A respectable wall of well-packed blankets between them. Spike was uncomfortably aware of every twitch of Xander’s scantily clad body. He, could feel the boy’s heat coming right through the blankets and saturating his own
He had somehow managed, he thought with horror, to get into bed without the kid seeing his raging hard on. And hadn’t that been a treat? Undressing in the warm room with Xander? Bumping elbows and knees and trying not to stare as the kid stripped off all those layers and stretched that well-muscled torso in all its glory.

Spike lay on his back and added one more item to his already extensive list of reasons why he would personally kick the butts of certain Powers that Were whenever he had the opportunity. He was never going to sleep this night. He knew that already. What he feared with a quite reasonable fear, was that he would never sleep again as long as this heady mixture of testosterone, hemoglobin and adrenalin breathed beside him in the dark.

“Harris,” said Spike after a very long time. “You asleep?”

“No,” said Xander in a terribly alert voice.

“Listen,” Spike thought for a moment. “I gotta go outside for a bit, you know?”

“Outside?” Xander sounded very confused.

“Uh, yeah. I’ve got something that needs doing. May take half an hour or so.”

“Okay?” said Xander.
“So, uh, I don’t wanna scare you when I come back. I’ll just yelp a bit outside before I come in, okay?”

Xander was silent, thinking. “Yeah,” he said finally. “Okay. Thanks.”

Spike rolled and jumped up. Happy to be able to move. He practically ran for the door.

Xander sighed with relief. The tent flap had barely fallen back into place when his hand closed around his cock.

There had been a brief period in his life, Xander would have admitted without shame to anyone but Spike, when he had been curious about other men. Just ... wondering. There was so much of that sort of thing on TV and in the movies, and Xander had seen men look at him. He had wondered. And for a few weeks, between girlfriends, he had driven himself to sleep with bizarrely informed but naïve fantasies of allowing one of those men into his bed.

He entertained one of those fantasies now. Just the feel of his own cock hardening in his hand, a sensation Xander hadn’t had for over a decade, was enough to push him over the edge, but he filled in the scenario rapidly.

He would look back at the other man. Hold his eyes just a moment longer than would have been normal, then the
leisurely walk towards the hotel room (of course this always happened out of town, some city he had never visited, would never visit again). The man would follow. Xander would leave the door unlocked, the lights off.

As he stood by his bed disrobing, the man would let himself in. Quietly lock and bolt the door. His face in shadows, he would strip and join Xander under the stiff hotel bed sheets in silence.

His hands would be cool, dry and sure, taking command. With the big man’s fantasy of being overpowered, Xander gasped and his strokes quickened as he imagined the stranger’s strength, pushing Xander onto his belly, firmly stroking his backside. A large, cool, unknown cock pressing at his entrance.

Xander’s head rolled on the pillow and he moaned as he imagined it. Pain, there would be pain and he would resist, but the stranger would murmur, amused, reassuring, and press in and then ... Xander didn’t know what would happen then. He threw back the blankets to give himself room, spreading his legs and thrusting upward into the cool air. His hand flying over his cock, his other hand pushing at his anus, wondering... He poked one finger curiously in and the slight pinch was all it took. He came violently, shuddering, the cum droplets
splattering his chest. Laying there breathless he only realized belatedly that his semen was now all over the sheets.. The sheets that Spike would soon come back to sleep in.

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Spike had trotted down to his favorite spot quickly. How many nights had he stood here, he thought, untying his fly with quick, practiced fingers, and wanked off to fantasies of women? His stiff member sprang into the air and he grasped it gratefully in his hand. He had no illusions about who would be in his mind this night.

All he had to do was imagine Harris’ mouth again, lower lip red as those white teeth bit down on it and Spike’s head banged against the tree as he came in great arcing spurts of white into the dark. He stood for a minute, panting, his damp hand cold in the night air. Gradually, his breathing stopped, he didn’t bother to wipe off his hand, though.

He closed it again around his cock. This time would take longer. Spike had a great imagination when it came to sex. And after several centuries of solitude, he had a veritable encyclopedia of wank fantasies. But his
favorites were still simple. He saw the dark head, resting on the pillow, rouse and turn slightly as Spike slid under the covers. His hand slid over the sharp hipbone, down the steely stomach muscle and his balls tightened as he imagined the big hand closing around his, but not to push him away. No, instead the big hand pushed Spike’s fingers into the mass of curls around the base of a cock hard and heavy and waiting for him. Spike groaned and fondled his balls, before sliding his fist again up his cock. God, just to be wanted, Spike’s greatest fantasy, to be so desired.

In the past the fantasy had always been of Angel, very much mirroring their first night together, over a century ago, but so erotic it still had enormous power over Spike. But this time he saw the dark hair longer, the skin he ran his fingers over, much warmer. And the voice... Spike heard again Harris’ voice, gently saying his name. “Spike,” whispered the voice, “show me, Spike,” He imagined Xander allowing him, even eagerly thrusting up against him, as Spike taught the boy... Spike cried out into the night, almost in pain as the orgasm seemed to yank all the muscles in his body in towards his pelvis, then shot great bolts of semen out through his jerking cock.
Quite some time later, Spike coughed loudly and said something like, “Harris, you decent?” outside the tent door. Kicked at the ground a bit and slowly entered.

The whole tent reeked of sex. Spike tried not to inhale and tied the tent flap back a bit, hoping the scent would leave before it invaded his senses and stiffened him again.

Harris was curled under fresh sheets and blankets, Spike noted as he lifted them to crawl in. He smiled at the whelp’s thoughtfulness. Kid didn’t realize that the heap of redolent bedding in the corner was still sending his scent all over the tent. Spike buried his face in the pillow and under covers and moaned in his own head at the musky heat coming off the boy’s curled body, as well. He could feel everything in his demon yearning towards it, and a bit of his dead body yearning in that direction also.

Concentrating hard, and with the sleepiness of three hard orgasms to help, Spike turned his mind away from the morsel laying next to him and was able to enter a kind of sleep. Somewhere in the fugue of almost-dark, his mind opened a door and Xander entered again.
Naked, glowing, with a glimmering white aura that seemed to arch like a light over his silky black hair. “Spike,” he said, smiling in that crooked way of his. His hand reached, open palmed, towards Spike. “Show me, Spike.”

And in his dream Spike felt no hesitation; he strode forward and gathered the heat and solid flesh of Xander into his arms. Felt around him the humming comfort of that white light. Buried his face in the neck like a molasses treat, soft and hard, muscled and silky smooth. Spike licked and tasted and touched his fangs to the irresistible flesh.

Xander twisted in his arms. “Yes,” he said.

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“Wow, Spike, this is better than I thought it would be,” said Xander.

“Yeah, thought you might like it,” said Spike, pleased. He strode proudly, as if he himself had created it, around the large spotlight they had found in the abandoned demon encampment.
With the help of several villagers, and under Xander’s experienced direction, they had managed to pull the huge spotlight up the cliff with pulleys and nylon ropes. Then a complicated contraption of platforms and rolling disks had brought it, with a great deal of noise, laughter and swearing in various languages, back to the vampires’ camp.

Spike was amazed at Xander’s ease with the strange humans. He seemed to be so physical with everyone but Spike. Arms over shoulders as he gestured, smiling, to explain what they should do. Large, muscular hands slapping men on the back, wrapping around the slim biceps, poking in fun at other men’s chests. Those liquid eyes, listening and shy then brilliant and moving with amusement. The men would do anything for him, Spike thought.

He knew he would.

After the villagers had left he and Harris alone with their prize, he watched Xander run those big, tactile hands over the burnished metal casings. Xander’s fingers experimenting with some knobs and seeming latches in one support. A small door popped open. “Wow,” said Xander. “Cool.”

“Can you make it work?”
Xander laughed. It was a fantastic sound in the damp, dark air. Light and full of color, it seemed to dance around Spike like some enchantment. “What is it about me that makes people think I can take a screwdriver and fix anything?”

Spike shrugged. He watched Xander’s fingers, still absently caressing the metal. “Yer the tool guy, ain’t ya?”

Xander shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck in apparent amazement, but his eyes studied the shielded wiring revealed behind the little door with the expertise of a man who had spent a lifetime in the guts of buildings, sussing out electrical systems. He carefully closed the little door again, his eyes tracking down the metal housing and following some mysterious footprint. He reached over, and magically, or so it seemed to Spike, pressed a hidden switch.

The spot made a muted booming sound, like a metal door slamming open, and a beam of impossibly bright light shot straight up into the air.

Spike instinctively leapt back, looking for cover from the sunlight, before he realized.

Xander was standing, one hand still on the light’s leg, gazing up into the sky in awe. “Fuck, look at that.”
Spike looked up. In the brilliant spot they could clearly see the state of the atmosphere over their heads. The sky seemed to boil with blood and smoke. “What the hell is that?” breathed Xander a little fearfully.

“Dunno,” said Spike.

“Do you think it’s poisonous?”

“Huh,” said Spike intelligently.

Xander glanced at him. Looked back up into the sky. “Hasn’t anyone tried to fix it?”

“Fix it?” Spike folded his arms across his chest and gave Xander an incredulous look.

Xander returned the look. “Hasn’t anyone tried to do anything about it?”

Spike raised his arms to either side, presenting himself as if to a stranger. “’ello, there, mate, William the Bloody here, Victorian vampire and sometime punk rocker. At no time, and in no way, ecological expert or weatherman. Not a wizard, either,” he added, tilting his head up again to stare at the ugliness of the sky.

“I’m surprised you and Angel didn’t think to bring somebody here,” said Xander.
Spike shrugged.

“Guess a world in perpetual darkness, with people dependent on you for survival, just wasn’t horrible enough to motivate some kind of action.” Xander had shoved both of his hands deep into the pockets of his vest. He looked more upset than angry. Perhaps it was a measure of the rapport Spike and he had developed over the past few days that he felt less outrage and more disappointment in his companion.

Spike bit his lip and glanced at him quickly before muttering, “It occurred to us.”

“Why didn’t you do it?”

Spike didn’t answer. He seemed to be absorbed in the study of a pebble near his boot.

Xander felt a prickle at the back of his neck. “Or did you?” The comments and asides Xander had picked up in the last few days finally hit his frontal lobes and demanded attention. “I wasn’t your first choice, was I?” he asked.

Spike’s silence was an answer in the negative.

“What happened to the others?”
Spike cleared his throat and frowned. He was getting really tired of looking into those dark eyes and seeing himself as in a blackened mirror. So he looked away. “You aren’t ready to hear this, whelp,” he announced crisply into the night. He heard Xander’s palpable disbelieving silence behind him. It crawled up his back. Despite himself, he whirled and glared into those black eyes.

“They couldn’t hack it,” he said roughly.

“They died?”

Spike was silent again.

“Was it...was it anyone I know?” asked Xander in a horrified voice. Imagining Buffy, trapped here, with these two monsters who both desired her. Trapped, desperate, lonely. “You, you fucker,” he gasped out, “you have to tell me.”

“No,” said Spike, quickly. “Not who you think. I wouldn’t have... we wouldn’t...” He frowned again.

“Who then?”

“Xander,” said Spike hurriedly, almost pleading, “you’ve gotta think how it was for us. The Powers asked for a name. We thought it would be a good thing, you know?
At first. Okay, okay,” he said, flinching from the steady beam of those dark eyes, “we’re stupid demons, I know, but we did think of a wizard. Somebody smart, a lot of understanding of the darkness... just, maybe too smart...” He petered to a stop, watching Xander slowly making his way to the name.

“Giles,” whispered Xander.

“He’s a Watcher,” said Spike. “He knows. He should have known.”

Xander looked like he might cry. Spike felt a mixture of shame and anger. It wasn’t fair. They had thought they were doing the best thing. It wasn’t fair that the whelp should look at him and see...

“Bastards,” said Xander. He turned away and looked out over the cold, wet plain. “He died of cancer, you know, Spike?” He spoke quietly. “You made him go through death again?”

“He didn’t die,” said Spike before he could think. He had a horrible feeling in his belly as he watched Xander slowly turn around, staring at him, the horror in his eyes fading, excitement replacing it.

“He’s alive?”
“Xander...”

“Where?”

“Xan, I’ve gotta...”

“Giles is alive and here?” Xander was thrilled, realized Spike, in despair. “Where is he? I’ve got to see him, Spike.”

“No,” said Spike, taking a step back even before Xander advanced on him in disbelief.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” Xander’s voice and smile were now just a little menacing.

“You can’t see him, he’s...”

“I can’t see him? I might actually have a friend in this godforsaken wasteland and you want to tell me that I can’t see him?”

Spike would have pointed out, stung, that Xander did have a friend. He had Spike. But even more upsetting was the joy in the boy’s face. Something Spike had tried, but as yet been unable, to put there. And the certain knowledge of what would follow when Xander knew the truth.
“Why can’t I see Giles, Spike?” asked Xander, remnants of the smile lingering on his lips.

“He’s been ill.”

“Ill?”

“He’s... not himself.”

“What,” said Xander, stalking forward like a slowly angering bear, “did you do to him?”

Spike pursed his lips and felt the outrage again. “Nothin’, did everything I could, he just...”

“You. Fuckers,” said Xander.

Spike spun about with a dip of the shoulders and a kick of the heel that would have set his old leather duster to snapping. He strode off. Xander immediately followed.

“Hold on, goddamnit, Spike! Stop right there!”

Spike stopped. He did not turn around.

“Where is he?”

“Hospital,” spat Spike, face forward.

“Where is it?”
Spike appeared to be counting to something. Then he slowly turned and began walking again, this time down the hill towards the village. “Suit yerself,” he said.

One lone, high-pitched tone filled the hospital room. Jennifer rose quickly and tried to find the little switch that would stop the awful sound. A nurse appeared behind her and turned it off. Jennifer saw her check her watch.

Her eyes went to her husband. James gripped his father’s hand; no more tears, just the tired, swollen eyes. “Dad?” he said.

Jennifer came around the bed quickly, tried to wrap herself around her husband.

He looked at her in confusion. Still, he held the old hand in a tight grip. “Sweetie,” said Jennifer, touching his hand lightly. “Let go, honey.”

“No,” said James simply. “No, the last thing I did was hang up on him. The last thing I did was yell at him... and...” He looked at his wife. His brows came down in puzzlement.
The doctor had come into the room. She stood back in a practiced respect. James saw her and his puzzlement appeared to deepen. He looked back at his father. He was so absolutely still. It seemed impossible. He stared at the man who had taught him everything he knew about the heart and the soul. “Oh,” he said. He pointed, like a small child, at dark marks above his father’s hospital gown collar. Two maroon spots on the old wrinkled neck. “What are those?” He looked up at the doctor again who came around the bed now, taking charge of the body, taking charge of the situation.

“Mr. Harris, Mrs. Harris, I am so sorry.” The doctor looked up at the nurse, who nodded and left the room. “We can take your father to another room, now,” she said, as if offering some care option. “Without the machines. You may stay with him for a while there, while you...” she looked up at Jennifer.

Jennifer nodded obediently, and tried to raise James from the position in which he had sat for so many hours. “Honey, we’ll sit with your father in another room...”

“What are those marks?” James whispered. His fingers wandered up to his own throat, brushed it vaguely. He looked at his wife. Jennifer felt the sorrow try to grasp
her, but she firmly pushed it away. She had to get James through this first.

“Sweetie, come with me,” she said. She saw the orderlies hovering outside the door, waiting to remove the body. She led her husband, suddenly so unsure he seemed an old man himself, out of the room.

Carefully making certain that James’ attention was in the opposite direction, she watched over his shoulder as orderlies smoothly removed her father-in-law from the room and wheeled him quickly down the hall.

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Well, this wasn’t so bad, thought Xander, looking around. The building was well lit, the interiors painted in soft colors. Unlike the hospitals of his lifetime, there was no antiseptic smell or clinical feeling of linoleum and machinery.

It was peaceful. A sweet, ritualistic smell, like something from those little churches he had visited when on business trips. Frankincense maybe? And villagers dressed in the silky polyester clothing, smiling in a friendly manner as he and Spike passed them in the halls.
Spike had been silent throughout the journey; apparently nursing some personal grievance that Xander could not, at the moment, be troubled to care about. Spike stopped outside a door and just stood there, sullen. Hands thrust in pockets, head dipped.

Xander looked at the door; anxiety, excitement, a kind of pinched emotion he couldn’t describe. “He’s here?”

A nod. Xander hesitated, hand on the door. “Can I just go in?”

Spike swallowed and nodded. “Xander,” he said quickly, before the boy could open the door. He didn’t look up to see with what expression Xander paused and regarded him. “I tried, Harris,” said Spike. He struggled to think of words, could think of nothing. He shook his head.

“Yeah, I’m sure you did,” said Xander coolly. He opened the door and stepped inside.

The reason he was allowed in the room, apparently, was that Giles lived behind glass.

Or some kind of polyplastic equivalent of it, thought Xander, walking the three full feet across the floor from the doorway and pressing his hand to the floor to ceiling transparent wall.
On the other side of the glass, in the middle of the room, Giles sat at a huge wooden library table. So much like the one they had sat around while researching, back in the early days of Sunnydale High, Xander would have sworn it to be the same one. He was bent over a book, smiling, nodding excitedly. Stacked all around him were ancient texts, scrolls. He was obviously happily unaware of Xander’s presence. Xander’s stunned eyes finally moved from his old friend to scan the room. The walls were bookcases, a staircase behind leading to more bookcases. Xander studied the wooden railing. It was so familiar...

They had recreated the library. Xander had a swimming feeling in his knees. He looked around himself dizzily and saw a plastic chair pushed against a nearby wall. He dragged it over noisily. Giles did not look up. Soundproof, then, thought Xander, eyeing the clear barrier once again.

As if to immediately belie this impression, a phone, sitting on the counter on the other side of the glass, began to ring merrily. The sound startled Xander. He hadn’t heard a dial-up phone ringing in a very long time. It seemed quite loud and abrasive. But Giles appeared unperturbed. He merely stood from his place, his eyes scanning but not lighting on Xander as they went to the phone. He strode over, a bounce in his step, and picked it
up. “Hello,” he said in that precise British accent. “Rupert Giles speaking.”

The sound of Gile’s voice unmanned Xander. He gripped the slim plastic sides of his chair, his chest tightening painfully.

“Yes, Buffy,” said Giles into the receiver. And the tightening in Xander’s chest moved up to his throat, clogging it somehow. He covered his mouth with one hand, as if to hold in the grief. And watched, heart breaking, as Giles removed his glasses and carefully polished them.

Giles replaced his glasses and spoke into the receiver. He had an air of great forbearance about him. “Yes, Buffy, I understand how important a Sadie Hawkins Day dance is in the great scheme of things, but we have a new nest of vampires to rout.”

There was a tiny snick of the door behind him. Xander heard someone enter.

“Harris?” said Spike cautiously.

Xander shook his head. He couldn’t speak and had no wish to. He watched Giles, who seemed so young now, from the perspective of a man who had lived well past forty. This was Giles in his prime, doing the life’s work he
had trained for. Before the disillusionment and the bitterness. The falling out from, and eventual destruction of, the Watcher’s Council. Before Buffy’s death, before Spike’s ensouling. Xander felt tears on his cheeks, not for the loss of his friend but for what must have sent him back into this place of comfort. “What happened?” he finally managed to get the whispered words out. Not looking at Spike yet.

“He just snapped,” said Spike softly. He stood near Xander, wishing he could put a hand on his shoulder or something. Anything. “He was fine, it seemed, first coupla days. I was showing him around. He talked to Angel for a bit. Met Dahla. He was a little edgy, kinda like you, but he seemed to be takin’ it all in his stride. You know, Watcherlike. Kept sayin’ ‘Hmmm. Quite.’”

“That’s what Giles would say when he didn’t know what to think,” said Xander.

“I made him really nervous,” remembered Spike. Giles had stood and was obviously searching for some book amongst the stacks. Spike watched him, head tilted. “He couldn’t sleep with me in the tent, couldn’t leave his back to me.” Spike sighed. “So, after a day of him jumpin’ outta his skin and wavin’ stakes every mo’, we brought him down here to Dahla’s place.”
“And something happened,” said Xander.

“He just snapped,” Spike repeated. “Dahla said he just stood up and walked over to an empty wall and started looking for somethin’ he called ‘Brethxin’s Text’. And that was it; we couldn’t get through to him after that. No matter what we did. It was like he couldn’t see us.”

Giles pulled the book down and spun around excitedly. Then, horribly, he began talking and gesturing as if he believed there were someone else in the room with him. Perhaps one of the Scoobies, sitting there at the table. Xander felt his own mouth grotesquely twist with the sorrow of it. He rubbed his hand over it, then over his eyes, his face, as if he could wash this away.

Spike looked sideways at Xander. “He’s happy, Harris,” he said helplessly.

Xander nodded. “Yeah, I got that right away,” he said in a snuffly wet voice. He laughed. Or exhaled. Laughing was a bar a bit too high at the moment. “He has his books. That would make him happy. He always missed them after the ...” Xander watched Giles back at the table again, merrily researching. “Is there anything in them?” he asked with a sudden, sad intuition.
Spike mulled over his answer. “No,” he said finally. “Least not to us. But he sees it and that’s all that matters.”

Xander nodded. “I want to talk to him.”

“What?”

Xander stood, the chair pushed back with a loud squawk. He wobbled a bit but then he got hold of himself. “I’m the Xander Harris he remembers, Spike.”

Spike had the worst kind of feeling about this. “No,” he said with absolute certainty. “You are NOT the Xander Harris he remembers. I thought that, y’ know. Here I am,” he gestured. “Same old Spike, right? What’s different? I got them ta bleach my hair, did the whole rig. But ol’ Rupert is smart, Harris. He saw right through it. He was talkin’ to me and then… then he just knew. And it was bad, Harris, okay? You don’t wanna do that to him.” He watched in sympathy as Xander slowly absorbed this. “You’re different Harris. A lot. You’re more confident, less” Spike frowned and thought. “Less fidgety, I guess. He’d know. Hell, I’d know.”

Xander nodded, thinking. “I want to talk to someone about this.”

Spike’s voice was bitter. “You don’t believe me.”
“Why would I not believe you, Spike?” said Xander his tone so cool that Spike could not guess whether or not Xander actually thought the vampire was lying. “I want to speak to a professional.”

“You don’t have the language.”

“You can help me,” said Xander smoothly. “And I have a lot more of the language than you’d think, Spike.”

Spike sighed. “Sure, I’ll help you. I’ll get Dahla to set somethin’ up. But I don’t want you to get disappointed, Harris. Some things you just have to accept.”

“You know, Spike,” said Xander, and the eyes that flashed towards him were hard and black. He pointed, with one angry finger, at Giles. “That man in there is the one who taught me to never accept failure.” Xander turned and preceded Spike out of the room.

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It was late when they finally made their way back. Xander was mostly silent. They had had a little chat with a doctor. Xander had made arrangements for further consultations. As soon as they left the building, he had gone quiet, and he hadn’t spoken to Spike since.
He didn’t appear to be angry with Spike, but then again he didn’t appear to want him around much, either. He eschewed dinner and stayed outside, examining the spotlight. Or just crouched in front of it in more silence. When Spike walked up he looked at him once, then pointedly looked away. Spike went back into the tent alone.

Having had a few weeks of constant companionship. At times combative, always sarcastic, and quite often irritating, Spike nevertheless felt excruciatingly lonely without Xander’s company. He poked about, cleaned and tidied. When he heard Angel returning from the village, he came out of the tent and excitedly followed Angel into his own.

“Oh, hello, Spike,” said Angel distractedly. He sat down on the bed and didn’t appear to have any plans to do anything else.

“ Took the whelp into town,” began Spike, pacing.

“That’s nice,” said Angel. He slowly began unlacing his shirt.

“We went to the hospital, Angel. I didn’t want to tell him, but he figured it out and he wanted to see the old Watcher…” Spike stopped. He looked at Angel, who had
tugged his shirt off over his head and was methodically working at the laces of his boots. “Are you listening, Angel?”

Angel looked up, squinting, as if Spike stood before a bright light. “What is wrong, Spike?”

Spike cocked his head to one side and studied his old Sire. Angel looked down again, pulling at his shoelaces and vaguely brushing at a spreading dark spot across his upper thigh. “What is that, Angel?” asked Spike, sliding down next to him and touching the foul smelling stain lightly.

Angel’s mouth opened in wonder. “I’m bleeding,” he said. “It must have hit me.”

“That ain’t blood, Angel,” said Spike in a sudden panic. He urged Angel onto his back, pulling down the drenched slacks. There was a large pool of some vicious looking black oil lying over an open wound on Angel’s thigh. It was ugly and smelled hideous. “Magic,” said Spike with assurance. He looked up at Angel who was staring, almost unseeing, up at the roof of the tent. “Where were you, Angel?”

“Dahla sent me to find a child,” said Angel. “There was a cave.” He looked sideways, at shadows rippling across
the wall of the tent; he smiled and waved his hand at them. “I think I’ll sleep now, Spike,” he said.

“No!” Spike grabbed Angel’s shoulders and violently dragged him upright. “Fuck,” he said “Harris!” he bellowed. “GET YOUR FLabby ASS IN HERE!”

Xander appeared in the tent door a second later. Looking royally pissed off, until he saw Angel and the mess now spilling from his thigh and over Spike’s desperate hands. “What do you want me to do?” he said immediately.

“Run like hell and get that faerie bitch up here,” Spike growled out. “Tell her to bring her medicine or spells or whatever they call them now.”

“Greimlich,” Xander informed him, spinning around. He took off at a dead run.

“Greimlich,” said Spike. He shook Angel hard. The older vampire’s eyelids were slowly closing and Spike slapped him once, hard, trying to keep him awake. “ANGEL,” he shouted an inch from his ear. “You’ve been hit by a spell, ya old poof!” He shook him again hard, then pulled him tight and embraced him. “Don’t you leave me, you old fucker,” he cried against Angel’s neck.

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Xander ran down the steep, dark path so fast, it was more like a controlled fall. He jumped the fence that encircled Dahla’s house and banged on the door, pushing it open as he knocked. Shouting every word in the alien tongue he could remember.

She came from the corner as if she had materialized. Her eyes wondering and huge. She moved so slowly, that to Xander’s adrenalized brain, she seemed to be floating. “Angel!” yelled Xander, gathering supplies that looked vaguely familiar to him from his few hours at the hospital. He shoved them at her. “Greimlich! Angel!” He saw the information register in Dahla’s eyes.

The run up the hill seemed to be even faster than his sprint down, thought Xander, feeling a wild energy in his legs pushing him easily up the steep incline. Dahla sped ahead of him, running with the bounding, easy leaps of a weightless deer.

By the time he made it up to Angel’s tent, she was already inside and Spike was outside pacing up and down.

“Is he okay still?” panted Xander.
Spike shook his head; his hands tore at his hair. “Passed out,” he said after several attempts at speech.

“Spike.” Xander caught at the distraught vampire, vainly trying to stop his agitated movements. “Spike.” In the past few days he and Spike had both seemed to be avoiding body contact. Which had been fine with Xander. The football incident too terrifying to revisit. But now he gave in and wrapped his arms around Spike.

Spike stilled immediately. He gave a great shiver and leant his forehead onto Xander’s broad shoulder.

Xander patted him, rubbed a circle in the center of his back. “He’ll be alright,” he said.

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When Dahla emerged some time later, they were both still standing like that. Xander’s entire larger frame wrapped around the slender, smaller figure. Spike’s head pressed into his shoulder. Xander stroking his hair. She met Xander’s eyes and smiled, nodding.

“He’s alright,” whispered Xander into Spike’s hair. Spike looked up at him. Their faces were an inch apart. The
warm lips parted in a gentle smile. “He’s alright, Spike,” said Xander again.

Gold light, like flakes of raw amber, floated in the depths of the eyes that looked down into Spike’s. Xander’s eyebrows furrowed and his lashes flicked over those eyes. “You okay, now, buddy?” he asked.

Spike nodded dumbly. He pressed his body further into Xander’s. Xander didn’t try to release him, but something seemed to stir at the bottom of those clear depths. Something darker. He took a deep breath and Spike saw the tip of his tongue. A quick pointed thing, briefly fly across his lower lip then disappear. Then Xander did release Spike, dropping his arms and half turning away. His eyes spoke once more, some troubled thought, and Xander looked in the direction of Angel’s tent.

“We should go in and check on him, right?”

Spike nodded. The parts of his body that had pressed against Xander had tiny fireflies of energy dancing over them.

They stumbled through the door. Once again, careful not to touch each other.

Angel sat propped up on his bed. His upper torso bare, his face pale even for him. But his eyes were clear and
steady, with that intense gaze that chilled Xander to the bone.

Spike stomped about, his immense relief covered in a show of annoyance. “Bloody Hell, Angel,” he waved his arms. “What were you about goin’ off again without telling me?”

“I’m sorry, Spike,” said Angel calmly. He looked at Xander. Xander met his gaze stoically and Angel nodded once. “Harris,” he said with something approximating respect.

“I’ve told you not to do it, you great ape,” whined Spike. He plunked dramatically down on Angel’s bed and caught his hand up in both his. His head bent to hide the emotion in his eyes, though it was so clear in his voice. “So what was so bloody important you were gonna leave me here to clean up the mess alone?”

“There was a child,” said Angel. He flexed his hand in Spike’s, then surprised him by turning his palm up and clasping Spike’s hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze, intertwining his fingers through Spike’s.

Xander could see how violently this small gesture affected Spike, and felt a twinge of annoyance that Angel could so easily hold Spike’s loyalty with these tiny little
hints of affection. *Tease*, he thought spitefully, as he might about a flirtatious but cold woman. Spike was holding Angel’s hand, looking up into his face.

“Thought you were gonna dust this time,” he laughed shakily.

“Not my destiny,” said Angel. The word appeared to have some secret meaning between them, because both vampires laughed and seemed to bend their heads closer together.

“Well, I’m off to…” Xander gestured vaguely, there being no occupation that demanded his immediate attention. He shrugged and dipped to leave the tent. No one remarked on his exit.

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Xander was concentrating on tortilla rolling about ten minutes later, all his energy focused on NOT attending to the sounds that he was nevertheless straining painfully to hear, when Spike came through the tent door and threw down his overvest as if he meant to stay.
Xander pretended a disinterested surprise. “Thought you guys were having a Hallmark moment.” He slapped a tortilla hard into the flour.

“Yeah, well...” Xander glanced quickly sideways and saw Spike standing in the middle of the tent, looking back towards the door. “Angel’s tired,” said Spike. He sighed and plunked down onto the bed. Pulled at the hair-tie at the back of his head and rubbed his neck.

Xander paused, a tortilla held between both hands. “There’s blood on your neck,” he said, like he might point out spinach between someone’s teeth. Some spring in his belly tightened. He gripped the tortilla and saw the veggie mixture plop out the end. He put it down, nauseated and no longer hungry.

Spike shrugged. “Angel needed blood.”

“He drinks from you?” Xander was amazed that his voice still sounded so casual. The spring in his belly having wrapped around his lungs.

“Yeah, well, he is my Sire.” Spike yawned and plopped backwards to lie on the bed, arms spread out to either side. His face, gazing sightlessly up at the tent ceiling, seemed small and wan in the meager light.
Xander found that he was gritting his teeth. “He took too much,” he growled. “Look at you.” His head jerked in a kind of nod. “You’re all…”

Spike’s head rolled to regard Xander in mild wonder. “I’m fine,” he said.

“No, you’re not, he’s… he’s.” Xander stood, gestured. Turned and sat down again. “It’s like he’s just using you.”

Spike watched him, his lips parted slightly in surprise.

“Using you. Like he does everybody. Poor Angel. Poor, poor suffering Angel,” said Xander, his voice ugly in his own ears.

Spike struggled to a sitting posture. He watched Xander.

“The big Hero. Funny thing, he’s the hero and everybody around him dies. He’s the big General…”

“He is a hero, Harris. Several times over.”

“So are you!” Xander pointed out, as if arguing some case.

Spike’s eyebrow went up. “Yeah. Guess.”

“Well?” Xander waved his hand around.
A smile touched the corner of Spike’s mouth. “I’m okay, Harris,” he said.

“No you’re not! He’s...he’s sucking the life out of you!”

Spike laughed outright. “Like a vampire?”

“Yes!” Xander felt the spring tightening in his head now. Crazy thoughts were twisting around in there. He turned back to the tortilla preparation board and brushed, with jerky agitated movements, at some crumbs on the edge.

Spike grinned at the back of the troubled young head. “Thanks for worryin’ about me, Harris,” he said. He smiled again when Xander made a disgruntled noise and shrugged one shoulder. Spike chuckled. There was something warming and sweet about the kid’s outrage, however misplaced. The White Knight was protecting his honor, he realized with a little thrill. Who would have ever thought it?

He cocked his head and watched the boy shakily cleaning off the breadboard, tisking and muttering. Xander’s ears and the back of his neck were red. With embarrassment, Spike imagined. “Hey, Harris,” he purred, seeking to lighten the mood with a little humor, “am feeling a bit drained, you know. Care to top me off?”
Spike’s voice, like a thick mink coat, slithered across the room and slid itself silkily around the craziness in Xander’s brain. ‘Care to top me off?’ Xander’s entire body shuddered as those words slid right into his cerebral cortex and seemed to touch every nerve. A heavy pulse of desire throbbed through him, and he put his hands flat on the counter to keep from falling forward.

The pheromones that surged across the room almost knocked Spike flat. He gasped. Which gave him an even greater whiff. He saw Xander shudder, grab the surface in front of him. What the hell?

As in the presence of incomprehensible Magic, Spike became extremely cautious and aware. Heat and hormones came at him in little pulsing waves. The boy’s breathing was loud and raspy as if his mouth were open. Spike found himself thinking of that mouth, as if the thought were a hypnotic draw, and then steadfastly drew his mind away from the thought. Xander swayed, seemed to relax. Spike drew in a deep breath and felt the pulse of scent fading. He looked down at his hands where the hairs stood on end, and at his lap, where other things would have stood on end if it weren’t for the tight rayon/poly of his pants restraining them. He reached over and grabbed the blanket, threw it over his lap,
before Xander turned with downcast eyes and clenched fists.

“Fuck off, Spike,” said Xander in a pathetically shaky voice.

“Sure,” said Spike. His own voice sounding a bit out of control as well. He cleared his throat. “No problem, Harris.” He tried to laugh. “’S what I do.”

“I mean it, Spike. Fuck off. Get out of here.” Xander still spoke with downcast eyes, but his voice was gaining strength.

Spike managed a little snort. “What, brat?”

“Get OUT of this tent, Spike!” Xander raised his head enough so that he was glaring at Spike from beneath his lashes. His lips twisted and he spat, “Get the fuck out of here and stay away from me!”

Spike stared and then reacted. “Go to hell,” he said quietly.

Xander stood. His whole body was trembling with rage. Spike slid his eyes up the long legs, allowing Xander to see him dwelling speculatively on the thick lump on the inside of one thigh. He purposely dwelt for an appreciatively long time on Xander’s neck also before
allowing his eyes to once more meet Xander’s. Spike put every ounce of evil intention and arrogance in the smirk with which he met Xander’s eyes.

“This is my place, whelp,” he said. “I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“Then I’ll leave.” Xander strode across the floor towards the entrance, grabbing blindly at a vest as he went.

“No,” Spike said, blocking the door in a wink. “You’re stayin’ here.”

Xander stopped dead. He was only two feet from Spike. Far too close. He took a step back and growled. “You can’t keep me prisoner.”

“I ain’t gonna, brat. I don’t need to. You can’t run away from yerself, Harris.”

“Oh, for crying out loud...” Xander expostulated in great aggravation. “Spare me, please, Dr. Ruth!”

Spike took an insolent step forward. He grinned at Xander, with the tip of his tongue between his teeth, allowing his eyes to give the kid another once over.

Lightning struck at the core of Xander’s panic zone. “Fuck you, Spike!” He took a step back.
Spike took another slinky step forward.

Xander stared at him with huge, terrified eyes and Spike immediately felt like an ass. Poor kid was ready to have a stroke of some sort and here he was taunting him. He relaxed, ceded ground by stepping backwards. Bent his head to give the kid a chance to recover, then looked up again, schooling his expression to neutrality.

Xander still stood, panting, his mouth open, his eyes black. “Yeah,” he said.

Spike raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Xander huffed. “I can’t run away from...” He took a breath.

Spike shrugged infinitesimally, as if to indicate his dismissal of the whole issue.

“From myself,” said Xander. And he stepped across the two feet between them, grabbed Spike’s surprised face in his warm hands, tipped his chin slightly and fastened his mouth to Spike’s lips.

Spike hadn’t been kissed in over three hundred years.

He opened his mouth and it was as if he had lived in a small, dark cottage in the middle of an uninhabited wood
forever, and suddenly some stranger opened the door and just walked inside. The fire surged at the hearth, the lights brightened, the cat yowled. A million notes of music burst from the possessed pianoforte in the corner.

Spike melted into Xander, his arms wrapping around and up, twisting themselves to clasp the back of Xander’s head, his warm neck. He felt Xander’s arms pulling him in, his tongue skating along the roof of Spike’s mouth, warm, soft, pressing into Spike’s tongue. Spike wriggled and writhed against him. Somebody moaned and the sound vibrated inside their shared mouths.

“Spike!” The voice in Xander’s head was screaming at him, drawing attention to what he was doing. “Spike!” ‘Yeah, shut up,’ thought Xander fiercely, sucking on the cool, strong tongue he had found, ‘Yeah, I’m kissing Spike. Shut the fuck up.’

“A Spike! Help!” A tiny space appeared between the shared Heaven of their mouths as Spike drew back. “Spike!” The voice was coming from the other tent. Spike looked up at Xander, his eyes were black with swelled iris, his mouth red and swollen. “Spike!”

“It’s Angel,” breathed Spike, staring up at Xander.

“Spike! Help me, Spike!”
They separated and it was as if Spike had suddenly regained his own body. He looked down in wonder at hands and arms that had just seconds earlier been part of some other universe. He heard Xander take a big, gasping breath.

They jumped and ran out of their tent and into Angel’s.

Angel was sitting up on his bed again, looking very much as he had when Xander had seen him earlier. Except his covers were pushed off and he was running his hands up and down his completely naked torso. Xander looked away.

“Spike,” panted Angel, his breath coming in fast, hyperventilating gasps. “What’s wrong with me, what’s going on?” Xander could hear him patting himself. He glanced back to see Spike, kneeling beside Angel, helpfully dragging the covers back over him, but Angel pushed them away and grabbed Spike’s hand, pressed it to his chest.

A surge of something Xander immediately recognized as pure male jealous rage pumped through his body and he stepped forward. But Spike had stilled and put his other hand on Angel’s chest. Then bent forward and pressed the side of his head there.
Xander rocked on his feet, not knowing what to do.

“Fuck, Angel,” said Spike, drawing back and staring at the naked vampire. He swiveled and stared up at Xander. Xander noticed randomly that Spike’s lips were still swollen and red. “Fuck,” said Spike, through his kiss-bruised lips. “Angel’s alive.”

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“How did it happen?”

They were sitting, more or less alone, finally, in a corner of Dahla’s house. After Spike and Xander had dressed and urged a bizarrely embarrassed Angel to walk down the hill to Dahla and present himself, fully shanshued, the entire village had risen up in an explosion of celebration.

Bright, colored solar lights, used only at the darkest night celebration, were strung across the main street. Troubadours strummed shining, lacquered, long-necked mandolins while the ringing percussion cymbals beat out a rocking, Asian sounding, beat. Young women danced; long, complicated lines of them weaving though the town, behind a festooned symbol held aloft by a small
child. Food gifts were brought. Decorated with flowers and ribbons of clinging, shiny cloth. The people sang and reached towards Angel, their faces bright with joyous smiles.

Dahla wept.

Angel had clung to Spike, throughout. Xander shadowed them, feeling the odd homesickness of someone caught at a family celebration in a foreign land. Angel seemed unable to take a step without at least one hand needfully gripping Spike. Xander imagined how weak he must feel, how vulnerable. *Poor Angel,* thought Xander, snidely. And was immediately disgusted with himself. This one day in all of the centuries of Angel’s existence, Xander had to give him. No matter how much he hated the guy, he had to appreciate the meaning of this moment.

He just wished Spike would acknowledge him for a minute.

But Spike was completely taken up. As teary as Dahla one moment, excitedly enervated the next. He alternately embraced and encouraged Angel. Making him blow out candles. Bringing him reflective surfaces and laughing when Angel automatically lifted a hand to fix his hair. Finally, with the look of pride and sadness Xander recognized as that of a parent giving away his daughter,
Spike held Angel’s shoulders, gazed into his face, and with a little shove walked away to leave him with Dahla. The human couple walked slowly into the back of the house and disappeared behind a door.

Spike came back and sat beside Xander.

“How did it happen, Spike?” Xander asked again.

Spike sighed and shook his head slightly. “I dunno, Harris. Guess it was the kid in the cave. The counter finally turned over or somethin’.” He looked towards the hallway down which he had lost Angel, his expression unfathomable.

“Are you alright?” asked Xander softly. He wanted to take Spike’s hand, but wasn’t sure of it. He could have told himself it was to comfort, but Xander was being honest with himself today. He wanted more than to comfort.

Spike looked back at him with bright eyes. “Yeah, thanks. I’m good.” His eyes lost their focus as his thoughts went internal again. “Gives a bloke hope, don’t it?” He looked down at his knees and his lips curled in a little smile.

“You think it’ll happen to you some day?” asked Xander, surprised that he had never thought of it.
“Nah,” said Spike, shaking off redemption like a dog would shake off water. “Think that prophecy was kinda a one-off. It’s been drivin’ Angel for so long. Kinda wonder if he didn’t make it happen himself, wanting it so…” He looked off towards the hallway again.

“You don’t want it,” stated Xander.

Spike shrugged. “I like being a demon. Kinda hate the idea of hell, mind you. But I wouldn’t mind…” his voice went soft and he looked off into space, “wouldn’t mind Heaven, I think. There’s a few people there I’d be pleased to see again…” The happy tilt at the corners of his eyes turned down and Xander saw him frown.

He didn’t know what to say, so he took Spike’s hand.

It was funny how much personality and feeling could be in a hand. Spike’s hand was strong and hard, a man’s hand. But his preternatural healing had kept him from calluses and the skin was as soft as a small boy’s. The bones were long and elegant. They were refined hands, a poet’s hands. Xander’s big, thick fingers closed around Spike’s hand and the vampire turned his wrist and wrapped his fingers firmly through Xander’s. The grip was cool, but a warm centered feeling emanated from it and settled in Xander’s chest. He sighed and leaned back against the wall, resting their hands between them.
He was content with this, he thought, until he felt Spike’s thumb brushing softly up and down the inside of his wrist. He looked up into hungry, dark blue eyes and a wave of desire took the room away.

He hadn’t realized he was leaning towards Spike until they touched lips. His mouth opened against Spike’s and his mind greyed out to just that circle of contact.

“Harris,” whispered Spike against his mouth.

Xander managed to make some sound.

“D’you know what your doin’?”

Xander shook his head, and leaned forward again into Spike’s lips. His free hand tangled in Spike’s shirt collar, pulled him closer. He licked across Spike’s full lower lip, so soft, so... Xander moaned.

Spike pulled away. He straightened and, grasping Xander’s shoulders, forced him to straighten also. “Harris, you ain’t some teenage girl. Think about what you’re gettin’ into here.”

The eyes that looked into Spike’s seemed a kaleidoscope of velvety colors. “I don’t know what I’m getting into. Teach me, Spike,” Xander whispered.
Spike whimpered helplessly and grabbed Xander violently against him. His mouth latched onto Xander’s with a ferocity that overwhelmed Xander’s senses. He felt himself handled, overpowered. He heard himself make some small acquiescent sound and then he was lifted, Spike easily pushing him to his feet, they stumbled backwards. A door opened behind him and he was tripping over feet, practically carried across an unlit room. Xander felt his legs hit something hard and then he was tumbling backwards into the dark.

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The wake room was small and tastefully lit with recessed lights. The thick scent of lilies lay over everything. Jennifer understood, with that constantly pragmatic part of her mind, the necessity for the lilies, but she hated the way their thick scent crawled to the back of her nose, almost gagging her.

James sat hunched over in one of the dark wood, velvet upholstered chairs. The guests remained outside, it being highly unusual these days for people to actually view the body at the viewings.
Jennifer was still unsure why James had suddenly changed all the plans and insisted on a burial instead of a cremation. The heavy mahogany casket, it’s half-lid open, revealing the blush and make-up enhanced old man, nestled in white satin. James stared at him with an intensity that Jennifer found disturbing and frightening.

“Everyone is here, honey,” she prompted him softly.

James looked up at her. His face seemed terribly alert and ready for something. “Okay.”

“They...” Jennifer allowed herself a small moment of sorrow. It rose in her throat. “You should hear the lovely things people are saying about him...” she said in a teary voice.

“Yeah,” said James. He stood. “Dad was a real hero.”

Jennifer looked at him oddly.

James walked out of the room, steady and serious and his wife went with him, her arm looped through his. As they left she glanced back at her father in law’s casket. The small blue and white paperweight that James had fetched from the house, now balanced above the old man’s clasped hands.
Jennifer had been lucky in her life and had not experienced a lot of personal loss. But she thought that maybe James was taking this strangely and she wondered how long one waited before calling in grief counselors. Or a therapist. She thought, perhaps, she should make some phone calls.

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“What do you want, Xander?” Spike whispered against the warm ear, wet where he had been sucking on the lobe.

Xander shifted under the lithe body that seemed to move constantly as it pressed down onto him. Cool and hard, like a giant massage tool, Spike’s legs pressed into his thighs, his hands gripped and caressed and teased, his mouth was all over Xander’s face, his ears, his neck. He gripped the vampire’s narrow hips in his hands as if they alone kept him anchored to the bed. Inhaling in little surprised gasps and exhaling in shaky little grunts as Spike’s hardness rubbed and rocked and bumped against his own.

“Oh God, Spike,” panted Xander, his head twisting under Spike’s assault. “I just want you to, just...”
“What do you want me to do?” Spike’s tongue plunged into Xander’s ear.

“What... Ooohhh,” moaned Xander, as Spike’s hands pulled apart his shirt and two strong cool thumbs ran back and forth over his nipples. He whined pitifully and arched up when Spike stopped and drew back.

“Don’t stop,” growled Xander, in a seriously threatening voice.

Spike grinned. “Focus, whelp. What do you want?”

Xander blinked. “May I see the Wine list?”

Spike laughed and wriggled his hips into Xander and Xander’s mind shot off sparks and stopped having linear thoughts.

“Gah,” he said.

“Hokay,” said Spike. He wiggled downwards and Xander felt the long fingers at his pants, material falling away and suddenly the utter bliss of a strong fist wrapped firmly around his cock.

“Gah,” he said in as encouraging a tone as he could.

“Sure,” said Spike and bent to take Xander’s cock into his mouth.
Both Xander’s arms flew out to either side and tried to hold onto the bed as his entire body was sucked into the cool, soft tunnel of Spike’s mouth. He thrashed and felt hands holding him down; he bucked and felt himself restrained. He started crying out, a series of helpless, pitiful nonsense that his mind couldn’t follow as Spike’s throat closed around him, swallowing, the soft walls of his throat rhythmically gripping Xander’s cock. Suction, unbelievable suction, demanded the cum in his balls to pull towards his shaft, and Xander keened and tore at the sheets and flailed at Spike’s head as his balls drew up so hard and tight they felt like they were caught in a vise. He gasped out vowels, as a tongue flicked across his slit, that throat closing around him again, and a wet finger, two wet fingers, pushing against his hole. Pushing and circling; Xander tried to twist away, couldn’t. The fingers pressed hard, breached the muscle. Xander yelled. And fire flew up his body, stiffening the muscles of his thighs and chest, shooting white fire through his brain where it undoubtedly exploded out of the top of his head.

When his vision cleared he was laying gasping like a landed fish. Spike sat on his haunches above him, licking his hand like a cat with cream. His white torso, patterns of blue shadows moving as his muscles worked, stretched forward and hovered over Xander’s.
Xander reached up and ran his spread fingers over that smooth cool beauty. Down to the arching, hard cock. He wrapped his fingers around it, feeling suddenly enormously inadequate. He looked up at Spike pleadingly.

“What should I do, Spike?”

Spike moaned. His eyes appeared to roll back into his head, and he swallowed noticeably. The cock in Xander’s hand twitched hard and he tightened his grip on it, staring at it in wonder.

Spike shifted and crawled up Xander’s body. He stopped with his cock hovering, dripping, just inches from Xander’s mouth. “Take me in your mouth, Xander,” demanded Spike, in a growling voice that sent sparks to Xander’s just-sated groin. Xander leaned forward and tentatively, gave it a little lick.

Spike hissed.

Xander looked up at him again, merry mischief appearing in his eyes. This time he leaned forward and captured the head firmly between his lips, pulling it back with him, as he let his head rest again on the pillow. Spike moaned and rocked forward into the wet heat of Xander’s mouth.
Xander flickered his tongue rapidly across the little slit at the end of Spike’s cock; he tasted precum drooling there and sucked at it hard.

Spike cried out as if in pain. One hand came down and gripped Xander’s hair. The other flew down to his shaft and began rapidly jerking up and down, pulling his foreskin back and forth. Xander felt a strange surge in his own groin as his tongue caught at the slide of foreskin and slid under it. He sucked harder, a kind of fierce desire for the sour salty liquid spilling into this mouth pumping in his belly, heating his groin. He reached up with both hands and found Spike’s firm buttocks, dug his fingers in and groaned.

“Oh, Xander!” Spike was bucking now. His cock pushing into the back of Xander’s throat, making him gag and then a rush of cool liquid, filling his mouth completely and dribbling down the sides of his face. Spike practically tearing his hair out and wailing.

With one last long wail, the gush of cum let up and Spike stopped rocking. Xander still gulping and trying not to gag, Spike pulled himself, with a little pop, from Xander’s still suckling lips.
Spike scooted back a bit then let himself collapse over Xander. Xander wrapped his arms around the cool body and squeezed apologetically.

“I’m sorry,” he said sadly. “I’m not very good at that.”

Spike made a choking noise and his body vibrated somehow, he lifted his head, looking into Xander’s face and Xander could see him laughing. He felt a little stunned. “I’ll get better,” he said defensively.

“Christ, Harris, you get any better and my fucking heart will start beating. You about did me in, brat.”

Xander grinned. “Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Spike warmly, his lips closing over Xander’s. They tasted each other for a long time, tongues sharing each other’s cum, until their lips became hungry again. Spike drew back and smiled into Xander’s eyes. “Course, I’ve been hard for you for days. Wasn’t gonna take much.”

Xander didn’t know if he should pout or blush. He did neither but looked up at Spike wonderingly. “How do you do that?” he said finally.

Spike bent down and gave Xander another kiss. “Do what, Xan?” he said. He kissed the end of Xander’s nose.
“Stick yourself out there like that? Admit that you wanted me? I mean, I could say it was a fluke. You know? Or I was in a bad place and confused...” Xander stopped. Spike’s smile had died, his expression gone still. He watched Xander like an old recluse might from behind a curtained window.

“Is that what you’re gonna say?” Spike asked in an inflectionless voice.

Xander looked into eyes that had been hurt so many times, it was what they expected. And yet, and yet kept letting it happen. “Is that what you think you deserve?” he said with the brilliant insight of an old man who had spent too much of his life watching television with women. “Is that what you want me to do?”

Spike was still. He didn’t move, but Xander could feel him withdrawing, getting ready for the punch in the nose, the kick in the groin. “I’ve been hard for you for days, too, Spike,” said Xander sincerely. He tightened his arms around the slim back. “I’m hard for you now,” said Xander, wriggling around to prove his point.

Some candle flickered in the depths of Spike’s eyes. He studied Xander as if mystified.

There was a hard, quick rap at the door.
They had left the door open, realized Xander in a pique of embarrassment, grabbing at the tumbled sheets, trying to hide Spike’s nakedness from the eyes of others. He and Spike peered at the silhouette in the doorway. Small, graceful, edges blurring and sliding as she swayed in the light of the hall.

“Es Angela,” said Dahla’s voice urgently.

Spike laughed. He let his head drop to Xander’s chest, then raised it and cocked an eyebrow at the boy. “It’s always Angel,” he said.

As Dahla led them down the hallway, Spike began to get that tingle of precognition that every mystical creature gets after centuries of survival. Maybe it was the draft blowing down the damp hallway. Or maybe that tingle was due to the warmth of Xander’s hand, still held in his. But, probably, it was the way the little shaman’s face looked. The fear in those usually steady eyes.

Was it possible that Angelus had risen? This whole shanshu thing was such a wild card. Maybe the human Angel was still cursed, on some metaphysical plane. Maybe he could still become evil.
Ah well, Spike shrugged that off. A human Angelus would just be a very bad man. He grinned in anticipation as they stood outside Dahla’s door. Might even be kinda fun.

The door swung open and Dahla ran in. Up to the bedside and leaned over.

Angel lay in a sweat of fever, tossing deliriously.

“What?” said Spike, coming up to Dahla’s side worriedly. “Is he havin’ a relapse from that magic oil?” He looked at Dahla. “Greimlich?” he asked sharply. “Es Angela besuchen em Greimlich aus?” “*is Angel under the spell again?*”

Dahla shook her head. “Angela es seeck,” she attempted in her odd English.

“He has that flu?” Spike felt relief for a scant second. Then he thought about it. “Came down with it pretty quick, didn’t he?” He looked at the sweating, feverish head tossing on the pillow.

“Angel has that thing I had?” asked Xander from his place by the door. He stepped into the room. “That unbelievably virulent flu that almost killed me despite a lifetime of antibiotics and vitamins? Not to mention over a hundred extra years of immune system development?”
He stepped up quickly and he and Spike looked at each other. Then Spike turned and lay his hand carefully on the sweaty head. “He’s burning up,” he said flatly. He looked up at Dahla. The concern in her eyes was more frightening to him than all the babble Xander had just spewed.

“Don’t they have antibiotics here?” asked Xander helplessly.

“Nope,” said Spike. He watched Angel.

“Aspirin?”

“No,” said Spike.

“Fuck, Spike, the fever alone could give him brain damage.”

“Shut up, Harris,” said Spike sharply. He chewed at his thumb thoughtfully.

Dahla had left the room and now returned, a young girl behind her. They had blankets, a jug of water and many small cloths. Dahla began immediately dousing the clothes in the water and draping them over Angel’s head and neck. The girl piled blankets on his body.

“Is that all they can do?” persisted Xander quietly.
“Fucking shut up, whelp, I’m tryin’ ta think here,” snapped Spike viciously.

“Think about what, Spike, you suddenly come up with the formula for penicillin or something?”

Spike jumped to his feet, his face blazing. He gave Xander one intensely hostile look and swept out of the room.

Xander watched him go. Turned back to Dahla and her assistant. “Vampires,” he said to Dahla. He shook his head. She rolled her eyes and nodded. Xander almost laughed. “What can I do to help?” he asked her, bending to pick up the water jug.

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Many hours later, an exhausted Xander finally dragged himself up the hill to the vampire camp. He pushed back the tent flap, nodded at Spike, and threw himself on the bed.

There was a long silence. The sulking vampire looked up from his chair in front of the fire. “He still alive?”
“Yes,” said Xander to the ceiling. He closed his eyes. “Fever leveled out. Dahla says it’s a good sign, and he’s sleeping now. She sent me home. Spike, I’m so hungry…”

“Sure,” said Spike. “I’ll make somethin’.” He didn’t move.

Xander summoned the energy to turn his head. “I am way too tired to ask,” he said. “But ask I must, apparently, if I’m going to eat.”

Spike looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“What the hell is wrong with you, now, Spike?”

“Nothin’.”

Xander watched him. He sighed. “I was married for forty years, Spike.”

Spike shrugged.

“And I know that when someone says ‘nothing’ is wrong, what they really want is for you to guess what is wrong.”

Spike reached over and poked at the stove door.

“So,” said Xander wearily, turning his head back to stare up at the tent ceiling and furrowing his brows in concentration. “Let’s see… Angel gets sick. You freak out. No, correction, you get completely pissed off. Angel is
getting better but you are still pissed off. I guess... Oh wow, Spike, could it be that you are mad at Angel for getting sick?”

“Stupid,” said Spike.

“No rocket scientist yourself, Spike,” said Xander.

“Not you, lard head, it would be stupid fer me to get mad at Angel fer gettin’ sick.” Spike kicked petulantly at the floor. “Not like he did it on purpose.”

Xander smiled at the ceiling. “I had an operation for gall bladder when James was about four years old. I was in the hospital for a couple of days and when I came back he ran up and kicked me, deliberately and as hard as he could, in the shin.”

Spike studied his nails. “Harris, I hate to criticize yer kid, but I think that’s a might mental.”

“No, Spike,” said Xander patiently. “It’s normal. Angel has always been invulnerable. He’s your Sire. It’s like having a father that never gets old, is never weak. Now, all of a sudden, he’s human. He’ll grow old. Someday...”

“That’s...just fuckin’ ridiculous, Harris,” expostulated Spike loudly. “Angel is not... I don’t, have never, thought
of Angel as…” He snorted and made a derisive noise, waving this idea away with both hands.

“Okay,” said Xander, smiling. “Can I have something to eat now, Spike?”

Spike sighed, rose and knelt down, began rolling out the tortillas. “Sure, Xander, gimmee a mo’ and I’ll have these ready.”

“Thank you, Spike,” sighed Xander in a heartfelt way. He closed his eyes. By the time the food was cooked, he was snoring lightly. Spike shook his head and put the food back into the storage container. He came over and sat down next to the sleeping man. Pulled a blanket up over him, taking care to tuck it around his feet. Reached over to play lightly with the stray bangs that fell across his forehead. Then he ran a thumb gently along the relaxed jaw.

“Thanks, pet,” said Spike softly. He lay down next to him, one arm stretched across his chest in a possessive sort of way. He closed his eyes and followed Xander into sleep.

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Spike did not wake until the people were trooping by his
tent on their way to the sunset ceremony. He popped up and looked around. Xander was not in the tent, and Spike could tell by the glow of the tent walls that the sun was exposed, so he couldn’t go outside to find him.

He paced a bit. It was odd being the only one not allowed at the ceremony now. In the past, he and Angel had shared the exile. Kind of like being their own country. Or family. Now Spike stood alone in the tent and listened to the voices outside.

“Dia Dao.” He heard Xander’s familiar clear accent, and could admit that it warmed him to hear it. An unfamiliar villager’s voice answered and Spike felt a little pride when he heard Xander continue the conversation. Halting and grammatically fragmented, he nevertheless was able to communicate. A higher, feminine voice joined the conversation and Spike’s brows lowered. He knew that change in Xander’s voice. He heard the new girl and Xander saying goodbye to the first villager, then moving further away from the tent, still chatting together. They walked far enough away so that Spike could no longer distinguish their words.

They stopped somewhere out there and continued talking. Spike paced. What could they be finding to talk about for so long? The girl’s voice rang out in a clear,
happy laugh and he heard Xander’s deep, self-deprecating chuckle. He had managed to tell a joke. Spike took another turn around the tent. Now there was silence.

There was a very long silence. Spike was beside himself, wanting and yet unable, to even lift the flap and peer outside. The glow hung on the walls of the tent. Spike stared at it, as if he could make the sun set faster just by trying. Then, with the quickness of a shade dropping, the darkness slipped over the walls. Spike literally burst through the door.

Xander was standing alone at the top of the ridge, leaning against the old tree, looking off towards the greenhouses. His head turned and he smiled easily at Spike as the vampire trotted up, looking around for lurking village girls.

“I saw Berynn,” said Xander. He stepped closer to Spike and easily slid his arm over his shoulders, hugging him against him. Spike was awash with that feeling of euphoria that Xander’s touch could engender, and forgot why he had been so agitated.

“Berynn?” he asked, trying to snuggle closer without appearing to.
“Guy from the village I met before the demon attack,” explained Xander. He looked at the ground, seeming to unconsciously hug Spike tighter. Spike went with it, his whole left side pulled into Xander’s shoulder. He breathed in just to fill his head with the boy’s scent.

“He has these weird fits,” said Xander worriedly. “Maybe he has epilepsy.”

“Probably one of the empaths,” said Spike. He dared to slide his arm around Xander’s waist as well. There was so much heat here, in the little circle of Xander’s embrace, Spike felt he had never been this warm before.

“Empaths?” Xander turned to look at him.

“Yeah, they feel other people’s feelings. Fear, happiness. Pain.”

“Must be hard,” said Xander.

Spike looked up at him. Xander’s eyes were filled with movement, like dark flags whipping in the wind. His mouth had lost its perpetual grin. The short upper lip slightly open. That pointed tongue appeared again, swiped the lower lip. “Spike?” said Xander. “Can I ask you a favor?”
Spike nodded, swallowing. *Anything you want, Xander,* he heard the voice in his head answer loudly.

“Sometime could we invite the village people up here for dinner and stuff?”

“What?” Spike heard his voice break like a kid’s.

“I think it would be fun to have a party,” said Xander.

“A *party.*” Spike said the word like it was the most ridiculous, idiotic word he had ever heard.

“Yeah, they have music, here. We could decorate. Feed them something special. It would be nice, don’t you think, Spike?” Xander was grinning with excitement. It was irresistible.

“Sure,” said Spike helplessly. “Okay, Xander.”

“Berynn’s sister said she could help us,” said Xander.

“Berynn’s sister,” said Spike.

“Yeah, I met her tonight. She’s nice.”

Spike was silent.

“We’ll wait till Angel’s a little better so he can come also.”
Spike nodded, looking at the ground. He relinquished his hold on Xander’s waist. “Okay,” said Spike, stepping back and giving Xander his space. He turned and marched back towards the tents. “Speakin’ of Angel,” he called back. “I’ve got things of his to pack. You wanna help?”

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They had the small bundles wrapped up rather quickly. Angel didn’t have much. All but a few of his books had all been lost in the fire that destroyed the world. A couple of precious vellum scrolls, his clothes. Xander was a little surprised that Spike was packing all of Angel’s clothes.

“He won’t need all this while sick in bed at Dahla’s, Spike,” he said smiling. “He’ll just have to drag it all back.”

Spike shoved an old shirt forcefully into the bundle. “Won’t be comin’ back, I expect,” he said low and tight. “He’s a human, i’nt he? ‘Spect he’ll stay down there with the humans, now”

Xander blinked. He was going to tell Spike that he was overreacting but then, he thought, perhaps he wasn’t.
Spike spent a long, somber moment at Angel’s weapon box, looking over the ancient tools and touching them lightly with his fingers. “Guess he won’t need these,” he said sadly.

Xander came up beside him, and that warm, friendly arm went around his shoulders again. “Maybe there’s something he’d like as a keepsake,” he suggested.

This cheered Spike a bit and he took his time, finally settling for a heavily carved dagger. More meant for ritual than battle anyway. They wrapped it in with the other things.

“Guess you’d like to take this stuff down there,” said Spike gruffly, not looking at Xander as he tied the last bundle shut.

“Sure,” said Xander. “I’ll do it.”

“Give ya a chance to catch up with your friends I suppose.”

“Yeah, that would be nice.”

“Won’t be long,” said Spike gruffly, “fore yer movin’ down there too, I guess.”

“What?” Xander stopped and stared at Spike.
Spike stood with his back to him, hands on hips, surveying the tent. “I could keep this thing up just ta hold supplies and weapons,” he mulled as to himself. “Bit like havin’ an extra room…”

“I thought…” Xander stood looking at Spike. He hadn’t actually given the whole thing much consideration, but he had felt that what had happened between them, whatever the heck it was, had been sort of meaningful. It hadn’t really occurred to him that Spike might not feel the same. Now, here was Spike apparently trying to get rid of him.

“What did you think?” said Spike over his shoulder.

“Nothing,” said Xander. He bent to pick up one of the bundles. Stood looking at it and thinking. Set it down. “Well, actually…” He took a deep breath. If Spike could stick himself out there, then he could too, right? “Well, I’d rather stay with you. I…I wanted to…”

Spike waited, his head down. He looked, to Xander, as if he were exercising an irritable patience.

“Why are you mad at me?” asked Xander, sounding like a child.

Spike made an irritated noise. “Not mad, you daft wanker.”
“But...”

Spike swung around in annoyance. “What in all hells are you mewling about, Harris?” He glared at the kid who was looking at him with his mouth tucked in and his dark eyes wide in that childish way of his. It gave Spike an overwhelming urge to hug him, so he looked away.

“See?” Xander pointed. “You’re mad.”

“Well, yeah,” said Spike. He shook his head and implored those above for patience. “Yer acting like some daft woman all pouting and ‘yer mad at me’ and...” he gestured, “the face.”

“The face?”

Spike turned and gave Harris the face with the big hurt eyes and the wounded mouth. Xander gaped at him for a moment and then laughed. “I don’t do that.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“God,” said Xander, laughing, “that’s awful.”

Spike couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, it is.”

“Man,” said Xander, coming forward and wrapping his arms thoughtlessly around Spike. “I am so sorry. I ever do that again, you have my permission to slug me.”
“Right,” said Spike, inside Xander’s embrace and unable to think. His traitorous arms rose and wrapped around the strong waist. Xander’s mouth was rubbing against his head. He was still laughing. Spike felt his face seeking and finding the warm hollow of Xander’s neck. His lips touched skin and parts of his body started disappearing again into the place that was Xander and Spike together.

“Spike,” said Xander, his voice soft and no longer laughing. There was a hand at the back of Spike’s neck, he rolled his head up. “Yeah,” he whispered.

A warm wet mouth closed over his.

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“God. Oh, God, Spike.” Xander twisted and squealed.

“Told ya I’d make you scream,” growled Spike from beneath the blanket.

“Ahhh!” screamed Xander obediently, desperately beating at the lump beneath the blanket that was Spike’s head.

A growl and a chuckle and Spike’s hands dug into Xander’s sides again and tickled hard.
“Staahhp!” begged Xander, hopelessly kicking and trying to heave the powerful, tickling monster off his body.

Spike stopped, but didn’t release him. His head peeked out from beneath the blanket, like a turtle’s head peering out from his shell. “What do I get if I stop?”

Xander looked down at him, leering with delight “Anything.”


Xander’s smile softened. “Yeah.”

Spike released him and crawled up further. Planted a soft kiss on Xander’s mouth. Thought about it for a minute, and decide he needed another. Drawing back from the second kiss, he looked into Xander’s eyes and felt himself floating there. It seemed he could just stay this way forever, watching the light and dark swirl and blend in Xander’s eyes.

They had gone from kissing upright, to kissing sitting, to kissing fully clothed under the blankets. Spike had never necked for such an extended period in all his unlife. But he hadn’t kissed or been kissed for many years, so he didn’t much mind and besides, he was terrified.
Spike was scared to death to initiate sex again with Xander. He knew, somehow he just knew, that this time would be different. This time it would mean something. The devotion and loyalty in this kid wasn’t something you just turned off like a faucet. Spike knew about that sort of thing. He was the same way. What was happening between them, this close, warm feeling in which he delighted, was rapidly rising to something more, something significant. He could see it coming at him like a steep cliff. He was either going to run up it. Or smack into it.

And, although the kid’s innocence was so erotic to Spike, that he was barely able to control himself, he felt a deeper well of sexuality in Xander just waiting to be tapped. Xander took such pleasure in the sex act, was such a sensual man himself; Spike felt the imminence of depths of pleasure. It was a breathless, terrifying place to go and he felt, as a diver does, a certain hesitation before falling backwards into the sea of it.

But, finally, Spike had never fucked a man. There had been something about his ‘relationship’ with Angel, maybe it was the Sire thing, or maybe the control Angel had to have whenever they were together, but Spike had never questioned or sought to change the roles in their sex play. Now, he knew, Xander wanted him to be in
charge. At least for now. Xander wanted him to... Spike’s mind spun out, sparks flying from the wheels, whenever he thought of what Xander wanted him to do.

A gentle hand ran up the side of Spike’s face, cupped it, ran back across his head, gathered the hair there and carded it gently. Spike’s head arched under the caress. Xander grinned lazily and repeated the gesture.

“This is nice,” said Xander.

“Yeah,” said Spike, surprised as some wave of emotion suddenly swelled in his chest and receded.

“So,” said Xander. He caressed Spike’s head again. Under the blankets, he shifted and spread his legs so that Spike’s body sank into him. He rocked his pelvis and closed his eyes in appreciation as he felt Spike’s cock rubbing against his.

“So,” said Spike, closing his eyes as well with a little shiver, and leaning over to lick Xander’s neck.

“So,” said Xander, deeper, softer, huskier, “you up for phase two?”

“Phase two?” asked Spike, nuzzling Xander’s collarbone.

“Yeah, you know, the next...er...phase.”
Spike looked up at him. He could feel Xander’s heart thudding against his chest. And Xander’s cheeks were turning pink, the rich blood pushing up to the surface of his skin.

“You know, Spike. That ... stuff guys do with...er...other guys.” Xander laughed nervously. “You know...”

Spike found he didn’t trust his own voice. “You want me to?” he managed to get out roughly.

“Yeah,” said Xander, the idea making him squirm already under Spike. “Yeah, I really think I do.”

“Now?” squeaked Spike.

Xander stilled and looked at Spike with that face he had promised he wouldn’t make again. “When... whenever, heh,” he said, sort of shrugging. “Or not. It’s okay...” He wriggled a little, his position suddenly feeling vulnerable and embarrassing.

“Oh, fer...” Spike rolled his eyes in disgust. “Feckin’ child.” He leaned down and took Xander’s mouth, thoroughly and passionately. When he raised his head again he grinned down at the breathless boy. “You getting’ insecure, brat?” He rocked against Xander’s pelvis suggestively. “Feel that?”
“Y...yeah,” breathed Xander, little curlicues of happiness spiraling up from his groin and down his thighs.

“Dick doesn’t lie, whelp,” said Spike. “I just want to...to be sure yer ready.” “I’m ready, Spike,” Xander said breathlessly.

“Right then.” Spike pushed himself up and slapped his hands together, all business. “Let’s do it then.”

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Spike leapt from the mattress and began tearing off his clothes. Xander stared up at him for a minute, then rose slowly to his knees, started untying his shirt. Spike was hopping up and down on one foot as he pulled off his pants, when he noticed how slowly Xander was moving.

“C’mon, kid,” Spike jumped back onto the bed, naked and bouncing. He brusquely helped Xander shed the shirt and reached for the ties of his pants.

Xander grabbed Spike’s wrists. “W...wait,” he said. He rubbed the bones of Spike’s wrists slowly with his thumbs and worked on breathing. It had been pitch black in the room the other night. Nothing but sensation, inside and out. Here, in the bright lights of the tent, the
bold reality of naked Spike. *Getting naked with naked Spike*, was splashing over him like cold water.

Spike busily untied the pants and pushed them down. Xander’s softening penis greeted him, Xander’s suddenly goose-bumped flesh shivered. Spike looked up at Xander’s chin, avoiding his eyes. “You cold, Harris?”

“Yes,” said Xander, whose teeth obediently began to chatter. He allowed Spike to push him down, tuck him under the blankets; he lay still while Spike draped himself over his torso. He belatedly responded when Spike bent to peck him on the lips.

“We’ll need some slick,” said Spike, scanning the tent with a professional eye.

“S…s…slick?” asked Xander gamely.

“Yeah, sure,” Spike assumed a professorial air. “Anal sex don’t have the natural lubricant you get with women…”

Xander shivered violently all over. “Oh,” he said.

“So you gotta use lube, or slick or…” Spike propped himself up on his elbows and scanned the tent again. Then he climbed to his knees, using Xander’s chest to lever himself up. “Otherwise it hurts like hell.”
“Hurts?” said Xander plaintively. “But…but…” Xander rolled over to watch Spike searching the tent. The sight of naked Spike now not seeming quite so naked, Xander could see and find himself oddly appreciating the vampire’s firm ass. “But,” said Xander, warmth beginning to return. “It feels good, too, right, Spike?”

“Sure,” said Spike, plopping back onto the bed with a container of something that looked suspiciously to Xander like vegetable spread. Yellow and sweet smelling. “Eventually,” added Spike.

“Eventually?” repeated Xander. “Is that butter?” he asked, moving away a little as Spike tore back the blanket and began scooping some of the stuff out of the tub.

“Don’t worry, whelp, its organic,” grinned Spike, scanning the slope of Xander’s muscular buttocks with an appreciative eye.

“Oh, g...good,” said Xander, lowering his head to his arms and shivering. He attempted a laugh. “Heh...heh don’t want a lot of preservatives th..there, right?”

“Right,” said Spike, scooping a large dollup out with two fingers. “all you want up yer ass is me.” He laughed, and grinned in Xander’s general direction.

Then he stopped, mortified.
Xander had his head down, his eyes squeezed closed. He was shaking all over, his butt muscles uncontrollably tensed up and spasming. Spike lay one hand gently on Xander’s upper back and felt the skin flinch from him.

“Xander,” he said low and soft. “You okay?”

“S...s...sure, Spike,” said Xander over his chattering teeth.

Spike ground his own teeth and cursed himself, his demon, and a variety of other innocent persons. Then he came back and cursed himself again. “Stupid prat,” he muttered.

“What?” Xander’s muffled voice sounded terrified.

Spike set down the container of spread and carefully eased himself across the boy’s back. He tucked his arms under Xander’s armpits so that he could hold him in a modified hug and lay his head down on the back of Xander’s neck. “Sorry, Xan,” he whispered.

Xander’s breath was still quick and shallow. “What for, Spike?”

“For bein’ all kinds of fool,” confessed Spike, rolling his cheek against Xander’s back, dropping a kiss there. “I’m ... nervous, Xander. I’ve never done this before.”
Xander’s whole body shook under Spike as he laughed. “Oh boy, yes you have, Spike. A lot. I am so sure of that...”

“Not...” Spike sighed, “not like this, Xan.”

“Oh,” said Xander. Then he figured it out. “Oohhh.” There was a silence during which Spike remembered what embarrassment felt like and Xander worked past the sudden mental image of Spike and Angel together.

“Do you still want to, Spike?” asked Xander eventually.

Now Spike was laughing. He rested his forehead on Xander’s neck and laughed some more. “God, you have no idea,” he snorted through his laughter.

Xander chuckled. “Yeah? Well, me too.”

“Thank God,” said Spike. He slid himself sideways off of Xander and pulled him over, then nestled back on top of him. Xander wrapped his arms around Spike and hugged him against him.

“See what you mean,” said Xander, moving his hips suggestively against Spike’s hardness. His eyes looked up through his lashes, shy and seductive at the same time.
Spike looked down at him, tongue between his teeth, and grinned. “You feel good, too, Harris.”

“Yeah,” said Xander. He ran his hand up Spike’s neck to the back of his head and pulled him down into the kiss. Spike felt Xander’s other hand slide down and grab possessively at his ass. It felt very very good.

Xander pulled away from the kiss, biting at Spike’s chin. “Think I just found out I’m an ass man,” he whispered, squeezing that part of Spike again.

The effect on Spike was somewhat like a tire pump. Every ounce of blood in his body seemed to pool in his cock. “Roll over, Xander,” he said, desperately, before his brain quit working altogether. “Want to keep this simple.”

“Oh, you will,” said Spike. He crawled onto Xander again, bringing the container of spread with him. Leaning sideways he stroked Xander’s cheeks, occasionally stopping to lean over and lick the back of his neck, an ear lobe, a shoulder blade. His fingers caressed the dip between Xander’s cheeks, sliding up and down in the
buttery substance, until they slid, with a little bump, over Xander’s pucker.

Xander jumped. “You...you sure you know how to do this, Spike?”

“S okay, pet,” murmured Spike, licking at skin. He ran his finger over the pucker again, circled it gently, drew his hand away to get more slick.

“Seems kinda gross,” said Xander, wistfully.

“Not from where I’m sittin’,” said Spike. He slid his finger over the little opening again, rubbed back and forth.

“I’ve never seen it,” said Xander. He laughed. He wiggled a bit.

“It’s beautiful,” murmured Spike. He lowered his head and began kissing down Xander’s spine. “So perfect and sweet and waitin’ for me.” He smiled when he felt Xander wriggle again, and kissed further down, his finger still circling over the little rosette.


“It’ll feel better than nice,” Spike promised, kissing further down. His lips found their way down Xander’s
crack, his tongue lapping at the butter, moved lightly over Xander’s hole and he jumped again.

“Spike,” he hissed. “That’s gross.”

“Please, Xander,” begged Spike, kissing and licking, his tongue flicking back and forth eagerly. “Please let me taste you, let me…” He pushed hard against Xander’s hole with the flat of his tongue, groaned appreciatively when he felt it spasm.

Xander’s body told Xander’s mind to shut up, and pushed back infinitesimally towards Spike’s mouth. He gasped when he felt the cool tongue poking at his hole, then cried out in surprise as the pointed tip found its way in and wiggled.

He could feel Spike growling, the vibrations buzzing up his tail bone. And the idea of Spike’s mouth down there, combined with the soft yet firm sensation of the cool tongue inside him, was now so erotic, Xander was writhing around, his hips moving in a little circular pattern.

Spike pulled back a bit. He ran another lubricated finger over the hungry hole. “Yeah, whelp, it’s nice.”

“Spike.” Xander ground himself into the sheets, pushed back towards Spike’s fingers.
“Got you right here, Xan,” murmured Spike, his finger pressing harder, till it just popped in.

Xander made a noise and pushed against Spike’s finger.

“Yeah?” said Spike. He pushed his finger a little further in. He had an idea that there was a place that Angel hit inside him. He wondered if Xander had it.

“Oooohhh, Gaaahhhhd,” moaned Xander.

Spike guessed he’d found it. He rubbed softly against the little spongy swelling that was making Xander moan for a few more seconds, then withdrew his finger. Xander whimpered, but Spike quickly brought two fingers up and pressed in. Xander jumped again, Spike could hear him panting. He kept his fingers still.

“You okay, Xan?”

“Yeah,” breathed Xander. He wiggled his butt. Spike could hear the smile in his voice. “God, Spike you’ve got your fingers up my ass.”

Spike grinned. “Yeah, I do, Harris.”

“It feels so fucking strange.” Xander pushed back harder, and Spike obliged by shoving his fingers in deeper, bumping the little spongy lump as they passed.
Xander’s moan was long and drawn out. He spread his arms and his legs and ground against the sheets. Spike chuckled.

“You gonna make it to the main event, pup?”

“Spike,” panted Xander. “God, Spike, whatever you do, do it now please. Please.”

“Oh, Geez,” breathed Spike, pushing the head gently against that small enticing opening. “Oh, fuck, Xander. Oh fuck.” And he very slowly pushed in.

Xander cried out, his whole back stiffening, and Spike stopped dead. “Okay?”

Xander was panting. “Is it supposed to hurt? A lot?”

Spike was afraid to pull back and hurt Xander again. He kept himself still and thought hard, remembering. “Yeah, a little. Sorry Xan. More like a burning, though, right?”

“Yeah,” Xander’s breathing was returning to normal. After a minute Spike heard him swallow, then the dark head moved up and down. “Yeah, go ahead.”
“You sure, Xander?” asked Spike.

Xander nodded again. His hips moved infinitesimally towards Spike’s cock. A movement that sent such a surge of desire through Spike, he thought he’d come right there with just his cockhead poking into Xander’s hole.

“Do it, Spike,” said Xander. “I…I want you to.”

Shaking with the effort to control himself, to hold himself back, Spike pushed forward again, the heat pulling on him, Xander’s muscles spasming around him. “Tell me if you want me to stop, Xander,” Spike rattled mindlessly. “Tell me if I hurt you oh god Xan oh god so tight so hot so fuck oh god.”

Xander rolled against the sheets, his muscles tightening and relaxing, his hips finding a grinding rhythm. He started pushing up against Spike, trying to bring the thickness inside him back to that spot, that feeling of fullness swelling up his spine. His muscles seemed to want him to push at the intrusion and, convulsively, he did.

And as Xander bore down Spike slid in, his cock sliding hard over Xander’s prostate, and Xander screamed.

“Sorry!” Spike tried to still himself.
“Ooohhh, Spiike. Do that again,” begged Xander, trying to simultaneously press back into Spike while rubbing his pelvis hard against the mattress.

Spike was losing control. Xander’s channel was clenching and fluttering around his cock, so tight and hot he felt like he was going insane. The blood in Xander’s body seemed to be rhythmically thumping against his skin from the inside. Spike’s hands ran over the sweet smelling flesh and he found his body spreading across Xander’s warm strong back, his face rubbing into the sweaty neck, damp hair tickling his eyelids, blood pumping below his lips, his chest, until he was embracing it. Barely conscious of his demon visage emerging, Spike gently circled the back of Xander’s neck with a hungry fang.

Xander made a high keening noise and thrust back again. Spike shoved forward instinctively, and dug his teeth in infinitesimally.

Xander shuddered all over. Spike regained himself a bit and lifted his fanged mouth safely from the boy’s skin.

“Oh shit, don’t stop Spike,” cried Xander from beneath him, the broad, warm back heaving and moving, and Spike felt like he was riding a dolphin, a seal, some water creature. The strong hips rocking forward and back,
Xander’s skin becoming slick with sweat as he pushed himself up, and shoved back harder against Spike. “God, Spike, God, don’t stop. Harder. Please God.”

Spike pulled back and pushed in against Xander’s spot harder.

Xander cried out again, a high sound of pleasure, and Spike’s mind circled around like a spiraling bird, diving in and out of Xander’s voice, begging and pleading, demanding more and harder, driving him to ride against the taut globes as fast as he could. Hot tight heat sucking him in and clenching around him and sudden tight spasms as Xander bucked and yelled and banged his hips against the mattress and all Spike could do was hold on, his cock embedded in this wild animal, his pelvis slamming to meet him, his balls drawing up and pulling essence right out of his spine to flood inside Xander as he screamed and screamed.

Spike was lying across Xander’s back, breathing. Xander was whimpering and gasping for breath, his back still occasionally shuddering.

“Spike,” gasped Xander.

“Bloody...” whispered Spike against the skin of Xander’s back.
“Yeah,” said Xander. “Me, too.” He reached one hand back and grabbed Spike’s hip. Spike opened his mouth and caught a little dribble of sweat as it ran by. His mouth still open on Xander’s back, his hips still held hard against Xander’s ass, Spike drifted off, warm and sated and exhausted.

“Spike,” whispered Xander.

“Mtihxxst,” said Spike.

“That was amazing,” whispered Xander.

“N,” said Spike.

“I know,” said Xander, and he closed his eyes and slept.

~*~*~*~*~

Later, when he woke, Xander rolled over and gathered Spike and the blanket up over him. In his sleep, the surly demon seemed much smaller, and he responded to Xander’s embrace by curling up in a ball and nestling into Xander’s chest. It was like holding a soft cool pillow against his belly while he slept, a habit Xander had had as a human a very long time ago. He squeezed Spike a little
tighter and smiled when the vampire grunted and mumbled and then hissed a little. Like a kitten.

“No way I’m leaving you alone up here by yourself,” said Xander.

Spike murmured and growled at unseen predators, his lips mouthed the skin of Xander’s chest.

“We ‘also rans’ gotta stick together, buddy.”

Spike’s tongue found Xander’s skin.

Xander chuckled. He hugged Spike again. “Do I taste good, vampire?”

Spike’s face and shoulders wriggled and he whimpered in his dream.

“Yeah,” said Xander, his eyes closing as he drifted off. “I don’t know what I meant by that, either.” And he slept again.

8

Xander carried the heavy tray to Dahla’s table. The pot in the center, which he chose to think of as a tea pot, and china cups and saucers rattled alarmingly, but he managed to get the whole thing there without breakage. Dahla followed with a plate covered with something that
looked like tiny cakes. Xander thought the little treats might be nice to have at their party.

“*What are those called,*” he asked slowly, in her language.

“Platzcaken” said Dahla. She put one on a plate and handed it to him. Put another on a plate and offered it to the pacing vampire.

“Spike, sit down,” commanded Xander.

Spike was chewing his thumb and scowling, but he came obediently to Xander’s side and sat. Their hands intertwined automatically.

“Why does he sleep so much?” Spike groused to himself.

“The illness hurt him a lot,” said Xander. “Dahla says...”

“I can understand the bloody language better than you, whelp. I know what she said.” Spike snapped, tensing. Then he relented and squeezed Xander’s hand apologetically.

The child came padding back into the room. Xander noticed Spike tensing again. “Kid’s back,” said Spike, watching her as a grown cat might watch a puppy.
The little girl, tiny and so blonde her hair seemed almost white, walked through the room with a grace that seemed unnatural in one so young. She circled, watching Spike with the same fixedness with which he watched her.

“Dahla,” she said in that sweet lisping way of hers. “Angela,” she pointed down the hallway.

Spike jumped up, took a few long steps towards Angel’s bedroom. Stopped, spun around, came striding back to Xander. Xander stood and calmly followed Dahla and the child down the hallway, an agitated Spike noisily behind him.

~*~*~*~*~

Angel was sitting up in bed. The little girl scampered across the room and clambered up onto him, as if she spent a lot of time there. She put one tiny hand on his chest, protectively, and watched Spike.

The room was very warm. Kept that way by the stoked stove in the corner. The bed in the center of the room was massive and heaped with blankets. In the center of it, seeming smaller by contrast, was Spike’s former Sire.
Angel was haggard and tired looking. His skin had a yellow tinge to it and his chin was grey with beard stubble. He smiled and lines crinkled up around the corners of his eyes. His loose, shoulder-length hair looked thin and tangled on the pillow.

“Hi,” he said, wheezing a bit. He expended what seemed to be an exhausting effort, and heaved himself into a sitting position. Dahla arranged the pillows behind him and he smiled up at her. He looked almost like her father, not her lover.

Xander could feel Spike hovering precariously at the doorway, as if any moment he might flee. He reached over and took his hand. Angel’s eyes, still as keen and shrewd as ever, though living in the tired face, took in the gesture. He looked from Spike to Xander.

“Harris,” he said, somehow managing to put menace into that weak voice.

Xander nodded. He kept hold of Spike’s hand and even stepped a bit closer to him. “Deadboy,” he said. And smiled. It was the smile he had used on employees who were lying to him about what had happened to company equipment. It was the smile he had used on competitors when he saw them at public functions. “Oh,” said
Xander, still smiling. “I guess that would be not-yet Deadboy.”

“Geez, Angel,” said Spike suddenly. “You look like hell.” He dropped Xander’s hand and came into the room. The little girl by Angel’s side sat up, alert. Spike’s eyes went from his ill Sire to the little girl in his bed. His nostrils flared as if at a bad smell. “What is that, Angel?”

Angel looked surprised. One hand came up and stroked the little girl’s head with affection. “This is Hope, Spike. The child I rescued from the cave.”

“Hope?” said Spike. “Some bloody fairy named their kid Hope?”

“She hasn’t got any parents, Spike. That we can find. And she doesn’t speak their language. I named her.”

Spike absorbed this information. Chewed it over, looking from Angel to Hope. “Okay,” he said finally, and walked over to Angel’s bed. Watching Hope with steady, unblinking eyes, he sat down, not a foot away from her. Reached over and took Angel’s hand.

The child came up on her knees and punched Spike in the head.
Spike fell off the bed, holding his head and howling in surprise. Angel laughed. “No, no, Hope. You can’t hit people. Even Spike.”

“Ow,” said Spike from the floor.

“Say you’re sorry, Hope,” instructed Angel indulgently.

“Sorry,” lisped the little girl obediently. She glared at Spike as he rose from the floor.

Angel laughed again. There was color in his cheeks now. He pushed at Hope gently. “Go on,” he urged. “Go with Dahla. Spike is my friend. I want to talk to him.” The little girl watched Spike for another moment, then slid off the bed. She padded on those graceful feet from the room, casting one more suspicious look back before she left.

Spike was rubbing his temple where the child had slugged him.

Angel laughed again. “Spike, you are great with children. I never would have guessed.”

“Yeah, sure,” said Spike, watching the empty doorway. “What the hell are you talkin’ about Angel?” he demanded, turning back.
“Pretending that she’d hurt you,” said Angel. “Children love that.”

“I wasn’t pretending, Angel,” said Spike.

Angel laughed again.

“That is not a normal child,” said Spike.

Angel shook his head, smiling. His gaze went to Xander, who still stood near the doorway. His smile went stiff and hard. “I’d like to talk to you, Spike. Alone.”

“Sure, Angel,” said Spike easily. He looked over at Xander, who was returning Angel’s hostile smile tooth for tooth. “Xander?” Xander’s gaze came over to Spike, and his whole face softened. “You wanna leave us alone for a bit?”

“Sure,” said Xander. He came across the room, bent down, and to Spike’s enormous surprise, then pleasure, than blushing chagrin, kissed him firmly on the mouth. “See you,” he whispered, before straightening. He cast a tight smile at Angel before he exited.

There was a burning hot, embarrassing silence. Spike kept his head turned away from Angel, even after Xander had departed and shut the door.
“Xander Harris,” said Angel.

“Fuck off, Angel.”

“Unbelievable,” said Angel.

Spike ground his teeth angrily. He wanted to spit out something spiteful and witty that would strike Angel to the core. Something about finally being treated like a creature with feelings. Something about happiness and laughter and not always having to be so bloody sad. But he turned to his worn out, pale and wasted Sire and just shrugged.

“Yeah,” he said. And shrugged again.

Angel shook his head. He sighed. “Well, whatever, Spike. I wanted to talk to you about more important things.”

Spike waited.

“Our mission,” said Angel.

“OUR mission?” said Spike. “Uh, Angel, I think you are retired now.”

“Maybe from battle, but not from the war, Spike. Maybe I’ll just direct from afar.” His eyes went distant. “Like a general.”
Spike rolled his eyes. “Sure, poof.”

“It’s important, Spike. You are going to have to focus.”

Spike prickled. “I’m focused.”

“You don’t have me to keep you in line, now. It’s time to be responsible.”

Spike glared.

“Without the visions, we won’t know when demons might be planning an attack.”

“Hold on, Angel,” said Spike. “You don’t have the visions any more?”

Angel shook his head.

“You sure?” asked Spike, urgently. “I mean, maybe cuz you were sick...”

“I’m sure, Spike. Dahla has assured me as well. They are gone.”

“Bloody Hell,” said Spike, appalled.

“You are going to have to patrol, Spike. Watch the borders. We will need a more regimented sentry system in the village. Maybe a warning alarm?”
Spike was still trying to take it in. “What the fuck were the Powers thinkin’, Angel?”

“Maybe they thought you were ready to handle it on your own.”

Spike swallowed.

Angel smiled and sat up. He clasped Spike’s arm and through his alarm, Spike registered the weakness of Angel’s grip. “You are ready, Spike,” said Angel kindly. “You know everything I know, and more. You’ve always been a better fighter…”

“Angel…” said Spike, terrified by these words.

“I’ve always trusted you to win, Spike. When you were at my back, I always knew that I was safe.”

No amount of insults or admonishments from Angel could have caused the terror and sense of urgency in Spike that these words of praise were causing. “Angel, stop it,” he begged.

“We are all counting on you now, Spike,” Angel said. He leaned back against his pillows, looking exhausted. “Could you ask Dahla to come in for a minute, Spike,” he asked. “I need to pee.”
Spike ran from the room.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander sat on the other side of the plastic glass and watched Giles.

“*Does he ever recognize real people*” he asked the psychologist in his halting way.

The doctor, more robust than most the villagers, if even paler, turned his eerily light blue eyes on Xander and studied him for a long moment before answering.

Xander squirmed under the scrutiny. He felt like every word he uttered was being analyzed. Thank God he didn’t know enough of the language to babble, he thought. Or he’d be spilling everything right now. Childhood issues with his mother, secret Oedipal problems, a fixation with vampire bites... Yeah it was a very good thing that he didn’t know their language well enough to hang himself.

“*He sometimes asks for very specific items,*” answered the doctor very slowly, so that Xander could follow. He gestured, trying to be clear. “*He asked for the books,*” he said.
“*So he knew that you would bring him books? He knew, and asked, and then went back to reading the ... blank pages?*” Xander said, more or less. He imagined he had left out half the prepositions.

The doctor nodded. Apparently as exhausted as Xander by the slow and confusing communication. They sat in silence for bit. Xander watched Giles.

“*What is he looking for?*” he muttered to himself, in the alien tongue.

“*Brethxin’s Text*” said the doctor immediately.

Xander looked at him. He looked back at Giles.

The Watcher stood from his table. He turned towards the bookcase and brought down one of the façade books. Opened it, nodding excitedly. He began to talk to someone across the room.

Xander stood slowly. “That’s exactly what he did the last time.”

Giles was explaining to his imaginary companion. “a ridiculous theory about the bones of dead men turning to grass and air full of blood and...
“That’s what he was saying last time,” said Xander. He turned to the doctor. Pointed at Giles. “*He says the same thing over and over?*”

The doctor nodded. Apparently this was not so unusual amongst the mentally ill.

“*What does he say?*” asked Xander, watching Giles.

The doctor frowned, seemed to ponder the question. Then he gestured to the side of the room. He opened a small box hanging against the wall and drew out a little gelled looking oval. He turned the oval slightly and placed it on top of the box. The gel shivered once, and sound began coming out of it.

“You recorded it,” said Xander amazed.

Giles voice came out of the wall, clear British precision making every word intelligible.

“Ah, yes, here is the passage. Well, it appears Buffy has been held up again, but Xander, perhaps you will be entertained by this. I have always found it amusing.”

Giles peered over his glasses at an empty chair at the table.

“He’s talking to me,” said Xander, a lump in his throat.
Bethzqin was the Nostradamus of the demon world,” Giles orated happily. He ran his finger down the page. “His predictions began for the decade after his death,” Giles squinted at the page, “about 440 AD, until a good thousand years beyond our current time.” Giles nodded, scanning the huge pages, he found something at the top of the second, “Ah, here it is, just listen to the poetry of this Xander, And there will be mountains of ash, the sky will be a sea of blood and ash, the sun will have forgotten humanity. And there will be an increase in the fortunes of our war, a sea of blood and... hmmm...” The phone hadn’t rung, but Giles put the book down on the table and went towards it. “I really do wish Buffy would join us.” He looked back at the phantasm to which he had been speaking. “Xander, don’t touch that text! The inscriptions there are very fragile!” He came back to the table and threw his arms up in despair.

“I remember something,” said Xander.

The doctor carefully lifted the gelled oval and made as if to replace it in the box. Xander gently stayed his arm.

“No, wait. Let me hear it again,” he said.

~*~*~*~*~
When Xander returned to Dahla’s house, he found Spike and the shaman in the curtained alcove where he had first met her, deep in discussion. Dahla was sitting back on her carved stone ‘throne’ while Spike paced. When Xander entered the room, Spike paused, waved him in, and then continued with his dialogue.

“Xander, here, knows a bit about patrollin’,” Spike informed Dahla in English and then in her language.

“Huh?” said Xander. “Listen, Spike, I saw Giles and I think…”

Dahla interrupted with a question. Xander understood half of it: “*How many...?*”

“*I don’t know,*” Spike answered her. He turned to Xander. “How many villagers d’ya think it’d take to watch the area?”

“Watch it for what?” asked Xander, feeling stupid.

Spike tisked. “Vampires, Harris.”

Xander did the double take blink. “I don’t know?”

“C’mon, kid, how did you Scoobies protect Sunnydale in the day?”
“Er, not very well?” suggested Xander. “Remember? The Hellmouth swallowed it?”

Spike waved that off. “Before that.”

“Well, would have to be,” said Xander.

Spike stomped his foot slightly. “This is serious, Harris. You gotta focus.”

A small smile tipped the corner of Xander’s mouth. “Right, Mr. ADD. You are telling me to focus.”

This statement seemed to be something of a last straw for Spike. He flew into a temper, punching a column so hard the wall shook and a few vases on the shelves rocked dangerously. Dahla stood, concerned. Spike whirled around, shouting.

“Bloody ridiculous... surrounded by idiots... Angel is the General right sure, sleepin’ like an old fool with that faerie wrapped around him... feckin’ insane powers that smoke crack... like to get my hands on...”

“Alright, alright, Spike,” said Xander, daring the maelstrom to step up to Spike and catch his arms. “Alright, I’m focused. Look,” he stared into Spike’s face with steady serious eyes. “Focused. Now tell me what’s going on.”
Spike leaned needfully into Xander’s grip. “Angel’s not got the visions anymore.” He looked into Xander’s face, trying to see if the kid got the import of this information. “We don’t know when the demons are comin’ now. He was our warning system.”

“Oh,” said Xander. A bad tingle starting at the top of his head and running like an icy cold droplet between his shoulder blades. He glanced behind himself instinctively. He looked back at Spike, saw something there, some need. It was the sort of thing that made Xander Harris rally. He smiled. It was the smile he had used when the newly poured foundation collapsed and they had forty eight hours to replace it. It was the smile he had used when his girlfriend was dead, his home sucked into a hole in the ground, and he had nothing but a school bus to live in.

“Piece of cake,” he said. He grinned. Straightened. Turned to Dahla. “Let’s get some people down here and have a patrolling class.” He clapped Spike on the back. “It’ll be like Old Times.”

~*~*~*~*~

*Old Times are never as great as you remember them,*
thought Xander, shivering in a dripping grove of slimy, gray barked trees before a small line of nervous young men. They had chosen twelve of the fastest. On the unspoken theory that if they could do nothing else, they could get away and warn the village.

Each man held a crossbow, the bolts slung like ammunition on belts around their hips and shoulders. Each also carried a few of the precious wooden stakes.

A huge splat of something cold, slimy, and possibly with legs, fell out of the tree and slipped under Xander’s collar to slide down his back. He slapped hopelessly at the sensation. “Okay,” he said. The men looked at him with great pale eyes. Did these guys ever blink, wondered Xander, shivering again but not from the cold. “Okay, the trick is to keep your ears open and watch the areas where they tend to congregate.” Xander looked around the Hansel and Gretel forest. “Which would be just about anywhere…” he muttered.

Spike translated rapidly, eyeing those crossbows at all times. He left out the last sentence. “They come from the West usually,” he told Xander. Repeating this information to the little group of men. Their eyes all, simultaneously, looked West.
Xander shivered again. He stood closer to Spike and put an arm over his shoulders. The plastic chain-mail he had fashioned for the vampire squeaked weirdly at the touch. “And Spike can hear them before we can,” he said. Giving the shoulders a little squeeze. “So if he says so, we run, got it?” The men all nodded in unison.

“Okay,” said Xander, slapping his hands together and getting that awful feeling he always got when he had to decide on assignments. “We need to break up into groups.” He eyed the men, pointed out groups of two, trying to put obvious buddies together, trying to put the relatively larger with the definitely smaller. He pointed out their various directions. Two men for each compass point. It left he and Spike to cover the most dangerous point, the direct West.

The men evaporated into the dark so quickly and with such an eerie swat team professionalism, Xander found himself thinking he should be taking instruction from them.

Xander looked around them. “Boy, this is ‘the Tulgey wood’ if anything ever was,” he said.

Spike raised an eyebrow as he rolled into a walk. “What are you on about?”
“It’s from my son’s favorite poem,” said Xander. He turned towards Spike. “Well, great, looks like I’m stuck with you again,” he groused, good-naturedly. The words had an echo on them, as if they reverberated down the stony walls of time.

Spike felt a prickle up his neck. “We’re off then,” he said, glancing at Xander oddly.

Xander hefted his stake. “Better not get in my way, fangless,” he teased. He didn’t see Spike react, marching away, oblivious. “Here’s hoping the little beasties are all nestled away in their little beastie beds, tonight.”

They walked in silence for some time. The habits of many lifetimes had intervened, but Spike and Xander quickly fell into a pattern they had established centuries before. Spike kept to the periphery, moving faster than Xander, like a scout. He kept circling back towards the boy, who kept his eyes on any area Spike was not investigating. They worked their way deeper into the damp forest.

A mist rose around their feet. They broke out of the thicket to a little treeless hill, and began climbing it. And for a sliver of time, Xander felt he was back in an old, Sunnydale graveyard. The dew-slick grass, the rocks like headstones. He looked up at Spike. The vampire was a wraith in the drifting mist and fog. As he swiveled,
surveying the area, Xander saw that he had gone into gameface. He was standing in a haunted place with the monster of a million bad horror films. Xander felt... not afraid, but excited, anticipatory. A crack of sound in the distance and the monster’s head came up, eyes yellow and alert.

“What?” whispered Xander.

Spike held up a hand for silence, he prowled forward on absolutely soundless feet and Xander didn’t move. Afraid his stumbling awkwardness would betray them.

Suddenly, noise and a clot of color and movement broke through the dark spot in a nearby grove of trees. Spike took off at a run, Xander after a stunned instant, sprinting behind him. He grappled awkwardly for the horn slung over his back, bringing it to his lips while running, trying to spit sound into the mouthpiece.

Spike jumped, kicked with both feet, hitting a demon square in the chest. He spun mid-air as the stunned monster fell, and back-handed another demon so hard Xander heard his neck crack from ten yards away.

Spike landed and spun, facing off two more demons. Xander flung the horn back over his shoulder and ran up. Shoulder to shoulder they stood.
“Dibs,” said Xander.

“Get the fuck back, whelp,” hissed Spike from the side of his mouth.

They took two sideways steps in unison, the demons circled accordingly. Xander slid an axe from the holster at his waist. Spike caught the movement from the corner of his eyes. “I said to stand back, Harris,” he growled.

Xander laughed. Well, he giggled nervously, but in retrospect he would think of it as laughing. Laughing loudly in the face of danger. *Bwahaha, slimy green toad creature demons, he laughed*, his mind would say.

And then the demons jumped. Xander had always been remarkably uncoordinated in the face of danger, and his DNA didn’t fail him this time, either. He stepped back, to give himself room to swing, and tripped over his own feet.

“Blah...” he yelped as his ass hit the ground and slid. Happily, one of the demons had been in mid leap as Xander fell, and was flying straight over him. All Xander had to do, still flailing, was thrust his ax holding arm up into the air and ... A horrible slicing and ripping sound then the burp and gush as slimy green toad guts spilled out over him.
Xander had the sense to roll away. You never know what demon guts will do. So he only caught a little juice and possible kidney bits. He struggled to his knees in time to see Spike planting a short sword through the other demon’s skull. It made a sound like a jack-o-lantern on Halloween hitting the sidewalk. Spike pulled the sword out and kicked the demon over. Then he just stood there, glaring down at the body.

“Something weird?” asked Xander, limping a little as he approached him.


“Geez, Spike, it was a simple question."

“I TOLD you to stand off, Harris.”

Xander snorted lightly. “I did all right.”

Spike made a disgusted noise.

“I killed my guy, right?” Xander gestured at the mess that still lay on the ground behind him. “Held up my end?"

“The PLAN was, I fight the two hundred and fifty pound demons, you blow the feckin’ horn, Harris. Remember the plan? I didn’t hear any horn blowin’.”
Xander mumbled.

“What, Harris? I couldn’t hear your witty retort,” said Spike angrily.

“I said, I couldn’t get it to work,” said Xander. He struggled to stuff his gore-coated ax back into the holster, muttering ostensibly to himself but loud enough for any vampire in a ten-mile radius to hear him, “Thank you very much for your help, Xander. Oh no problem, Mr. Has-to-be-the-big-guy-and-kill-all-the-demons-himself.”

Spike glared. “Clean yer weapon before holstering it, Harris.”

Xander flushed and yanked the ax back out, pointedly wiped the blade on his trousers, glaring back at Spike.

Spike turned away. “Next time I’m goin’ by myself.”

“What? No way!”

“You can’t take bloody orders, Harris.”

“Orders? Orders?” Xander repeated in outrage. “Since when am I taking orders from you?”

“Oh fer…” Spike took off the way they had come, shaking his head in frustration.
“Nice, Spike. Make your little statement then march off. Very grown-up,” shouted Xander, running to catch up with him. “Very mature.”

“Shut yer GOB, Harris!” yelled Spike, whirling once more to confront him.

They stood, huffing breath into the misty cold air. Or at least Xander huffed breath. Spike exuded an attitude of breath huffing.

“You are the most stubborn, annoying human it has ever been my misfortune to meet. And not drain,” screamed Spike.

“Yeah, well, so are you,” yelled Xander. “Except, you know, for the not human part and uh, substitute staking for the draining part.”

Spike shook his head so hard Xander could have sworn he heard an animated cowbell. “Huh?”

“You piss me off, too!” yelled Xander.

“You know what, Harris?” Spike marched up to him and jabbed him once in the chest with a hard forefinger. “You know what I’ve always wanted to do to you?”
“Go ahead and tell me, Spike!” screamed Xander. He snatched at Spike’s hand, pushed it away.

Spike stared at him. “I’ve always wanted to teach you a lesson. Teach you to...” his gaze wandered over Xander’s face, “to...to...”

Xander was breathing hard, his mouth open. “Yeah, well I always wanted to see you try, Spike.” He pushed at Spike. Pushed him again. Started to push him again but Spike snatched his hand.

“Harris,” said Spike in a strained voice.

“Huh.” Xander stared at his captured fingers as if dazed.

“I wanna fuck you so bad right now.”

“Yeah,” said Xander. “Me too.”

Xander felt the impact and the ooze of wet against the back of his head as he and Spike fell into the mud, devouring each other’s mouths. Spike tore Xander’s pants down with such impatience, Xander heard them rip. “Oh God,” Xander begged against Spike’s mouth, “hurry.”

The hands that moved over him were frantic, the mouth that sucked on his neck, biting, was hungry. Spike’s hands
were between his thighs, successfully rearranging his brain by what they were doing there and Xander made noises intended to spur those hands on.

Obediently strong cool fingers grasped his thigh and heaved his leg upward.

“Wait,” panted Xander, some trickle of sense permeating the ooze in his brain. “Wait, we need...aahhh. No.” The face against his neck growled and rose up to glare in his eyes. Xander felt the cold blunt head of Spike’s cock against his hole, registered that it was a demon’s face inches from his own, yellow eyes naked with desire, mouth open, dangerous teeth so close....

Xander reared up and kissed the sharp mouth. Spike thrust into him, forcing himself into Xander’s dry hole, his grunts of effort vibrating in their mouths. Precum lubricated them both very quickly and on the third or fourth thrust, the violent penis was allowed access. Xander yelped into the sharp mouth as Spike shoved in. He wanted to protest this... this invasion, but his brain wrapped itself around the pain gladly and his traitorous hips thrust back, wriggling in a frenzy.

Spike drew back, howling like an animal, and Xander cried out with need and urgent want of more, something more...he fought Spike’s grip just to feel himself held still
by the taloned, hard hands, reached up and ran his own hands hungrily over the bony demonic brow, his fingers painting the distorted nose, the hard lips, touching the teeth.

Xander was keening as Spike pumped into him with an impossible urgency, groaning in loud, painful vowels, like a dying thing in the forest.

“Oh yeah, God yeah,” Xander cried and yelled and whimpered. “Now, God now Spike, do it now...” not even knowing what he was asking for just that he needed it and wanted it now.

An odd expression twisted the demonic brow. He curved over, the wet sound of the mud as the ground was hit by their shared weight, his hands tightening, pinching the skin of Xander’s hip his thigh. The demon dove down and Xander didn’t even have time to react. Didn’t have time to think. Heat rose in surges from his balls through his cock, the wash of cold in his bowels, deeper than he had ever felt it, and he cried out in the extremes of satisfied need as the vampire buried his face in his throat and bit.

~*~*~*~*~
The spotlight stood at the center of the cliff, colored lights strung out from it like a carnival tent. Angel’s tent had been transformed into a caterer’s dream, with long tables swathed with glittering rayon cloth, holding porcelain bowls of sauces and cakes and staple tortilla wraps. Xander carefully inserted the little spigot into the huge pottery crock of some mysterious beverage that Spike had dubbed ominously as “Grog with a kick”, and forbidden him to drink.

“You’re still weak, Xan,” he said, ruffling the silky, lengthening hair with the familiarity of ownership. His hand lingered and trailed to barely brush the bite on Xander’s neck. Xander shuddered and Spike felt a surge of guilt and something else he felt too guilty to admit. “Does it hurt?” he asked.

“No,” said Xander in that odd voice he had whenever they referred to that. “But please don’t touch it again, Spike.”

Spike drew his fingers back regretfully. “I’m sorry, Xander,” he said for the millionth time.

“Yeah,” said Xander gruffly. He stood, dusting his hands. “You said that.”
“But you don’t believe me.”

“I believe you, Spike,” said Xander. He surveyed the tent with a critical eye. “People will be coming soon.” He headed for the door.

Spike watched him go. In the two weeks since the incident Xander had been polite, but distant. Kind, but cold. He hadn’t argued, criticized, belittled or joked with Spike. It was horrible. He also had managed to avoid the vampire’s bed. No mean trick when they slept in the same tent and on the same palette. He just never seemed to be tired when Spike was. Or crawled into bed long after the vampire had drifted off. He allowed, even initiated, the touching and occasionally the kissing, but then quickly pulled away.

If Spike had known human men as well as he knew demons, he would have thought Xander was suffering from commitment anxiety. But Spike didn’t understand human men. He hadn’t understood them when he was one, and he didn’t understand them now. He thought Xander was upset and possibly frightened by the bite.

It had only been a little sip. A hungry taste of Xander’s blood, rich with hormone and adrenaline and endorphin, as both men writhed in the ecstasy of their shared orgasm. It had been not even a half a pint and Spike had
had the control born of all these years of feeding from the willing villagers and stopped himself.

But Xander had had tears and blood and mud on his face and been practically unconscious. Pale, breathing in thin, shallow gasps, it had scared Spike half to death. He had picked the young man up and carried him back to camp. Even when Xander had come back to a sense of reality and struggled to regain his feet, Spike had not allowed it. He had carried him back here. Tucked him in. Bathed the wound. Forced him to take food and liquids. All the while pitifully begging for forgiveness.

And Xander had forgiven him. Calmly, seriously, looking him in the eye.

“I’m sorry, Xander.”

“I know you’re sorry, Spike. I know you weren’t trying to hurt me.”

But Spike felt the coolness. He felt the distance. He had enjoyed a brief moment in the circle of Xander’s affection. And he felt his cold and solitude even more, now that that warmth was withheld.

Outside, voices of people arriving. The first Spike recognized immediately. Berynn and his pretty little sister, Sherleen. They had been up here for the past two
days helping set up everything. Helping Xander with the formality of invitations and RSVP’s. A complicated and forbidding series of necessary steps to assure that everyone was invited and no one was insulted. There were party favors to be sorted. Too dear and too easily acquired both an insult. It was a complicated and difficult thing and Xander would never have managed it without Sherleen’s help.

It was a small pleasure for the boy. One Spike would never have thought to deny him. Especially after the incident. And the girl had been proper. No flirtatious and overt sexual moves for these young women! But Spike didn’t have to like it.

He pushed out of the tent and saw Xander engaged in conversation with the brother and sister, his arm slung easily over Berynn’s shoulder. And Spike felt another irritating twinge as he noted the flash of admiration and adulation in the young man’s gray eyes. His hand came up to Xander’s shoulder and he saw the way Xander’s head tilted towards him, the happy flush that bloomed in his cheeks. Those bloody empaths, thought Spike irritably. They knew just what buttons to push, just what you were happy to hear.
He stomped over to another part of the party area. Trying not to see the illogic of his suspicions. Glaring balefully across the brightly lit square at the two innocents.

“Spike!” Xander waved him over. “We are the receiving line! Sherleen says. Come on.”

Grumbling to himself, hands buried deep in the new brightly colored vest Xander had made him wear for the occasion, Spike took his place by Xander’s side. Stuck out his hand. “Pleased ta meetchya,” he grumbled to Berynn. The young man’s eyebrows went up in surprise and he laughed and took Spike’s hand.

Spike felt the comfort and calm and gawked at the child in surprise, yanked his hand away. “Don’t … you bloody devil!” Berynn had a positively imp-like expression on his face. Spike was completely taken aback at the insolence. In all his years up here none of these people had dared to try any of their magics on him or Angel.

“Whole Bloody System is breakin’ down,” he groused.

Xander laughed. The sound rippled over Spike’s skin pleasantly. Then Xander wrapped his arm around Spike’s shoulders and Spike could feel the party spirit starting to infect him. He looked down the hill and saw the bobbing
faerie lights of the approaching guests. Distantly, tambours and drums could be heard. Spike bounced a bit on the balls of his feet.

Xander laughed again. “This is going to be fun,” he said.

~*~*~*~*~

It was fun. After the initial stiff formality of greetings, everyone seemed to relax. The musicians settled into a corner of the plateau and, like a party back in Xander’s day, young people congregated in front of them, dancing.

Spike had meant to retreat into the shadows, but was unable. Their small group of patrollers in training found him and he soon was the center of his own little clique. The young men had apparently bonded and considered Spike one of their number. He looked up from the long, low bench they had set up at one end of the patio. A boy, Tyren, and his brother, whose name Spike hadn’t caught, were excitedly telling the story of some monster they imagined they had seen, with horns sticking out of its face and a long nose that was flat and pink at the end, when Spike’s internal sensor alerted him, and he looked up towards the reception area.
Angel and Dahla stood there, looking around.

“Hold on, fellas,” said Spike, rising quickly.

“Angel!” called Xander, as Spike approached the couple. He came up behind Spike and put one large, warm hand on Spike’s shoulder, extending the other towards Angel. “*Greetings*” said Xander formally.

Angel took Xander’s hand, looking at Spike. “Greetings” he said in English. “Spike,” said Angel, and his smile was fond. “It’s good to see you.”

Spike felt something inside himself liquefying. He reached forward and took Angel’s familiar, yet wholly unknown, hand. This was the man who had made him what he was. The man whose history Spike had made his own, whose opinions and points of view Spike had either adopted or lived as an open rebellion against.

Angel’s hand was warm, but not as warm as many humans. The skin against Spike’s palm was dry and felt loose. As if Angel had dropped a lot of weight. His face was drawn and still pale and he leant on Dahla.

“Can we sit down somewhere?” Angel asked, laughing shakily. “The walk up that hill ...”
It made Spike want to cry and rage at the indecency of it. He did neither. Awkwardly, the gesture wholly foreign, he offered Angel his arm. Slowly he led him to an empty bench.

Xander followed. "*How is he?*" he asked Dahla, low enough so only Spike could hear.

"*His heart is injured,*" said Dahla sadly. "*But he is becoming stronger.*"

*Of course Angel’s heart was injured,* thought Spike, adjusting a blanket over Angel’s shoulders. *It always had been.*

Spike could feel Xander standing over them, like a looming thunderhead.

“We are glad you could make it,” said Xander in his formal, adult voice.

Angel’s eyes studied Spike. “I wouldn’t have missed it. I...” he looked around the plateau, as if noticing things for the first time, “I love what you’ve done with the place, Spike.”

“Still kept yer tent up,” said Spike gruffly, fingerling the fringe of Angel’s blanket. “Case you wanted to use it.”
“That was thoughtful of you.”

Spike found himself searching for words. After all these centuries, he discovered, he didn’t know how to talk to Angel. He couldn’t say what popped into his head. And the casual platitudes seemed so false.

“Xander,” said Angel casually, not looking at the man. “Would you please get me a drink?”

Xander didn’t move. Spike looked back at him and took in the narrow, dark way Harris was glaring at Angel. It suddenly irritated him to the extreme that Xander would avoid him like a disease, and then suddenly become the jealous husband when Angel was present. “Get Angel somethin’, whelp,” he said coolly.

Xander’s hostility flashed from Angel to Spike. “Sure,” he said crisply, spun on his heel and marched off.

There was an ominous pause. Angel took Spike’s hand and bent over it thoughtfully. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you, Spike,” he said.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander stood in the refreshment tent, blindly staring at
the precariously stacked cups and the punch bowl next to them. His thoughts, as they had throughout the entire past week, skated wildly over an oiled surface.

He raised his hand slowly, and allowed himself to run his fingers over the bite. A thrill ran down his neck and seemed to wiggle through his esophagus and stomach into his balls. For the past two weeks, all he had to do was touch it, and he was hard.

*A vampire bite was not an erotic thrill*, said the Scooby in Xander’s mind. He remembered what he had been told about Riley. The addiction, all the psychological problems that led to it. Dangerous, crazy, wanting the bite was just plain nuts.

Xander had been through enough of life to have gained a little self-awareness. He couldn’t blame Spike for the biting, he knew he had been the one who wanted it. And the endless, uncontrollable fantasies that Xander was having, reliving the experience in the woods, the bite. Imagining that face overpowering him, taking him. It was all about the kink.

And Xander wasn’t a guy who used someone to indulge a kink. He knew Spike had been used in the past. Used because of what he was not who he was. He remembered one drunken night, a remorseful Buffy
spilling the whole story. But Spike was not just a cool new sex toy. He had been a friend, a caring compassionate companion, through all this madness. He owed him more than that, Xander told himself fiercely.

Xander needed to decide what he wanted, and to stand by it.

But the way Angel had looked at Spike... Xander suddenly reanimated, went to the drink table and quickly slopped liquid into a couple of cups. He couldn’t leave Spike alone with him.

~*~*~*~*~

“Dahla said Xander had been down, to deliver clothes and my books? But you hadn’t been with him...” Angel had taken his hand and seemed to be trying to read him. “Have you been alright?”

Spike nodded, panicking.

“I sent messages? Maybe you didn’t get them...”

“I got them,” said Spike quickly. “I...I ... We’ve been busy, Angel,” said Spike, purposely changing the pronoun. “Dahla said you needed rest. And we’ve got the village in
top shape, security wise. Figured you could be left in peace...”

“I’ve missed you, Spike.”

Every dead organ in Spike’s body seemed to chill. “I...I...” he said.

“Dahla is everything I could ever want in a woman, Spike.” said Angel slowly. “But I’ve only known her for a decade. I’ve known you for centuries. You’re my best friend.”

Spike wanted to draw his hand away from Angel’s. He wanted to stand and run from this. But he couldn’t. He turned his head away, the colored lights overhead blurred and blended together as he looked at them.

“You’re my Childe,” said Angel. “My blood.”

The stranger with the cold dry hands and the erratically beating heart, saying things that Spike had longed to hear for over a century, but no longer wanted, touched the back of Spike’s neck with two fingers.

“Consider that this day ne'er dawns again,” quoted Angel softly. “I needed to tell you, Spike, how I feel...”
Spike shook his head, pushing this away. “I…I…” he whispered.

There was distant and distinct horn blast. From the direction of the village. Spike jumped to his feet.

“What was that?”

“The alarm?” Angel also turned his head to peer into the darkness.

“Demons,” said Spike, taking off towards the dark hillside at a run.

Behind him, the little troupe of vampire hunters rallied and raced to follow. Xander emerged from the tent, dropped his drinks to the ground and took off after them. The music stopped and voices around them rose in a panic. Dahla looked towards the bench where Angel had been sitting with Spike.

And saw him running down the hillside as well.

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The chattering stopped as James rose with a drink in his hand. The entire room of mourners turned respectfully to face him.
He smiled around at them. Some of the faces were old and almost unknown to him. Former employees, the children of friends. Even old pals that laughed meaningfully and nudged each other when they spoke of his father and ‘owing’ him something. A lot of friends.

“My dad,” said James slowly. “loved this world.” He thought for a moment. “He used to say, it was a place where anything good or bad might happen, a guy just had to decide where he stood and then help it along.” A couple of heads in the room nodded.

“So, you know, we did a lot of charity work and,” James laughed reminiscently, “we had a lot of stray dogs.” He took a sip of his drink. “But my dad loved the worlds in his head a lot too. The earliest things I can remember are him telling his stories.” He saw a lot of heads nodding along. “Yeah,” said James. “We all know dad’s stories.”

“But they were all the same story really,” said James slowly. “They seemed like monster tales. But they were really love stories. Because it was all about commitment to the people you cared about, no matter what.” He looked at his wife, and Jennifer came to stand with him again. “He taught me that,” said James, his voice failing.

A few hands raised drinks in toast. James nodded, unable to speak, and toasted back at them.
“Spike!” called Xander, hurtling down the black hillside, his own shadow, cast by the bright lights of their party, obscuring the ground before his feet. “Spike, you undead idiot, wait for me!”

There was a lot of noise up ahead. Some of the patrol boys were yelling back and forth. Xander heard smashing. A howl.

“Spike!” he ran hard towards the howl. Came around a clump of trees and found Spike facing off what seemed to be a crowd of demons. They had backed him into a wall. He was covered with dark, black blood, and was howling and snarling. A gash ran down one side of his face, the black demon blood smoking wherever it touched his skin.

“Demon blood equals ‘bad’” said Xander’s brain to himself as he circled around looking for a way to help Spike. It was actually easy. Every demon in the group seemed to sense him at once, they turned and advanced, forgetting Spike.
“Harris you bloody moron, get out of here!” He heard Spike’s peeved voice from beyond the towering wall of demons.

Xander, backing rapidly away, looking quickly behind himself to notice that the demons had encircled him from the back, nevertheless rolled his eyes. “Quit giving me orders, Spike!” he yelled back.

A big hand grabbed his elbow. He jerked away, only to be whirled about by a hand on his shoulder. Somewhere on his person, Xander had a hunting knife. It had become standard gear, along with the stake, as soon as he began patrolling regularly. He slid it from its sheath and stabbed blindly.

Something was hit, it yelled, its blood splattered across Xander’s arm, stinging like hot grease and everybody leapt back from Xander.

The happy sound of cracking spines, and Xander saw two demon heads go down at the back of the group. He looked at the faces turned menacingly towards him, once again, and pointed towards their fallen comrades. They weren’t the brightest big uglies, thought Xander randomly, as they all turned in unison and looked behind him. When the demons were looking at Spike, Xander leapt forward and stabbed again.
The demon he had hit screamed and actually went down on one knee, and its companions spun about towards Xander again. He saw a fist, a dark blond head appear then another agonized noise. Three demon heads went down. The group spun about en masse in confusion.

Xander’s mouth twisted in a grin. The demons were so rattled by the attacks that always seemed to come from behind them, they obviously were beginning to think they were outnumbered or that their adversaries had some special powers. They began backing off.

Spike trotted up to Xander. He turned his fanged, bloody face up to the sky and shrieked like a possessed werewolf. The demons cut and ran.

Xander started laughing. Spike turned on him and Xander thought they were going to have another argument, when a loud human scream, abruptly cut off, came through the dark.

They both took off in the direction from which it had come, rounding a corner, and discovering the source of the scream almost immediately. Just outside the village, near the hacked and still steaming bodies of two demons, the patrol boys were crowded around a kneeling Dahla. Before her, on the ground, his eyes open
and staring in agony, his head twisted at a sickening angle, lay Angel.

**WARNING, THIS CHAPTER HAS A MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH.**

Lying helpless and in pain was the worst way to die, thought Xander, pacing up and down in Dahla’s parlor. They had carried Angel in here. He had been screaming, when he wasn’t unconscious or delirious with the pain. He had been begging them to kill him.

His neck was broken, but not completely. The nerves still reported the deterioration and failure of his body to him. His smashed vertebrae and punctured organs. Angel could feel it all. He could feel his kidneys and intestines leaking the poison into his body, burning his tissues internally like battery acid. He could feel the bones of his back grinding into each other, squeezing the vertebrae and the nerves between them tighter and tighter. He could feel his flesh, desperate for blood to cleanse itself, desperate for air, suffocating, poisoned and dying. But he couldn’t move.
He had been begging them to kill him there, on the muddy ground. But the small child he had been defending from the demons would not let anyone near him.

Hope stood, barefoot and in her sleeping gown, hissing, her hair flying out as if with static, all around her. Spike had run to Angel and she had thrown him back. Literally picked him up and thrown him.

Spike bounced from the fall, and came at her again. But Xander managed, simply by wrapping himself around Spike’s body, to dissuade him, until Dahla could talk Hope into letting someone close to Angel.

Spike was almost as insane and animalistic as Hope. He howled and tore at his hair, rubbing the black demon blood and his own blood over his face, like someone gone mad. He dragged his clawed hands over his gameface, scaring every last villager who hadn’t already run from Hope.

Angel screamed in mortal pain and Spike became more frenzied. Dahla finally managed, her face streaming with tears, to get Angel’s focus, to calm him somewhat. He gazed up at her, his brown eyes milky and out of focus. The villagers approached warily, watching the insane vampire and little were-girl all the while, and found a
way to lift Angel to a stretcher. They carried him into the house, Spike agonizing thirty steps behind.

Calmed, Angel then began demanding Spike.

It was like calling for Death, and everyone there knew it. Dahla began to cry again. Berynn, and a couple of other villagers, turned to embrace each other, grieving already. Xander instinctively reached to hug Spike with one arm, but was shrugged away. Spike stared at the door, as if it were his own death he was facing.

“I can’t do it,” said Spike, finally.

“Then don’t,” said Xander immediately. “You shouldn’t have to. No one would expect you to.”

Spike turned his shocky gaze on him. “You don’t know anything,” he said.

“Spike, please, Spike, for the love of God,” came Angel’s voice. Spike made a creaking noise, like an old chair bending under a great weight.

The door swung open and Hope stood there. Her white gown and hair were smeared and sodden with mud and demon blood. The pupils in her pale blue eyes were pinpricks. She was weaving slightly on her feet, beckoning Spike with one tiny hand.
Dahla rushed past her, and Hope did not stop her. She stood waiting for Spike.

And Spike seemed to bend towards her, acquiescing to some tremendous power. He took the few steps to the door.

“No,” said Xander, coming after him.

Spike reached out and he and Hope took each other’s hands. A ripple seemed to pass over Spike’s skin. “Oh,” he said. He laughed shortly. “Of course.”

The little girl’s face tilted up in a mature and vaguely familiar gesture. Her eyes flickered at Spike, something knowing, even arrogant.

“He was always going to be yours, wasn’t he,” whispered Spike. He almost stumbled as she led him through the doorway.

“Spike,” said Xander, knowing Spike was heedless. “Spike, you don’t have to do this.”

He saw Dahla leaning over Angel’s body, Spike and Hope moving towards him, then the door was shut and he was standing outside.

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Spike walked slowly towards the bed on which Angel lay and oddly saw, in his mind’s eye, a dying king laid out on his pyre. Angel saw Spike and the pleading need in his eyes was very like the way he sometimes looked at him when he wanted sex. So Spike approached Angel as he would his lord and his lover and knelt by the bed.

“Thank God, you’ve come, Spike,” said Angel. “Hope,” he called her over, his voice pinched with the strain of not screaming “Take care of Dahla for me.”

The child stepped forward, kissed Angel solemnly. She lay her perfect pale hands on his forehead for a moment, gazing at him intensely, then receded to a dark corner. “Dahla,” said Angel. “It’s time to leave.” She was a brave woman, thought Spike, watching her rise, in a steady graceful move, from Angel’s side, kiss him once, whisper something sweet, then walk away without looking back. Spike waited until he heard the door close behind her.

He reached up, took Angel’s senseless hand, lay it on his head for him.

“Forgive me,” said the executioner.

“Spike,” said Angel, his voice frightened, “I can’t see you.”
Something was shaking apart inside of Spike, like a slow, deep earthquake starting so far within the core that he could only begin to sense its rumbling. He clung to the ritual. Climbed carefully up onto the bed, looked into Angel’s pain glazed eyes.

“I am the wound that heals,” he recited.

“Spike,” gasped Angel. “I have so much to tell you.” His whole body shook, the sweat of his agony glowed on his skin.

“Tasting of eternity, you repay every debt,” said Spike, the words rattling out of his mouth by rote, inside caves collapsing, rock shattering.

“I never told you how grateful I was for you,” said Angel. Tears streamed from the corners of his eyes, down his face into his ears. Spike madly worried that the tears would bother Angel, and gently swept them away. “I love you, Spike,” said Angel.

Foundations collapsed. His own self, a webbed construct of mind and dream and magic began flying away, like a spider’s vanity torn apart by a wind. Spike bit hard on his own tongue, felt the blood gush into the bottom of his mouth. It helped to remind him what he was. Why he was here. “Death has come,” wept Spike, struggling to
keep his voice normal. He had to stop and lean his head on Angel’s chest. Heard the weak heartbeat, the sluggish pump of blood, smelt the strangeness of this creature who looked so much like Angel, yet was not. It helped him continue to remember that. “But in dying,” continued Spike with determination, “you turn your death to life.” He leant to Angel’s throat.

The old scar, as magical scars will, had lasted centuries since Darla’s passing. Spike fit his fangs over it tenderly.

“Spike,” said Angel. “Please tell me...”

Spike had to stop.

“Did you ever care for me?” asked Angel.

The earthquake reached the surface, fissures breaking the crust tearing the earth apart. “Angel,” sobbed Spike against Angel’s throat. “Angel, you know I have loved you. You were my death, my unlife, my...” he sobbed, opened mouth, that silent wracking sob of the overcome.

“Thank you, Spike,” said Angel, peace coming through the pain. “Do it, Spike.”

Spike was still sobbing.
“Do it now, I ask you. Break the membrane of our sweet union.” Angel continued the ritual words.

Spike rolled his head, slid his fangs up against Angel’s skin. Angel couldn’t move his head, so Spike had to do it for him, sliding his hand into the familiar hair, over the skull he knew like his own, pulling the head so gently back, mindful of the crushed spine.

Angel didn’t make a sound.

Spike slid his fangs into the nectar from which he had sprung. Like the river of Styx, it was his legend, his mythology, and he drank Angel’s blood as if he were drinking down the history of the world.

Angel lay still, his soft human breath ruffling the hairs at the back of Spike’s neck. His heartbeat slowing, his pain… Spike looked up into the eyes, going dull, the skin white. “Is it better now, Sire?” he pleaded.

Angel looked into the face of his own death and he couldn’t help the fear. Spike violently shook off the visage of his demon. “Angel?”

“I forgive you,” whispered Angel, his eyes closing. Spike bent to his throat, re-entered the wounds. The last drops seemed to take forever. He imagined them somehow carrying the thickest, most redolent essence of the
demon itself, as the heaviest gold would sift to the bottom, the oldest vestiges of the Aurelius clan still lay in the last drops of Angel’s blood.

A chill swept over Spike’s neck. The halting breath no longer warming him. The heart no longer beating. A chill took hold of Spike’s body. He raised his head from the throat of his maker.

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After Dahla came out of the room and ran down the hall to another, private area of the house, pushing away anyone who tried to follow her with comfort, Xander found himself back in the parlor with Berynn and two of the young patrol men.

He sat on a stool and tried to collect his thoughts. In the other room, Angel was dying. It was a bit much for Xander Harris to take in. He had always thought of Angel as somehow eternal. The boogeyman, his personal nemesis. Always a threat to the ones he cared for, no matter how many times they planted that soul back into him. Always the spool the thread wound back to when something wicked happened. Angel the death card. Angel would soon be dead.
And Spike would need him now. The dazed creature who had stumbled into Angel’s room to perform his duty as mercy killer needed compassion and caring in the same measure as he had shown to Xander, when he had first been brought to this place.

He doesn’t need me having perverted fantasies about him, Xander told himself angrily, not recalling Spike in game face shrieking at the demons earlier, because that sent the peculiar spiral to his balls again. He’s a guy, my friend, who needs help.

The doorway to Angel’s bedroom opened, Hope appearing in it. Behind her Xander and the others could hear a sound like a twister, or a dog baying, or… Dahla looked at Xander meaningfully and he leapt to his feet and ran to help Spike.

Angel’s lay white and straight and utterly still on the bed. After over a month of waking up next to a corpse, Xander would’ve thought his ability to distinguish between a vampire sleeping and a dead human was nil, but he felt how dead Angel was. His body, his bed, the linens on it, were clean.

The rest of the room was covered with gore.
In the corner Spike was a tiny ball of loud, endless moaning. Fully vampire, he had torn off his clothes and shivered naked in his own blood. As Xander approached, Spike looked up. He appeared to recognize him.

“Stay back,” he hissed through his fangs. “It’s still hungry.”

“What’s still hungry, Spike?” said Xander, taking one crouching step forward. Spike was rhythmically tearing at his chest with his claws, rivers of blood running down it to pool around his hips and feet as he crouched on the floor.

Spike made a noise like a cougar and Xander froze. He had never heard that sound coming out of Spike before. “Angelus,” said Spike. He giggled. “He’s heeeere,” he said in an eerie voice, tapping his head with one finger. His hands came down, swiping playfully in the blood on his chest. He held out his gory fingers. “There he is, the old poof.” And he started to laugh. High-pitched, hysterically, gradually devolving and deepening until he was sobbing and rocking and moaning, curled into a ball, hands buried in his gory hair.

Xander crawled forward slowly, and when Spike didn’t respond, gently touched his shoulder. Still no response, so Xander wrapped his arms around Spike and hugged.
“It’s okay, Spike,” he said softly. “It’s...”

His head cracked against the floor and a claw jabbed painfully into his arm as Spike pinned him flat on his back, growled like a cat again and yelled. “Spike’s not here! I told you, stupid human! He wasn’t strong enough. Bloody soul...” Spike’s grip let up a bit as he raised up over Xander’s torso, rocking slightly, his voice going sing-song. “Bloooody sooooul.”

Xander made a small move to free himself but the demon quickly caught hold of him again, shoved him back down. He shifted his weight and looked into Xander’s eyes, his head cocked to one side, studying him, as if he wasn’t sure what Xander was. He lowered his head, sniffing his neck. He mewed appreciatively, his hips beginning a subtle grind against Xander’s pelvis, his cold, hard tongue drawing a line up Xander’s neck and over the bite that had Xander’s entire body shivering with hot and cold sparks.

“Angelus always wanted to taste you,” Spike hissed into Xander’s ear. And bit. The fangs incised the old bite with a fast, expert precision, a flash of icy pain that only elicited a tiny cry from Xander. But that small sound may have been what saved his life. Because when Hope came bounding back into the room, he was no longer resisting.
His hips were pumping upwards, matching Spike’s grinding movements, his head tilted up and back to give the vampire greater access. And Spike was showing no signs of pulling away from his feed.

Hope grabbed Spike by the hair and threw him against the wall.

There was a crack, and then a kind of confused clattering slither as Spike’s bloody body slid in the gore on the floor. Some kind of clarity returned to the yellow eyes. Spike shuddered horribly and his human face appeared. “Xander?”

Wobbly and weak, Xander struggled to his feet and crawled across the mess towards Spike.

“Hey buddy, you back with us?”

Spike’s head was buried in his hands again, but the sounds that were coming from him were normal. “He’s... he’s...”

“Let’s get out of this room, Spike,” said Xander reasonably. He reached his friend and gently pulled him upright. Spike sagged against him. “C’mon, we need to bathe.”
“No!” said Spike violently, pulling away. “You can’t just wash... you can’t...”

Xander held Spike. He lowered his forehead to his shoulder helplessly. “You can’t not bathe, Spike.”

“There’s a ritual,” said Spike, his patience in explaining this obviously paining him. “There’s a holy room. I...I need to do it that way, Harris.”

“Okay, Spike,” said Xander. “We’ll do whatever you need us to do. Okay, buddy? You just tell me what you need and we’ll get it.”

~*~*~*~*~

There was something so right about an old Irish wake, thought James. His mother had been Irish and his dad had always been enthusiastic about the proper way they celebrated and honored family. Weddings were soap operas of drama and drinking and tears. Christenings were beautiful rituals of religion and innocence and drinking and tears. Funerals were for reminiscences and stories and drinking and tears.

“Dad would have loved this,” said James, standing after another guest had told a story of his boss, Mr. Harris,
giving the odd jobs to the homeless guys they had found sleeping on a job site. “He loved stories and he loved being a character in them. He said, ‘Life should be an angsty drama with a happy ending. Otherwise it’s just bad reality television.’ He had so many stories,” James laughed. “And, of course, they were all true.” Several of the people in the room laughed.

“But Dad’s favorite stories,” said James warmly, “were about vampires.” He shook his head and looked around the room. He saw the warm smiles and imagined they had all been privileged with his father’s vampire stories. “There was so much detail in those stories,” said James Wonderingly. “I would ask questions, and he always had an answer, always had some story to explain his answer. About vampires and souls and love. About evil and blood. Weird thing about evil,” said James, smiling to himself. “In my dad’s stories, the evil guys were the ones that saved the world. Cuz, you know, everybody has that potential.” James looked at his hands, seemed to get lost in his own thoughts. Jennifer touched his arm and he looked up at her, as if surprised to find her there. “I remember everything he taught me,” he told her solemnly. She nodded, keeping the worry from her face.

“A soulless demon can’t love,” he said to her. “Not really. But a vampire’s soul can be restored to them. With an
orb of Thesulah. He had one, he said.” He was studying her, his eyes, so much like his father’s, wandering in puzzlement over her face. “I found it.”

“Sweetie,” said Jennifer, gently guiding her husband to a nearby chair and easily slipping the scotch from his hand. “I think some other guests would like to speak.”

“Sure,” said James. He seemed deep in thought, then suddenly, ghoulishly, he laughed. “I should record it,” he said. “That would just crack him up.”

Oddly, Jennifer found herself borrowing her coping mechanisms from her father in law. Wacky situations called for wacky solutions. “I’ll go up front and find one, honey, okay?”

James looked up at her and smiled genuinely for the first time in days. “Thank you.”

~*~*~*~*~

Xander rolled the bedding up carefully, and stuffed it into the bag of laundry he would drag down to the village later in the day. Spike had, in the past week, developed an extreme intolerance of odors. Xander needed to strip
the bed every morning. And most of their clothes and the boxed food had to be kept in the other tent.

Spike absolutely refused to enter the other tent. He even skirted wide around it when he passed it. Like a small child might give generous berth to the purported ‘witches’ haunted house.

He bathed frequently and obsessively. Just now, he was in the huge tub that they used for that purpose, it was pulled up close to the roaring stove. The heat filling the tent with such intensity that Xander’s clothes clung to his sweaty skin uncomfortably. He dragged the bundle to the door and stood wearily, gazing at the quiet vampire soaking in the warm bath. He felt the sweat trickle from his armpits down his side. It would be just a matter of minutes before...

Spike sniffed, looked irritable. “Harris,” he growled, “you need a bath.”

“I know, Spike,” said Xander, trying not to be annoyed or insulted. “I’m hot. I’m human. I sweat.”

Spike wrinkled his nose distastefully and raised a sponge to his face, pointedly blocking out Xander’s odor. “Humans smell like meat and blood,” he told the sponge
privately, “and death. They smell like death. They smell like...”

“Spike!” said Xander, thinking fast. Repetition of phrases was a very bad sign. “Where do you want to hunt today?”

They called it hunting now, the patrolling. It was one of the few things that seemed to still make Spike happy. Certainly, Xander didn’t make him happy. He could barely stand to be even a few feet away from him. And slept on a monkish pile of rags in the corner. Which Xander had to launder daily.

Thank God for Berynn and the patrolmen’s help. If the young men didn’t come up here regularly, returning and replenishing the supplies, water, laundry, Xander could never have managed the care of the demanding, unstable vampire by himself.

“I thought we’d go up that eastern cliff face. Fancy I saw some trail the other day,” said Spike, successfully distracted. He stood from his bath, dripping, rosy from the heat of the water. Xander’s eyes ran uncontrollably over the glowing muscles of Spike’s abdomen, thighs, that ass that Xander had learned to adore. He tried not to look at the penis arching half erect from the glistening wet brown curls between Spike’s thighs.
“Yeah,” he jerked his eyes away. “Okay, let’s do that,” he said.

“Bring me a towel, Harris, then?” said Spike.

And Xander bent to retrieve one of the freshly laundered towels. He had to step closer to Spike to hand it to him. Self-conscious about his own body odor, which Spike mentioned constantly, about his own arousal, which Spike would undoubtedly scent as well. He tried not to look at Spike at all as he pressed the towel into his hands.

Spike whipped the towel away and rubbed himself dry briskly. Xander turned his back and tried not to think about it. He heard Spike searching through the pile of clean clothes.

“I’m going out to get more water,” announced Xander, speeding out the door before he had to endure anymore of Spike marching around naked.

Outside, the colder brisk air. The soothing blackness of it all. Xander leaned against a tree. It felt good, the tree against his back. His back was lonely. His arms were lonely. Xander’s entire body was empty and lonely. He ached.

~*~*~*~*~*

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Xander stretched his cramped arm up over his head. He grabbed his elbow with his other hand and tugged a little, pulling out the muscle. Then he adjusted his posture in the uncomfortably small and rigid chair and shifted the drawing board to his other knee.

On the other side of the transparent wall, Giles orated. The same speech over and over. To the same invisible audience.

Xander watched him, his drawing tool tracing a particular arching shape unevenly over the surface of the pad. He grimaced, his face scrunching with the effort. And tried to make the lines a little more even. Then he looked up at Giles again. Shook his head with frustration.

“I’m trying, Giles,” he said.

The door snicked behind him and Xander didn’t even turn around. Giles’ physician stood in the room, arms crossed, watching his patient and Xander with that absorbed expression of his.

This was his daily routine now. To come, listen to Giles, and try to remember. The doctor seemed fascinated and had taken to accompanying Xander during his visits. Rarely, he would comment. The silent listening type,
apparently, thought Xander wryly. It had made him uncomfortable and self-conscious at first, but now he was accustomed to it, it was actually rather comforting. Especially today.

“Not much luck, today,” said Xander, shaking his head and gesturing towards his drawing pad. “*bad*” he said. The doctor peered over his shoulder at the odd glyphs Xander had drawn there. He raised his eyebrows noncommittally, as if to say he saw potential for Xander in some artistic field.

Xander grinned. “Okay, Picasso I am not, but this one…” he tapped a particular glyph with the tip of his writing tool, “this one is almost right. And I saw it three times. Probably,” he laughed. “probably just a demonic ‘and’ but hey.”

Giles, on the other side of the wall, had just finished his phone call to Buffy and come back to the table to exclaim over Xander’s eradication of the marks in his book.

Xander sighed and shook his head. “Well, it’s not happening today, I guess.” He stood. Handed the pad to the doctor, who took it without comment. This was their routine. “I’ve gotta go hunt with a crazy vampire,” said Xander. “Me and my shattered ego will be back tomorrow.”
He wandered over to the Town Hall, feeling more worn and less hopeful than he had in the week since Angel’s death. Spike was there already, behaving, thank god, like Spike. He was demonstrating a particularly effective throw. Letting the men, one by one, practice by throwing him. He acknowledged Xander when he walked up. His eyes clear and rational, if cool.

“You ready, whelp?”

And then they hunted. Spike led the patrol on a fast-paced, endless and grueling march up the east cliff. He had been remorseless and intense about this task every day since Angel’s death. Driven by a demonic adrenalin, that no human could possibly follow, he would circle back admonishing his struggling, exhausted ‘minions’. The patrolmen bravely tried their best and Xander found himself coming to love these warm, compassionate people with their huge hearts and sense of comraderie. He approved.

Today, Spike seemed even more obsessed than usual, and long after the men had finally admitted defeat and collapsed in various stages of exhaustion against a string
of trees outside the village, Spike was still prowling, lecturing, restless. Xander, happily hyperactive in his seventeen-year-old body, decided it was time to take him from the group and let him run. Let off some steam, so to speak.

“Let’s go to the West cliff,” he suggested to Spike. “See if there are any new tracks.”

They headed off without incident and were halfway through a grove of sticky, weirdly snarly rooted trees, peeling them meticulously from around their legs, when Spike started quoting Angel’s books again.

He stood suddenly and stared off into space. “In the middle of the journey of my life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost,” he said suddenly. And didn’t move.

“Spike?” Xander worked the branches free from his arm and moved closer to his friend’s side.


“Sounds right to me,” said Xander.
Spike looked disgusted. “You don’t know.”

Xander felt immensely tired. “I know. I don’t know anything.” He forced himself to shake it off, the crushing feeling of despair. There would be time for that later. Circling carefully around Spike to keep his ‘human’ smell upwind, he said as soothingly as he could, “You remember everything he taught you, Spike. You remembered all the lessons.”

Spike shook his head, nervous. “No, I’ve forgotten.” He worriedly enumerated on his fingers. Xander stood patiently, emotionally exhausted, while Spike spelled out all the lessons he had learned from his Sire. He hesitated and the sheer panic on his face broke Xander’s heart.

Spike sat down in the middle of the damp, slippery wood. And stopped talking.

“Spike?” Xander looked around the eerily still wood. This didn’t seem like a good place for Spike to completely withdraw, as he had a few days ago. He didn’t think he could carry the 180-pound man back and he couldn’t leave him here. And this wasn’t someplace in which Xander wanted to spend an entire evening.

“Spike, uh, let’s get going, okay? West cliff? You know? Looking for demon tracks?”
Spike was biting his lip and silently counting on his fingers.

Xander completely forgot about the proximity to human smell problem and squatted down in front of Spike. “Hey, buddy,” he said, “let’s get going?”

Spike looked up at him, and he seemed for a moment to Xander to be sinking away from him, as into a hole in the forest’s floor. “What’s it like?”

“Uh, it?” said Xander, wanting to pull Spike up physically if need be.

“Heaven?” said Spike.

Xander stared. “It’s great,” he said.

Spike nodded, looked at him expectantly. He leaned forward. “Tell me about it.”

“Sure,” said Xander. He looked around them. “Uh, Spike? Flesh and blood here. I gotta get out of this wood first.”

“Oh,” said Spike, shrugging. “Okay.” He stood and began working his way back through the trees. “You can tell me when we get back to camp.”

~*~*~*~*~
If Xander had thought Spike would forget about Heaven and move on to new distractions by the time they had made their way back to camp, he was sadly disappointed. As soon as they entered the tent and started up the stove, Spike plunked down on the bed, legs folded, hands on his knees, leaning forward, excited and enthralled like a small boy at a camp story circle. “So, tell me about it,” he said immediately.

“Uh...”

“Heaven,” prompted Spike. “I know I didn’t ask much before, but ya know, I was kinda jealous. But seein’ as Angel is there now, well, I guess...” His eyes narrowed suspiciously at Xander. “What?”

“N...nothing!” Said Xander, thinking fast. “Just, not sure...not sure we are allowed to tell.”

“Oh.” Spike looked crestfallen.

“It’s great,” said Xander immediately. Spike looked up again, his face lively.

“Yeah?”

“Uh, yeah. And everybody is young,” Xander gestured at himself, “like me.”
Spike made a dismissive noise. “Angel wouldn’t care about that. He was young for an eternity nearly.”

“Well, yes, but there’s no sickness, no disease.”

Spike shrugged, unimpressed.

“Huh, uhmmm,” Xander tried to think of something about his purported Heaven that would be better than the life of an immortal demon. “Everyone you’ve ever known is there.”

Spike looked worried. “Everyone?”

“Well, sure,” said Xander, thinking he’d gotten this part right. “He’ll see everyone he knew in life…”

“Angel knew an awful lot of Happy Meals,” said Spike worriedly.

“Oh!” Xander regrouped quickly. “Uh, no! You see, Spike, everything is forgiven in Heaven, everybody loves everybody.”

Spike looked utterly amazed. “Angel will meet everyone he killed and they’ll forgive him?”

Xander doubted this with all his heart, but “Sure!” he said. “For instance,” the juices were flowing now, and even without Spike’s prompting Xander wouldn’t have
been able to stop, “When I was in Heaven I saw this guy I knew in High School. He was such a nerd and, well, so was I but he was worse.” Xander stopped, took a big breath. “Anyway, he uh, had some issues and well I was a jerk. It doesn’t matter…” he brushed off that story, impatiently, “anyway in Heaven it was like we totally got what the other guy had been going through and it wasn’t like we forgot or anything, but we just knew and,” he smiled at Spike, “it was okay.”

Spike looked perplexed. “Kinda hard to explain a demon…”

“See, that was the thing.” Xander scooched closer to Spike excitedly. “I didn’t have to explain anything. Neither did he. We just knew.”

“Huh,” said Spike in wonder. He thought for a minute. “I wonder if he’ll see her.”

Xander didn’t have to ask who ‘her’ was. “Sure,” he said uncomfortably, finding the sliver still buried there in his heart. “They’ll see each other.”

“Wonder if she’ll still…” Spike frowned, looking down. Xander found himself working past something he hadn’t even known still existed. “Yeah, but, you know, it’s
Heaven. And I’ll bet,” he dared to poke Spike softly in the arm. “I’ll bet all they talk about is you.”

Spike smiled to himself. He played with the blanket near his knee. “Almost as good as being there.”

Xander had a sudden overwhelming desire to weep. “Sure,” he said.

Spike caught the change in Xander’s voice. He looked up sharply. “Thanks, Harris.”

Xander shrugged.

Spike sat up straighter, stretched and yawned. “Well, time fer bed, I guess. Sun’s rising.” He hopped off the bed and wandered over to his pile of rags, stripping as he went. “Sleep well, Harris.”

Xander had had a week of not looking at Spike, not thinking about Spike, not letting himself hope for Spike. He stood and disrobed and slid under the blankets quickly. “Sleep well,” he said.

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There was never any night or day noise here, just the dip and swell of the wind. So when the little sounds of feet
and knees on the floor came, Xander woke immediately. He felt the blankets lifting, the give of the mattress behind him. His skin prickled with expectation and his poor neglected libido leapt to attention, as he recognized the soft words spoken as Spike’s when he slipped in behind Xander in the bed.

“You asleep?” murmured Spike, so close behind him, Xander swore he felt, impossibly, breath on his ear. A cool hand cupped Xander’s hipbone.

Xander shook his head. Afraid to speak and break the spell. The cool hand slid over his abdomen, sensitive finger pads tracing every cell of skin as they swept down. And hesitated. Xander reached up, tentatively wrapped his hands around the stalled fingers, carefully moved them southwards to his cock, which was already aching and arching to meet his abdomen.

He heard Spike hiss behind him and strong cold fingers slid into his pubic hairs then wrapped quickly and tightly around his cock. Xander gasped. “P...please,” he begged in a breathy whisper.

“Oh...” said Spike, his mouth coming up to Xander’s shoulder and mouthing the skin. “Oh, God, Angel...”
It was like being flayed, Xander would decide afterwards. The pleasure rippling over his skin suddenly turning to something sharp and cruel. “No!” he said, pushing Spike’s hand away roughly and struggling to rise from the bed.

Spike grabbed at him. “Angel? I’m sorry...” he sounded completely horrified. Xander spun around and grabbed him and shook him.

“Spike, it’s me,” he said, the soft skin under his hands, the erection jutting into his thigh. But not for him, for Angel. Not for him.

Spike leant towards him, still, apparently, in his delusion or dream. “I’m sorry, I won’t do it again.” He seemed near tears.

“It’s okay, Spike,” said Xander. His hands uncontrollably squeezing and sliding down over the wonderful biceps, over the pectorals, sliding over Spike’s abdomen. “Oh,” said Xander, beside himself. “Oh, God, Spike. Please...please, I need...”

His hand closed around the cock, marvelously hard and leaking. He ran his fist up it. Leant into Spike.

“Xander?” said Spike, and shuddered all over. Xander immediately let go of him.
“Yeah,” he said, the bitterness rising, sour and evil and feeling thick in his throat. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“Bloody Hell, I’m sorry, Harris,” said Spike.

Xander didn’t care anymore. He didn’t care if he was pushed away, embarrassed. He didn’t care about anything but ... “Please, Spike,” Xander caught one of Spike’s hands and raised it to touch his chest, his neck, his mouth. “God...”

Spike pulled his hand away. “I can’t...”

Xander took in a huge breath and heaved his body over so that his back was to Spike. He clenched his teeth until the sounds building in his chest were in no danger of erupting. Then said tightly, “Sure. No problem.” He sat up abruptly. “Not tired anyway.” And he jumped out of bed, blindly reaching for any old slacks and pulling them on violently. “I’m going to... going to...”

“Harris, don’t be daft, where are you going at this hour?”

“Fuck off, Spike,” said Xander. He grabbed a shirt from the chair and flung it on. “I’m going down to the hospital to visit Giles.”

He managed to get his feet into boots and charged, boots untied, shirt flapping open, out of the tent and down the
hill. Half of his mind expected Spike to follow. A week ago, Spike would have followed. Concerned, annoyed, yelling at the stupid human boy to get his sorry ass back up to the tent. But Spike didn’t follow.

Xander went.

~*~*~*~*~

This time, when Xander let himself into Giles’ room, he didn’t even look at his old friend.

He threw himself into the rattly plastic chair, lay his arms on his knees, his head on his arms and allowed himself to voice all the rage and frustration and sorrow he was feeling. He sobbed and yelled at Spike and the universe for some time before he felt himself being watched.

He looked up and saw Giles’ physician standing by the wall, regarding him with concern.

“Sorry,” said Xander. He sniffled.

The man looked grim-faced. Xander guessed he had seen a lot of hysterics in his time.

“I’m just having a really bad day,” Xander said.
The small round man with the pasty skin came over and stared at Xander for another minute with those eerily pale eyes. “*You are very angry*” he said. “Angry,” he clarified in English, pointing at Xander.

“*I’m tired,*” said Xander.

The man’s pale eyes looked unimpressed.

“I have to go,” said Xander suddenly. He rose awkwardly and walked with jerky steps from the room.

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Xander spent the rest of the day sitting outside waiting for the sunset service. He knew that, when it was over, Berynn would come up and spend time talking with him. And he was looking forward to and needing that more than he was willing to admit.

Berynn had been an emotional touchstone for him. For the past week, and really even before, he had been there whenever Xander was looking for a friend. And somehow Berynn had understood that the evenings, just after the sunset ritual, were the worst.
During Spike’s illness, he had taken up the job of teaching Xander the language. And he was bothering to learn English, as well. Or ‘bloody American’ as grouchy Spike would have called it.

This evening, Xander spotted the dark head, amongst all the others, easily. And felt a huge relief and anticipation as he saw the slender figure approaching him.

“Are you well?” asked Berynn formally, sitting down in his regular spot.

Xander moved aside to make room for the man on the bench. He accepted the shoulder squeeze and the pat on the arm gratefully. Contact; God, he needed the contact so badly.

“Yes,” said Xander. He laughed. “No.”

Berynn looked at him, the slender eyebrows raised in sympathy. “Is Spike well?”

“We had a bad day,” said Xander shortly. Saying it out loud made it more real and he was unable to keep the emotion from his voice. “I just feel tired, I guess...I’m sorry...I...”

Berynn wrapped an arm around Xander’s shoulder. The warm slim body pressed against his side. “*You need not
speak if you cannot*” he said. A phrase so often repeated by the people of the village, Xander knew it by heart. It was a phrase particularly authentic coming from Berynn. He could feel Xander’s exhaustion, his tiredness, his loneliness and need...

With his other hand, Berynn took up Xander’s. He looked up at him, the gray of his eyes going a dark mossy color, as the iris expanded. Thick black lashes, that always seemed to tremble with their own weight, flickered over those translucent eyes, as he studied Xander’s face. “I like you Xander,” he enunciated carefully.

Xander nodded, grateful. “Yeah, thanks,” he said. “*Thank you*” he repeated. He smiled into those beautiful, kind eyes, leaned a little more into the comfort of the smaller man’s embrace. Berynn’s hand touched his jaw and Xander knew he should pay attention to this. He knew he should wonder at this, but it felt so good, the caress. Berynn’s hand sliding around his neck, touching the muscles there with a soothing pressure.

None of the seductive endorphins were exuding from Berynn, this time. It was as if he had purposely turned them off. This comfort, these gentle touches, were wholly human. Berynn’s hand pulled Xander’s head down to his level and suddenly his lips were on Xander’s.
This was wrong, this was so wrong, thought Xander, sobbing needfully against the soft, warm mouth. Feeling the arms wrapping around him, clasping the smaller body to his own almost violently.

Berynn’s lips barely moved, but they opened and Xander plunged his tongue in. Seeking the answering pressure, the heat and connection. He ran his hands up and down the shivering back and turned his chin, bending Berynn against him. The young man’s entire body responding to his with a malleable eagerness.

Berynn lips separated from Xander’s barely as he pulled away for air. He looked up at Xander with wonder and awe and adoration in his face and Xander’s brain caught up with and sharply jerked the reins back on his body. He dropped his arms, so quickly the startled villager almost fell. Xander grabbed Berynn’s shoulder to steady him, then quickly dropped his hand and moved an inch back on the bench. “I’m..I’m.. s...sorry,” he stammered.

Hurt. Shame. The dark lashes dropped and hid the rest of Berynn’s emotions from Xander. His skin flamed a bright red.

Xander’s brain now delighted in reporting everything it had been unable, because of Xander’s willfulness, to report before. The hesitancy of the mouth that had
kissed him, the unknowing movements. The open, innocent trust in those eyes. He thought of the bizarre and rigid taboos of these people and realized it was entirely possible that Berynn had never even kissed anyone before.

“God,” said Xander, dropping his head into his hands and pulling at his own hair in anger. “I’m such a fucking pig.”

He felt Berynn’s hand patting his shoulder and looked up at him from the corner of his eye. Berynn smiled, his face was still pink, a new touch of bitter humor turned up one corner of his mouth. ‘I put that there,’ thought Xander miserably. ‘I taught him bitterness.’ He felt like a plague.

“*I understand*” said Berynn, the flush on his skin deepening again. “Spike,” he said wisely. “*Sherleen said it was so,*” He kept to his own language, insecure again.

“Sherleen did?” Xander asked miserably, feeling another flood of guilt.

Berynn nodded sagely. His eyes sad, but not angry. “*You love him*” he said.

Xander didn’t move. He thought hard about the words he had just heard. He didn’t hear that word very often, so perhaps he hadn’t understood it?
“What did you say?”

Berynn’s brows came down, his eyes narrowed. “You love Spike,” he said quite clearly, in English. With a California accent.

Thoughtlessly, instinctively, Xander shook his head. “Nope.”

Berynn drew back, surprised.

“That’s impossible,” said Xander. He folded his arms across his chest. “That’s not what’s going on with Spike and me,” he said. Berynn was looking at him with those great, sad eyes and that bitter little smile and suddenly Xander felt like some sort of explanation was needed.

“This is not your average situation,” he said earnestly. “Spike and I, we have a history. A not so good history, actually. But, you know, I kind of get the guy and he gets me because of that history. So of course there’s...” he squeezed his arms tighter around his chest, trying to think past some things that had happened recently. “of course there’s ... um, sympathy.” He looked up at Berynn, imagined he saw some kind of disbelief there. “Okay, so its more than sympathy,” Xander ceded with a sigh. “There’s, um, the groiny stuff. But that could have happened with anybody. I guess it’s always been there a
little bit. It’s just it was me ‘n Spike because…” He had been going to say because there was no one else, but he somehow felt that wasn’t entirely true.

“Fuck,” said Xander. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

He stood, took a few stiff paces, and turned towards Berynn urgently. “But love is something else, you know? I loved my wife, my son, my grandson. I…I loved Willow.” He stopped, the feelings spinning about on the oil slick he had been ignoring all week. “I loved people. In my life,” said Xander. “This is... this is different. I can’t. I... he’s a vampire. He’s not even alive! How can you love a corpse.”

Berynn watched Xander with those great empathetic eyes, then his glance flicked to something behind him. Xander spun about.

“’S true,” said Spike, standing in the door of the tent. “You can’t love a corpse, can you? Can’t love a dead man. I told him. I said, ‘don’t be an old poof’ I said ‘don’t...’” he looked at Xander with suddenly terrified eyes. “He asked me... he said...Xander?”

And Xander rushed to gather the disintegrating Spike into his arms. He shushed him, he rocked him.
Spike didn’t push him away or tell him that he smelled. He buried his face in Xander’s chest. “He said it and then I killed him. I’m a demon, you know. ‘S what I do…I ...kill them...” said Spike, as if reciting a lesson.

“It’s okay, Spike, it’s okay,” Xander said tearfully into Spike’s hair. Whispering reassurance into his scalp. “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

“He said it,” whimpered Spike. “How could he do that? It’s not... it’s not done. and now he’s ... he’s dead, Xander. Angel is dead. But it can’t be true. Cuz you can’t, can you? Can’t love a dead man. Can’t...” The denials devolved into sobbing.

Berynn stood and walked away. He looked back once, and Xander tried to thank him with his eyes, as he held his lover and rocked him and hugged him tightly and pressed kisses into his hair. His hands and arms full of him.

“I’m here, Spike,” said Xander. “It’s going to be okay.” He carefully guided Spike back into the tent. Lay him down on their bed. Wrapped his arms and legs around him and held him as Spike cried. After a very long while, he thought Spike had fallen into sleep and slowly released him, rising up to pull a blanket over him.
Spike’s hand closed gently around his wrist. “Wait,” he said softly.

Xander stilled.

“Don’t … don’t leave yet?” asked Spike.

“Okay,” said Xander. Schooling himself not to expect anything, he lay back down, pulling the blanket over their shoulders.

Spike rolled over. He lay, cheek on pillow, gazing at Xander. Xander could feel his own breathing, out of control, his heart thumping. Spike slowly raised a hand and touched Xander’s face with the pad of one finger.

Xander panted and felt the weeping rising in his throat again. He closed his eyes as that hesitant finger traced his cheekbone, slid down his nose, barely brushed his lip. The finger hovered there for a very long time.

Then the hand dropped away and Xander opened his eyes. Spike lay before him, his face relaxed, eyes closed, mouth opened. He was asleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Later. Much later. With the sensitivity of one who lived in
perpetual darkness, Xander could feel the change in the wind that indicated the sun’s location in the west. He lay on his back, eyes closed, wondering what had woken him, when he felt Spike’s hand on his chest.

Moving slowly, as it had the night before, slipping easily under the unbuttoned shirt and sliding over an immediately erect nipple. Every limb on Xander’s body rippled to instant attention. He tried not to breathe.

Spike’s hand slithered down.


Spike’s hard lean body rolled up against him, his erection pressed into Xander’s thigh and the new yearning Xander was feeling for that erection to be inside him, to touch him, leapt like fire across his body and he rolled towards Spike, hungrily seeking his mouth in the dark.

Fuck it, he thought.

Not for him, Xander thought despairingly, guilty and hating himself for it, but clutching at the hard ass, rubbing himself against that bone hard erection, his mouth open wide, his tongue eagerly pressed into Spike’s. Spike moaned and Xander thought, he's moaning for Angel. Spike rolled him over, fingers pulling apart
flies, freeing all the heat and sticky hardness and Xander thought, God, he’s feeling Angel.

He writhed into Spike and they slid against each other in a frenzy. Spike was gasping and crying out with little helpless sounds. He kissed and sucked on Xander’s mouth in small pecks. Rolling his hips now, sensuous waves of movement.

Xander rolled in the surf of it. Angel, Spike was with Angel and Xander suddenly knew what Spike was seeking, what he was needing. He forcibly rolled Spike onto his back, tumbling with him, pushing down the open pants, his hands seeking something they had never sought before, running up and down behind a man’s sac until they tripped over a little wrinkled lump of ...

“Oooohhhh,” moaned Spike. His knees drew up infinitesimally.

“Okay,” breathed Xander, his heart hammering, his hands popping out in sweat, as he eased Spike’s thighs up. He adjusted himself on the mattress and lifted his cock, feeling with it for that small opening. Spike rocked eagerly towards him. Wanting Angel, seeking Angel.

Because he had been wanting Spike inside of him. Because it was what he had dreamed of all week, and
maybe had been dreaming of all along, Xander knew that Spike needed Angel to enter him. He pressed forward gently. The small opening resisted him, and he shoved, his cock like a battering ram, he slammed against that opening harder.

Spike grunted and shoved back. Xander felt the little hole seemingly grab hold of his cock, and he was in. He was inside of Spike.

Except it wasn’t him, it was Angel. It was Angel making Spike rear up and whine piteously, rocking and clawing at his head and shoulders. Begging.

It was Angel pushing up inside the cool, tight tunnel that clenched and heaved and suddenly relaxed again, swallowing him deeper, dragging him inside.

Xander gave a hiccupped breath and put his head on Spike’s chest and shoved into him hard, responding to the eager thrust of Spike’s hips, the clutching of his channel. He wanted it to be him, but it was Angel.

Spike was wailing and mewling and writhing beneath him, and Xander reached between them and grasped the drooling, hard cock, began pumping hard, trying to make it strong and dominant and demanding, trying to make it Angel and it seemed to work because Spike’s voice rose,
he rocked feverishly and then every muscle bunched and froze and he arched and Xander felt his cum shooting out.

*Spike was cumming for Angel,* thought Xander, pumping now, out of control, into such tightness he couldn’t stop, driven like a piston run on high octane fuel he couldn’t stop even though it wasn’t him, it was Angel, he couldn’t stop, his breath ragged and hot in his chest, sweat, horrible smelly human sweat flying off his head, his hair, he raggedly cried out and came inside of Spike.

Xander collapsed and sobbed against Spike’s chest. The cool, strong hands came round his head and carded his damp hair for a minute, then fell away as Spike slept again.

Xander withdrew carefully. Curled up again beside Spike. He felt empty. He ached.

Angel. It was always Angel.

10

Spike woke the next morning feeling more like himself than he had in a long time. He stretched, felt that familiar ache in his ass, smiled and wriggled as he felt the cum drooling out.
Xander’s cum. Next to him the musky boy snored loudly, and Spike lay back, smiling at the ceiling, reliving the feeling of Xander, suddenly dominant. Xander powerful and forcing himself inside of Spike. Spike felt...cleansed.

He rolled on his side and poked in a teasing manner at the meaty muscle of Xander’s shoulder. “Hey, sledgehammer boy,” he whispered with delight, “you awake?”

Of course he wasn’t.

Spike rose very carefully. Brought the blanket back over Xander’s shoulders as he got out of bed. He stood, enjoying the little stab of pain, and surveyed the tent with a sudden déjà vu, as if he had forgotten something. Next to the fireplace was the huge brass tub. Spike studied it, contemplatively.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander turned in his sleep and with that now familiar feeling of dread and depression, realized he was awake. ‘Oh frabjous day callooh callay...” mumbled Xander to himself. He kept his eyes closed and sought a cool spot
on the pillow that might lull his mind back into sleep for a few more minutes.

“Harris?” An annoying, hard, vampire finger poked him. *Oh, God, thought Xander, it’s already starting. Another Fun Day with Spike.*

“You awake, Xan?” Spike crawled in under the blanket and wrapped his arm around Xander’s waist. Xander froze. He felt terribly vulnerable.

They lay like that for a minute, Spike spooning Xander. Xander attempting to control his deep breaths and rapidly thumping heart, trying to think what was going on.

“Spike?” asked Xander.

“Yeah,” said Spike. He chuckled. “In the undead flesh.” He leant into Xander and nuzzled him just below the ear. Xander shuddered all over.

*Well, that wasn’t an encouraging reaction,* thought Spike.

Nevertheless, he leaned in and nuzzled again. “How you feelin’ this mornin’, Xander?” he buzzed against the back of Xander’s ear.
He could feel the kid’s heart hammering against his hand where it clasped his chest. “Xander?” said Spike. He released him and sat up. “You okay?”

Xander wondered what new twist they were going to have today. Cheery Spike would turn to what? Vengeful Spike? “S...sure,” he said.

“Liar,” said Spike easily, and saw the place between Xander’s shoulderblades tense.

*Oh, bugger all. He’d fucked up again.*

“Hokay, well.” Spike swung up easily to his feet and quickly drew on some pants, then padded nonchalantly over to the stove. He could feel Xander watching him. Spike played for a few minutes with the stove. “We’re outta water again,” he announced.

Xander’s sigh was full of weariness. “Okay, I’ll go get it...”

“It’s okay, whelp, I can do it.” Spike headed towards the door.

Xander sat up quickly. “Spike? The water is in the...other tent?”

“Yeah?” said Spike, flipping open the door and walking out. He stood for what would have counted out as
maybe fifty human heartbeats inside Angel’s tent, letting the waves of sorrow rise and crash over him, before finally leaning over, heaving the great jug to his shoulders and carrying it back into his and Xander’s tent.

Xander was on his feet, hurriedly dressing when he strode back in. “Spike?” Xander followed him across the room.

Spike set the water down. He waited until his eyes felt clear and dry again before he turned and gave Xander a little grin. “’S a man’s job, carryin’ that thing, Harris,” he said. “You should have me doin’ it.”

“What?” squeaked Xander with predictable outrage. He glared at Spike, then he really looked at him, reading his face. He stepped closer. “Spike?” Damnit if the kid didn’t look like he was about to cry, thought Spike, pulling Xander into a hug.

“I’ve been mad as Drusilla, haven’t I?” Spike growled against Xander’s shoulder.

Xander merely nodded and hugged Spike tighter.

“You took care of me, Xander,” said Spike. “Thanks.” He squeezed Xander then pushed him gently away, turning modestly back towards the stove.
“You…you remember?” Xander said, his joy turning quickly to a new anxiety.

“Yeah,” Spike smiled to himself.

“Spike, I’m…..” Xander could think of no way to say it. ‘I’m sorry I raped you, took advantage of your diminished capacity, used your body?’ He managed to find a chair and sit.

Spike seemed awfully calm for a man who had been raped. He shuffled around, locked the stove door. “I’d like to go see his grave today, Xander,” he said softly. “Wasn’t up to it before, you know? Woulda been stuck there waitin’ for him to rise or something…” His voice went weak at the end. He stopped, frowning.

“Okay,” said Xander.

“Should visit with Dahla and the kid, too,” said Spike.

“Yeah,” said Xander. “That’s a good idea.”

Spike nodded to himself. “Been meanin’ ta ask her fer some stuff for a while now,” he said off handedly. “Lube and such.”

Xander made an involuntary noise through his nose. Spike heard his heart begin hammering again. He let his
eyes slide barely sideways, glinting. “You gonna pound me like you did last night, I’ll be needin’ it if I wanna be able ta walk much.”

Xander made a weird little glottal sound. That lovely blood rose and suffused his face. He seemed to cough. “Oh.” He swallowed. “Sorry.”

Spike laughed.

~*~*~*~*~

James thought how much his father would have enjoyed the fact that his internment happened on a dark rainy day. The mourners stood around the rectangular hole in the earth, in their London Fog raincoats. Black umbrellas, like stiff flowers, grouped over their heads. It was very movie-of-the week, and his dad would have laughed and enjoyed the cliché of it.

James worried about the mud, though. It seemed so heavy and thick. “How long do you think it takes to dry out?” he whispered worriedly to his wife. Jennifer hugged his arm harder, her brow creased with emotion. “Jen?” He tugged at her arm like their son might when he wanted her full attention.
“What needs to dry out, honey?” asked Jennifer, looking at him with an odd expression.

“The mud,” said James, as if to a slow person.

Jennifer studied him for a while before answering. “I don’t know, James,” she finally said. “Maybe when we get home we can look it up?”

He nodded. Though he doubted the answers to his questions could be found via an internet Google Search. “He never mentioned it,” he said. “So I guess it isn’t important.”

Jennifer’s face was very pale. She had begun chewing the lower corner of her lip. A bad habit of her’s when stressed. James gently reached up and touched her lip, reminding her.

The priest’s words were oddly monotonous. Like a chant meant to hypnotize them, so that when the thud of earth on hollow coffin came the shock was dulled somewhat. When the heavy coffin hit the bottom of the grave, though, the sound went right through James' bones. He felt his knees giving, and sat on one of the aluminum chairs provided. Jennifer sank down beside him.

“Sweetheart?” She patted his arm.
They would wait until the mourners had left before they covered his father with earth, James knew. But he had to stay and make sure it was done correctly.

It was dark and wet and cold. Jennifer was urging him to leave, but all he could think of was lying alone at night in a cold, wet, field. “I can’t leave him here,” he said.

Beside him, Jennifer began to weep.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander couldn’t believe the difference between his feelings during this journey and the one he had made such a short time ago down the very same hill.

After an ecstatic moment of reunion, that had involved a lot of hugging, Xander and Spike had become suddenly shy of each other. Like a couple seeing each other again after a long separation, the reality of the other person seemed so intimate, it was almost embarrassing.

Their energy channeled instead into a sudden desire to visit their friends, so they were halfway to the village, to visit Giles and Dahla and Hope, before their daily patrol. Their hands clasped loosely between them, bodies casually bumping as they walked.
Xander looked around him, viewing the world through his new well-being. The solar lights still strung across the entrance to the village danced in the breeze below him, like fireflies or faerie boats. The scent of the flowers and offerings on the altars floating around them. He purposely bumped Spike and squeezed his hand happily.

“It’s pretty here,” he said, spontaneously.


He saw Xander’s self-deprecating grin flash in the dark. “Yeah, well, it doesn’t really bother me as much as it did.”

“Cuz yer acceptin’ it,” said Spike, his gaze sliding slightly to the dark rim of the woods, as he felt his own acceptance.

Xander rolled his eyes, squeezed Spike’s hand. “Old wise one.”

“I am, whelp,” said Spike playfully. “I am old and I am wise.”

“You gonna teach me, Master Spike?” teased Xander softly.
Spike was careful to cushion Xander’s head with the palm of his hand when he slammed him against the tree. He pressed his torso into Xander, looking down at the half-inch of air between their lips. “Say that again,” he breathed.

“Master Sp...” said Xander, his mouth smothered by Spike’s.

When they drew back from each other, Xander was gasping and Spike looked stunned. “Bloody Hell?” he whispered, resting his brow against Xander’s.

“Think we found a kink,” said Xander. His tongue came out, slowly drew across his lip. Spike watched it, hypnotized, as a cobra by the snake charmer’s hand. “Master...” Xander whispered again, and Spike struck. He sucked that teasing tongue into his mouth, his hands wrapping around Xander’s waist and lifting him against the tree, grinding against him, growling into his mouth, a long, hungry sound.

He felt Xander’s breath puffing frantically from his nostrils and pulled back again.

Xander took in air desperately. “Man,” he gasped. He arched his head as Spike bit across his chin and hungrily patterned his skin with little nips, chewing down his
neck, his tongue rasping across the stubble, digging into that soft, sweet flesh below his jaw, across the taut muscle, down over the bite.

Xander made a noise that did not sound entirely human.

Spike’s demon roused to that wakening call and he shifted, fangs sliding delicately over the sugary skin. He growled into Xander’s neck, his body shuddering with power and desire as he writhed against the boy, humping him through their pants against the tree.

His claws came down, and he pulled at the ties of Xander’s pants.

“No,” gasped Xander suddenly, struggling. “No, Spike, stop.”

Spike had acquired quite a bit of self-control over the years. He asserted mastership of his demon. The mystical one and the sexual one. He controlled himself one limb at a time and finally shook out of game face. Still leaning against Xander, trembling all over.

“Sorry,” he said, his voice hoarse.

He let Xander slide down and regain his feet.
“It’s okay, Spike,” said Xander. He still leant against the tree, as if for support. “It’s...it’s just we’re on the road.” He gestured with his fingers. “People might be walking,” he walked his fingers in the air a little. Took a deep shaky breath, dropped his hand. “You know?”

Spike nodded. “Sure.” He saw Xander’s hand reach towards the bite. Stop and drop to his side. Guilt, remorse, shame slammed through Spike’s body harder than any pheromone. He swung around and down the path with powerful strides, leaving Xander to come running after him.

~*~*~*~*~

So they were back to that, thought Spike, angry and confused. After last night, the sheer need and passion Xander had displayed last night, Spike thought they had worked their way past the bite incident.

So much had intervened. So much loss. Spike still felt hollowed out and shaking in the wind of that loss. And Xander was ... still Xander.

“Hey,” Xander puffed as he caught up to Spike, “what’s with you?”
“What’s with me?” Spike snapped back. He thoughtlessly punched his fist into a pillar as they walked through the village gate.

“Uh, Neanderthal much, Spike?”

Spike slammed to a stop. “No, Harris.” he snarled. “Vampire.” He stomped off again.

Xander watched him go. Then rolled his eyes. “Right. You’re the Big Bad,” he called after him. “You’re the Scary Monster.”

“That’s right,” Spike shot back, still marching down the road.

Xander jogged to catch up again. “Sounds like just a bunch of excuses to act like a jerk,” he said, puffing.

“Fuck off, Harris.”

“See, that’s the problem,” said Xander, pointing in annoyance. “You’re just mad because I didn’t want to do it in the middle of the road.”

Spike ground his teeth.

“That’s it, isn’t it, Spike?”

“No.” said Spike. “Of course not.”
“Then what’s wrong with you?”

Spike stopped and stared back at him in amazed outrage. “What’s wrong? I…I just lost the most important person in my existence, the only one who could ever understand....”

The whole last week came back to Xander in a flash of exhaustion and sorrow. “Hey!” he said, outraged, “I understand...”

Spike shook his head hard, shifted and leapt at Xander so suddenly he instinctively flinched back from the demonic visage. “That’s what’s wrong,” roared Spike. “You can’t understand ...how it feels. Only...”

He stopped. The wind went out of him and he resumed walking, subdued. “At least Angel and me were the same. We ....” The tears seemed once more imminent.

“Right,” said Xander. His head went down and he buried his hands in his vest pockets. “You and Angel were all set.”

~*~*~*~*~

“Not like that,” Spike caught the pommel of the short
sword that Xander held and roughly jerked it to the right so that Xander was holding it at more of an angle. He tisked. “Told you Harris, it’s a bloody weapon, not silverware.”

Xander’s wrist hurt where it had been jerked. “You said a stabbing motion…”

“Oh, fer bloody…” Spike turned away in exasperation, spoke to another patroller. “That’s gorgeous Timone. Exactly,” he shot a look at Xander, “like I said.”

Xander caught Berynn’s eye and imagined the young man was looking at him with an expression of pity. He felt, then, that all the patrolmen were giving him the same looks.

Spike was so obviously unhappy with him. It was like a couple coming to a party while in the middle of a spat. Xander had always been uncomfortable with his private issues being made public. He was becoming increasingly nervous.

The mark on his neck seemed to throb and he imagined it standing out more than it did. His clumsiness, really only a boyhood phenomena, seemed to suddenly return and he couldn’t handle the equipment correctly, finally
fumbling so unsuccessfully with a cross-bow that Spike came and snatched it from his hands.

“Christ, Harris,” he said. “All those years as a Scooby, did you learn nothing?”

“Spike,” hissed Xander in a low voice. “I’m doing my best.”

“Angel said this was hopeless,” said Spike, worry masked as annoyance. “He said we shouldn’t a brought you here...”

Xander felt that comment like a riding crop across his face. He spun around and stomped off, eyes stinging, face hot, so that he wouldn’t have to hear anymore of what Angel had said. He had had his full quota of Angel quotes for the week, thank you. He stopped when he had reached the edge of the clearing and turned to see Berynn close behind him.

And here was the other thing. He had become so dependant on Berynn. The young empath’s abilities making the translation and communications between himself and the other villagers so much easier. And the sympathy the young man expressed had been a comfort. But now Xander felt that he was wrong to presume on that affection. That any use of it would be to encourage
something he did not want. So when Berynn came up and threw an arm around him, Xander shrugged it off.

Berynn stepped away, looking more worried than hurt, but it upset Xander to see the expression on his face. So he wrapped his arm around Berynn’s shoulders again. Gave him an extra little squeeze. “Sorry, I’m cranky today,” he said a bit loudly, glaring in Spike’s direction, meaningfully. “It’s not your fault,” he told him.

“Don’t bother with him,” Spike said, just as loudly, apparently very aware of their activities at the edge of the field. He stopped what he was doing long enough to nod at Berynn and shrug dismissively towards Xander. “He’s on the rag today or summat. Thinks everyone is dirty or …” He turned away to fuss over a young man’s technique with a short blade.

“Not everyone rolls over for anyone who pets him, Spike,” Xander called back, angrily.

There was a definite lull in all surrounding conversations.

Spike’s back stiffened as he straightened from his lesson. He turned his shoulders and head half around to give Xander a long look. And for one electrically charged second, Xander thought Spike was going to attack him. But Spike ignored the comment instead, turning back to
continue his lesson. Xander watched him sullenly for a moment. He glanced at Berynn who, ever loyal, stood there looking like he wished he could help.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son,” Xander said low, to himself.

Berynn studied him, trying to remember any of those words from the English Xander had taught him. “Spike is...” he shrugged, “...still?”

Xander shook his head. “Yeah. I thought it was better, but, yeah. Spike is still...” he shrugged. “Spike,” he said, because that really said it all.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was still stewing in the juice of irritation later on patrol. Spike and he, with Berynn and one of the twins, were continuing the interrupted examination of the woods above the West cliff, when Xander came across one of those things you just don’t wanna find.

“Spike,” he called, standing back and staring at the thing on the ground. The air shifted and its smell flew up his nostrils. He gagged and covered his mouth. The smell
immediately brought tears to his eyes, he blinked at them blindly.


Berynn appeared curiously. He glanced, blanched. His mouth turned down in disgust. “Greimlich,” he said, disgust thick in his voice.

“Magic?” gasped Xander, staggering over to a tree where he could lean and not look in the direction of the thing. Berynn joined him. Xander noted the young man looking particularly green and scooped him closer with his arm.

Spike’s eyes took in the two, but came back to the problem at hand. He squatted down in front of the disgusting mess. A huge demon’s head. Perhaps the skin had been that dark maroon color originally, or perhaps it had turned after being severed. Spike took a cautious whiff of the air. Pretty damn sickening. He glanced at the humans who had to inhale at all times. “Better get back,” he called to Xander. “Gather up t’other one and get back down another fifty feet.”

“What are you going to do?” Xander gasped, trying not to inhale.
“Just get yerself back,” said Spike with an air of weariness. “Gonna have to figure this one out myself.” He didn’t see the look Xander shot him.

“Tyren,” called Xander obediently, stopping the younger man from his jog up the path and turning him back.

Spike studied the mess before him. The head’s mouth had been levered open, so crawling with maggots and worms, its severed sexual organ could still be seen. It was the end of a ceremony of sacrifice that Spike had witnessed before. A particularly black type of magic. All around the head, in leaves and carefully tied twigs, were symbols. They were oddly very familiar to Spike. He almost felt like he knew them. There was a heavy buzz of magic and something that tasted deliciously and dangerously of Big Evil.

Spike stood up. This was going to be bad.

~*~*~*~*~

“She’s still in mourning, Spike. We can’t take her up there,” argued Xander unhappily.

“We’re all in mournin’, whelp,” said Spike. He tossed the stick he had been twisting into one of those peculiar
shapes to the ground. “There’s nobody here that hasn’t been touched by death. But Dahla’s the only one knows anythin’ about these magics.”

“We could describe it to her.”

“Might leave out somethin’ important.”

Xander sighed unhappily again and sat down hard on the rock that jutted from the ground near Angel’s grave. He watched as Spike ran his hand for the thousandth time over the little plastic dome that marked the spot where the ashes had been lowered into the ground.

“They’ve got the bloomin’ dates right at least,” growled Spike fondly.

Xander looked around the woods, feeling guilty for his impatience and irritation.

“But, ya know, that ‘Liam’ there? Angel feckin’ hated that name,” Spike said for what seemed to Xander to be about the thousandth time. And Spike chuckled nevertheless.

“Spike,” said Xander. He sighed when he was ignored. He looked at the ground and saw the little stick Spike had been twisting, lying there. Then his brow furrowed and
he looked at it more closely. Leaned over and picked it up.

“Spike,” he said, more sharply. He stood, held out the stick. “What is this?”

Spike, his hand still on the stone, looked up, bemused. “What are you ramblin’ about, Harris?”

Xander held out the stick.

“Oh,” said Spike. “The magic symbols round the thing up there. One of ‘em looked kinda like that.”

Xander wasn’t precognitive. He was sure of it. Not even a smidgeon. But goose bumps and willies and every other kind of creepy precognitive feeling were crawling up his spine and all over the back of his neck. “Spike,” he said. “This is one of the symbols from Giles’ book.”

~*~*~*~*~

They had a meeting in the Town Hall. The patrolmen, Xander, Spike and Dahla. Really, the first such event of its kind, Berynn had reported to Xander excitedly. The first time the villagers had planned with the vampires. Taken a part in the battle to save themselves in this fashion.
He seemed very proud. As did the other patrolmen. Tyren and his twin, with that bright curling red hair that shone like twin flames even from a great distance in this dark headed place, seemed his permanent right and left hands now. They excitedly discussed the symbols on Xander’s drawing boards.

Dahla was withdrawn, but thoughtful. The involvement seemed good for her. Her cheeks had color and she seemed to become animated occasionally by the arguments. Hope stood near her, watching Spike. Dahla’s hand would occasionally come over and absently stroke the small white head.

Xander had stopped by the hospital and brought along his sketchbook of symbols. Dahla went over them for some time. She had wanted to visit Giles herself and attempt to communicate with him, but Xander had vehemently vetoed this. So Dahla asked Xander a lot of seemingly unrelated questions about Giles. She asked him what he could remember of the Watcher’s training and background. She asked questions about Giles’ personal life. What were his beliefs?

She also asked him what he could remember of the conversation he had had with Giles, that Giles kept reliving. What had been his, Xander’s, responses? Xander
remembered being high on sugar and daydreaming about Cordelia, but some he was able to recall most of his side of the conversation, and Giles’ was on tape at the hospital. Dahla told Spike that she thought the symbols were partially ritualistic, but that she recognized other elements as a kind of magic cloaking device.

The demons were trying to hide themselves from the villagers, then. So, one would assume, they were not yet invulnerable enough to let themselves be seen. It seemed the perfect time to attack.

They talked for a couple of hours. Came up with a plan. Or rather, Spike explained the idiocy of the plan, told them he would handle this himself and didn’t want to be “traipsing around baby-sittin’ a troop of feckin’ faeries,” as he explained quite loudly to Xander.

Xander hoped that when Spike repeated this to the patrolmen and Dahla in their own language, he was a tad more polite. Though judging by Berynn’s amused looks and the open mouthed shock of the redheaded boys standing by him, Spike was Spike in all languages.

They would be proactive and attack tomorrow, they all decided. Xander, watching Spike’s face, suddenly non-combative and agreeable, imagined that Spike planned
something sneaky before the appointed time. He would have to watch him.

~*~*~*~*~

“Whole bloody world’s gone mad,” said Spike, throwing his vest down and jerking off his boots without sitting. He hurled them into separate corners.

Xander followed him into the tent. He walked over, started up the fire. Sat and carefully began to untie his shoes.

“Children don’t understand what they’re up against. Think it’s a bloody game…” Spike paced. Xander shed his vest, began untying the sleeves to his shirt.

“Angel wouldn’t have put up with this,” said Spike, his voice pitching into a whine. “It’s cause he ain’t here. He’d have said…”

Xander grit his teeth and stopped undressing. “Angel’s not here,” he said.

“That’s the point, innit,” snapped Spike. “Nobody thinks I can handle it.”
God save us from demons and their low self-esteem, thought Xander wearily, irritation growing within him. “I know you can handle it, Spike,” he said.

“You don’t know anything, Harris,” said Spike.

“Fuck you, Spike,” said Xander suddenly, harshly. He jumped to his feet and jabbed a finger at Spike. “Fuck. You.”

Spike stared at him.

“I am so sick and tired of... of...” Xander turned and sat down on the bed. “Just fuck off,” he said.

“Xander...”

Xander determinedly ignored him, went back to unlacing his shirt.

Seconds ticked by, marked by the suddenly loud sounds of an angry mortal’s breathing and ties being slipped through grommets.

Finally, Spike came and sat down next to him. Xander purposely scooted further away.

Spike studied him. “I’ve been a bleedin’ asshole, haven’t I?” he said finally.
“No,” lied Xander. “You’ve been upset. I understood.”

“Right,” said Spike. “I was here, Harris.”

“I understood, Spike,” said Xander again, firmly.

They sat there in silence for a few more loudly silent minutes. Xander worked the ties on his shirt and fumed.

“You ain’t gonna calm down till you get it off yer chest, brat,” said Spike. “May as well.”

“Get what off my chest, Spike?” said Xander a tad testily.

“I’ve been a pain in the arse for days,” said Spike cheerily. “I know it. Go ahead.” He held his arms wide, as if inviting a free punch. “Tell me off.”

“You know, you take all the nobility out of being noble, Spike,” said Xander.

Spike studied him, thinking. “I guess you thought I was totally batty,” he said wisely. “But, I knew,” said Spike. “I knew what I was doin’ to you.”

Xander’s hands stilled. He studied his shirtsleeve for a minute. Then he raised his eyes, watching Spike warily.
“I ain’t sayin’ I’ve been right in the head,” said Spike. But sometimes, some of the stuff I said... I guess I was tryin’ to hurt you as much as I was hurting.”

Xander was silent.

Spike shrugged. “I can’t just ferget him, Harris. He was my Sire. And I know it wasn’t yer fault, but I blamed you, sorta. I don’t know why...”

“Because I hated him,” said Xander. “I hated Angel, Spike. And I’m glad he’s dead.”

The stunned white silence held them both. Spike blinked. “He was... he...”

“He was your Sire, your friend, your lover. He was the reason you existed. He was the big hero. He did everything perfectly. He knew everything. He. Was. Everything.” Xander’s voice was rising. He gestured angrily. “He touched you whenever he wanted. He called you and you went running like his fucking LAPDOG!” he yelled. “And now that he’s finally gone, its like he’s here more than ever! His tent is a fucking shrine. You ...you couldn’t stand the smell of me. You couldn’t...I had to beg...” Xander felt the hysterical tears rising to his eyes and couldn’t stop them. “And when I...” his voice squeaked with misery. He slammed his fist into the
mattress, furious. “I wanted to but it was Angel! It’s always Angel. It’s always. and I...I... Love. You.”

They stared at each other.

“Xander,” whispered Spike, shocked.

Xander felt the tears, humiliating, hot, thick, girly tears, spilling from his eyes. He rubbed his arm angrily across his face and turned away. Flopped belly down, face in the pillow. “Fuck off, Spike,” his muffled voice said into the pillow.

“I’m sorry, Xander.”

Xander couldn’t stand this. He couldn’t stand the humiliation of Spike. Spike. Apologizing to him for not returning his pathetic, obviously warped and delusional affections. He banged one furious fist into the mattress and made an angry noise into the pillow.

A cool hand grasped his shoulder and he shook it off. Pity would be the last straw. If Spike dared to pity him...

Spike stared down at the sobbing child who had just declared something to Spike that no human being had ever declared to him. Not unless it was too late. Because it wasn’t possible. There are some creatures, Spike knew, who cannot be loved. Like poor things born without
eyelids, or stomachs. Some essential part is lacking. And Spike knew he was one of them.

“Xander,” said Spike, in a grim commanding voice. “Look at me.”

It is impossible, no matter how badly your ego wants it, when your id is out of control with pain and hurt and rage and envy, and a huge shot of testosterone and horniness is mixed in. It’s impossible to appear cool and haughty when raising a tear-swollen face from a snotty pillow and trying to look the source of your rejection and humiliation in the eye. It’s impossible to look unaffected.

He tried.

“Yer shakin’, Xan,” observed Spike. His eyes were hard. “Yer all strung out,” said Spike. He raised his hand. Purposely, looking Xander in the eye, he ran his fingers over the bite on Xander’s neck. Xander shivered all over.

“Don’t,” he said, that horrible girly voice coming out of him again.

Spike came closer. His hand slid around Xander’s waist. He turned on the mattress. Quickly dipped his head and licked the bite, hard. Xander moaned, involuntarily. He told his hands to push Spike away, but they didn’t.
Spike licked him again. Then he pushed Xander flat on the mattress. Xander resisted. Or he felt the intention to resist rise in his chest and recede. Spike kept looking at him with those marble eyes. His jaw was clenched so hard; Xander saw the muscle jump there. “You don’t love me, whelp,” said Spike.

Then Spike’s hand ran over his stomach, slid down, cupped his cock, worked loose his pants, and slipped inside.

Xander lay panting and watching him, dark eyed, in shock. Spike leaned in and licked the bite again, squeezed Xander’s cock.

Xander twisted and groaned.

“Yeah, you want me, don’t you, Harris,” said Spike. “All this time I thought you were mad about it, you really liked it, didn’t you?”

Xander managed to get his lips to form words. “Fuck off, Spike. I told you to...” he groaned when Spike slipped up against his neck and began sucking steadily on Xander’s bite. He pulled back a fraction when Xander’s whole body shuddered.

“That what you want, Harris? Cuz that ain’t love. That’s easy. I can give you that.” He dug his blunt teeth into the
sweet supple skin; let the tip of his tongue work against it.

“No,” Xander choked, willing himself to arch his head away. He managed to gain control of his hands, pushed Spike back. “No, I want. I don’t want you like that, Spike,” he finally managed to get out.

Spike looked shaken for a second. His face went blank. Then that predatory look was back. “Right, Xander Harris doesn’t want that.” He wriggled onto Xander’s body, Xander’s freed cock tightly gripped in one hand, and started stroking. “Xander Harris, the noble White Knight, doesn’t want a dirty old vampire.”

“No, I …” Xander whimpered and struggled and tried to get Spike’s hand to stop. “I love you, Spike. I want you…” the damn tears were starting again and Xander was just sick to hell of crying like a girl.

But Spike had stopped. He blinked at Xander.

And Xander grasped his face gently in both hands. Yeah, he was shaking, he could see it now. And, sure, if Spike licked that bite one more time he was going to cum all over them both. But… he searched the stunned blue eyes.
“I love you, Spike,” he said. “If I have to say it too many
times, well, I think some manly part of me will be
permanently damaged, but I love you, Spike.”

~*~*~*~*~

Spike’s mouth was cool and strong and very self-assured.
There was no give and take here, no equality. His lips
controlled the kiss, setting a pace of movement and
pressure, as if he knew the mouth he kissed better than
it owner. And he did. Spike’s mouth was touching off
sensations Xander hadn’t known he could have, dragging
sounds from deep in his chest.

Spike’s hands moved over Xander’s body, neither
needing nor asking permission. Xander felt his pants
disappear from his thighs, then the hands again. He knew
his own body reacted but only registered his pliancy, as if
he were dough rolling in the hands of an expert. Being
made love to by a man.

Or rather, a male demon that had lived for centuries.

The assault ceased for a moment. Spike stilled, looking
into Xander’s eyes. The intensity of the dark blue gaze
seemed to Xander to have a feeling of infinity, like
looking into a mirror that looked into a mirror that looked into a ...

“You in there, whelp?”

Xander’s lips were no longer wholly his own, but he attempted a grin. “Yeah,” he rasped. “Yeah, and can I say, wow?”

Spike smiled and lowered his gaze. When he looked up again, his eyes were shy. And Xander imagined a heavy, rusty hinged door slowly creaking open, revealing a frail, hesitant, tow headed boy. Spike was in there somewhere. The real Spike. His hands rose to touch the pale face.

So beautiful, he thought, the pad of his thumb softly caressing a cheekbone.

“What, Xan?” Spike was so close that when he spoke he puffed air against Xander’s face.

Had he said that out loud?

“You’re a hell of a kisser,” said Xander, trying to lighten the mood. “Guess it’s that whole oral fixation thing, huh?”
Spike dipped his head, feeling ridiculously pleased at the compliment. He rose to his knees and just knelt there, looking down at Xander.

The boy that lay beneath him was all liquid. Like a deep black lake. Spike knew he could drown there. Clear legible emotions rose and fell in those eyes, like white fish from the depths. And Spike felt himself responding to the questions there. Some slumbering serpent uncoiling from his own deep place, as if Xander were summoning it. Compelling him to answer those questions, that need...

“What do you want, Xander?” asked Spike, almost fearfully.

In the dim firelight, Spike’s torso was so still and pale, he looked like that statue of David that Xander had seen in Art books. His eyes were dark shadows, his mouth open, light shone on the lower lip. Warming the color of it. Spike took a breath, for some inexplicable reason, and the light shifted over his chest.

It was like they hung at some fulcrum in time. They had been carried at a wild pace to this crest and now were waiting for something to tip the car over the lip of the hill. Xander reached for Spike, and Spike’s hand rose. He slowly intertwined his fingers with Xander’s. A studied,
careful action. His thumb resting against Xander’s wrist and Xander suddenly knew that Spike was feeling for the pulse there, feeling his life.

“You,” whispered Xander. He felt like he should say something more. Something poetic. But there were no words that he knew for it. This thing he felt.

Spike leant down and just waited there, those deep eyes reading him, until Xander made the decision for them both, reared up and kissed him, sliding his hand around Spike’s neck, his fingers pulling the smooth cool cylinder, with the silky curling hairs, down towards him as he lay back on the pillow pulling Spike into his mouth. Willing Spike inside of him.

Once again, the kiss took possession of them both. Dark cool waters of a kiss. Xander entered into it like it was the reality from which his doppelganger life had sprung. Spike’s hands traveled across his skin, lighting little sparks as they ran over his nipples, trickled down his belly, burrowed into the curling hairs. Xander moaned and felt some enormous sadness, from the past week, or maybe from the beginnings of his existence, rising up from his own private well. He sobbed into Spike’s mouth with need and Spike drew back infinitesimally, caught both Xander’s thighs by the back, lifting them. And now
his eyes were in the light, watching Xander. “Open up for me,” commanded Spike, pushing his cock against Xander’s hole.

Xander gasped as he felt his hole spasm, open, and grasp the cool, hard cock. He shuddered and felt Spike just slide in, as if he were stretched and lubricated already, as if his body had no will but to obey Spike. Spike seated himself firmly against his ass and then leaned down, his mouth touched Xander’s lips and tasted. His cheeks. His chin. He lay his forehead against Xander’s and didn’t move, although Xander was panting with the effort to be still, fighting the urge for that heavy thickness to rub up inside him.

“Xander,” said Spike, in a deep, cultured voice as pure and clean as any Xander had ever heard from Giles or his Watcher friends. “Do you know what I am?”

Xander nodded, not trusting his babbling, nonsensical Americanisms in what he felt had suddenly become an almost ritualistic situation.

“I am a monster from Hell, Xander,” said Spike. “Thousands of years old, I am a parasite that lives in the corpse of a man I killed. I feed on human blood,” said Spike. He arched his head, and Xander could see, in the movement of Spike’s throat, the dark shadow jumping at
the base of his neck, what an effort it was taking for
Spike, as well, to be still.

“Do you understand?” asked Spike, head arched back.

“Yes,” answered Xander hoarsely. “I know what you are,
Spike. I want you.”

Spike groaned. He pulled back his hips fractionally and
shoved forward, making a sound deep in his throat. He
repeated the movement. Again. And faster. Little, short,
jabbing movements, right up inside the depths of
Xander’s rectum, rubbing his prostate and pressing him
full. Spike’s movements sped up, gaining speed, gaining
force.

Xander found himself gasping for breath.

Spike growled, shook all over and his skin seemed to
ripple like a slow motion effect, as the demon emerged
all over his skin, his entire body foreign and hard and
cold and pistoning hard into Xander’s ass. He drew back
farther now on each thrust. Until he was reared up
against Xander, his clawed hands wrapped around
Xander’s thighs, pressing them down to Xander’s
shoulders, Xander was pinned there by a demon who
fucked him harder and faster than seemed possible. A
machine of slamming strength in his ass.
Then Spike began to cry out. Like an animal, he howled and growled and cried. Xander heard his own voice echoing the sounds that issued from Spike.

Fangs like glistening crystal caught the light. The yellow eyes seemed almost red. A hard tongue licked the upper lip and Spike lunged forward and covered Xander’s mouth. Xander felt a pinprick that stung like a bee on his lower lip, then as if released from a too tight container, the little release of blood spilling down his chin. He felt its chill pooling at his throat.

Spike said a word in another language.

He lunged again, like a snake striking and Xander felt a stab of pain in his ear, then the cold trickle again as more blood was released down his neck. The tiny little stabs were like lights being turned on in his body.

Spike spoke the word again, and this time when he struck Xander’s other ear, Xander cried out and felt cum swelling in his balls, the first hot surge pulsing up his cock.

Spike said something and the words tickled over Xander’s skin, surged with power through his balls. Spike was pumping hard against him, bent impossibly over him, licking at the wounds. “Xander,” said Spike, his voice
humming over the syllables of his name. His hips were slamming so hard and so fast, his dick a presence of force and swelling energy inside Xander, Xander could feel himself coming as in a dream, it kept going on and on.

Distantly he heard himself screaming. Begging, jerking impossibly under that endless fucking. Begging for more, screaming the words back at Spike. Screaming ‘mine’ and ‘yours’ and now, please Spike now, and this time when Spike slid his fangs into his throat, Xander jerked his chin back and arched to meet him.

~*~*~*~*~

‘You okay, Xan?’ Spike kissed an earlobe softly.

Xander mumbled unintelligibly and found his mind to be floating somewhere above the world of words.

“You’re an amazin’ human, you know,” said Spike adoringly. He wriggled the cold tip of his nose under Xander’s jawbone.

Xander sighed and hissed and felt something ripple and release from him. Like bubbles rising that had been trapped under water. He just let it go.
“I won’t let anything happen to you,” said Spike. His eyes looking into Xander’s half-lidded ones now. Dark and serious as a vow. “Nothing will hurt you. I promise, you know, Xander?”

Xander knew. He looked at Spike and saw that they both knew. He belonged to Spike now. He was safe. Xander closed his eyes and the last bubble lifted towards the smooth infinite surface and disappeared.

Spike kissed the sleeping man lying next to him with a tenderness he hadn’t even known he had. He watched over him for a very long time. Then he rose carefully, gathering his clothes and silently slipped from the tent.

He didn’t put on his shoes until he was outside. He gathered the weapons silently as well, then padded down the hill with his packed arsenal on his back. He stopped before the bend and looked back at the glowing tent.

“Nothing will hurt you, Xander,” said Spike.

After Xander had first lost his eye, all those decades ago, he had had a good ten years of waking in the morning feeling as if he had slipped sideways from himself. It wasn’t so much the lack of peripheral vision, although
that had probably been what started it, but more the feeling that he was not quite inside his own lines. Like a cartoon with the colored part animating outside itself.

The loss of Sunnydale, and Anya’s death, had pushed him even more askew.

But adulthood is a series of slides West from one’s true North anyway, and in time Xander had become so accustomed to not being himself that he had accepted the strangeness as natural. The missing eye merely part of the new person in whom he dwelt, and who he came to identify as himself.

And during his life there had been moments when he had known somehow that this was the way it was meant to be. The day he and his wife had decided to marry. The day they had brought his son home from the hospital. Xander could still remember sitting on the sofa the next morning, Patricia still in bed, James a tiny warm ball tucked into his arm, thanking the powers that be, despite all the loss, regret and sorrow, thanking them sincerely and profusely and from the bottom of his heart. For his life.

And if, over the years, he sometimes had still found himself, as if coming to from a dream, standing on an overpass in Los Angeles, or staring out the window of a
skyscraper, and wondered who the hell he was and how he had come to be there, Xander had stepped past that sensation with no thought whatsoever. There were obligations, responsibilities. People were waiting for him. He was a man outside his own lines, perhaps, but it no longer worried him.

When he had first woken in this strange new world, his restored dual vision had barely fazed him.

This morning though, as he became conscious of himself, Xander had finally felt the jerk and settle of coming into focus. No longer atilt or blurred. For the first time in decades, Xander felt fully himself.

Himself in bed with a vampire-lover, he remembered, somehow accepting that as part of the clarity. What had happened last night? His whole emotional being, like a heat seeking missile, had found its target and burst over him in a shower of whatever this feeling was. Spike and he were together somehow. And not just in a ‘two guys having sex’ kind of way, either. “Spike?” he whispered, flopping his arm sideways to wake him. His arm bounced against the cold, empty mattress.

He turned his head sideways and found Spike not there.
Xander sat up. “Spike?” He rolled out of bed and staggered around. He felt a little high, so it took a few moments to realize that Spike was actually not there. The tent seemed not just vacant, but *emptied*. He could almost scent the missing vampire.

He rubbed at his neck, habitually scratching the healing bite, and found his fingers fumbling instead over an old scar. His bite was completely healed.

A vampire bite is not a normal wound. Xander had explained all this to James on many a story telling night, as they whispered under the quilt with a flashlight, giggling like a couple of boys. Xander had explained to James that a vampire bite doesn’t just scab over and heal in a week, like a scrape you get on your knee.

It’s a puncture wound to a primary artery. Two thick holes in your neck. It aches and it itches and even if the vein wall has healed enough so that it isn’t still seeping into the hole, it feels tender. The demon has fangs to feed; once its food is drained, there is no purpose in healing. One isn’t supposed to survive the bites, and they are ugly wounds, ragged and tissue destructive, not like a suture or a surgeon’s knife. If one does survive a vampire bite, as Xander had now thrice, one is careful not to move one’s head around too much. Not a lot of violent
neck twisting. The ache and the itch become an ongoing continuous presence. Swallowing is a conscious act. Speaking vibrates against it.

Spike had buried his fangs deep in his neck last night, Xander remembered with a weird little thrill. So he was stunned to feel under his palm not even dried blood or skin. And there was no pain or tenderness in his neck at all.

Where the bite had been, he felt instead two cool lumps, with the wrinkled soft tissue of scars. His hands flew over his face. He felt something similar under one lip. Each earlobe had the tiny, soft fleshy mark. Overnight the bites had healed.

He began searching around the debris of the tent, shaking his head at the mess. The place looked like a college dorm room. Xander kept poking through the piles of discarded clothing, bizarrely looking for a mirror. Of course there were none. A reflective surface? In the round brass sides of the tub, Xander squinted and twisted his face, trying to see his scars.

Under his lip, perfectly centered, one tiny, white, star-like mark. Matching marks on both earlobes. He couldn’t see the wounds on his neck properly. They didn’t seem completely closed, though, his fingers found weird
indentations in both, like a navel. Touching them, of course, made his morning woody leap against his leg. But that was nothing compared to the sensations washing over the rest of him. Every hair on his body seemed to be breathing. He could feel the air around him, its temperature, its moisture. He could *hear* the silence. He felt more alert than he ever had in his entire life. Beyond the adrenalin-before-the-battle alert. Beyond the important-business-meeting alert. He swore he could hear the earth itself, the ground groaning, the trees stretching in the gloom outside. He started breathing faster and he could almost see the heat of his breath, like a scientific photograph, writhing through the cool air.

“SPIKE?” called Xander. Then he remembered the battle. The Plan.

He only hesitated long enough to grab appropriate clothing.

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The patrolmen, to prepare for the battle the next day, had slept in the Town Hall. They had made their own ritual of it. An exciting and almost illicit seeming act in this society of strict and ancient traditions, to make a
new one. But they were young and heady with the excitement of so many new things happening during their time.

Most of them had never spent the night anywhere but in their own homes, with their own families. Even Tyren and Tybal felt wild and free surrounded by strangers instead of their five sisters.

They made a sort of pact. Gave each other new names. Exchanged a few exaggerated stories between themselves of recent exploits while on patrol and then, their beds laid out in a little circle in the middle of the hall, they grouped closer and told vampire tales.

‘The Old Ones’ they called them. The ‘Masters’. And in their tales, their vampires were the two angels of the dark world who pitied the race of man and defied their own gods to help the people of Earth. Brought them wisdom. Brought them light. Protected them from the jealous gods. There were a lot of creation stories about their vampires. How they had come from the circle of stones. The larger, darker one, mad and raving, speaking with the Gods in his mind. The smaller, facile with languages though always wayward in his grammar and accent, friendly, sensual, hedonistic and passionate.
They had obviously been of the Gods. Their strength and battle skills were incredible. They had brought the first people food from the far off lakes. And coal for warmth. They had brought the old solar panels from some Land.

The stories said that the Old Ones had starved and almost died, because they would not drink from the peoples of Earth, but a sect of priests had sacrificed their own blood to keep them living. Since then, the ceremony of sacrifice, when one became a true adult of the clan, was when one offered blood to the Old Ones. The mark was one of adulthood and honor.

Berynn’s fingers slid habitually over his old mark. He looked down at his arm and really studied it for the first time since he had received it quite some time ago. It had been Spike who delivered it, he remembered. And then, oddly, he remembered Xander’s lips on his mouth.

The Old Ones battled the demon hordes. And there were also ancient prophecies, set down by the first sect of priests, that there would be someday, a time of light. A time after the Old Ones. There were also prophecies about others outcast by the Gods. Heroes and villains sent to aid the Old Ones. Stories of their roles, the signs of their coming, and the last battles.
Most of the men thought Xander was one outcast by the Gods. His stature, the unnatural size and strength of him. His coppery brown skin, obviously spoke of some alien land, some non-human derivation. They hypothesized about what kind of creature he might be.

Berynn reflected that he had a poor opinion of a God who would cast away someone like Xander. And he was fairly certain that Xander was completely human. Because Xander was afraid most of the time. Confused. He was lonely, and that might have been the state of an exile, but the sensation was familiar, one Berynn knew too well. It seemed like every human being he knew felt that way most of the time.

Sometimes he ached with all of their shared loneliness. Not tonight though. Tonight they were together in a shared adventure. The sensation was delicious. It was great being an empath in a room full of happy, excited people.

Now one of the men was describing an incident with a magical beast while on patrol. “His eyes were red and tiny. Not like the ‘Masters’. This was a hungry stupid look. His nose quivered with rage and he shook his shaggy brown head. His neck was so thick, it seemed part of his torso...”
One of the men interrupted at this point to accuse his companion of fabrication. But the man’s patrol buddy confirmed the story.

Now they were all joining in, laughing, adding details.

Berynn sat on his little bed, arms wrapped around raised knees and smiled happily. Tyren came and sat beside him, resting his arm over his shoulder. He touched, teasingly, the bright pink tip of Berynn’s nose.

Tybal plunked down on the other side of Berynn, and his arm joined his brother’s, woven together around Berynn’s back. He rested the red mop of his head happily sideways on Berynn’s smooth dark cap of hair.

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When Xander burst through the doors of the Hall sometime later, he found them curled around each other on their shared blankets, like Siamese cats in a nest, their slim white limbs overlapping.

Berynn raised his tousled and confused head from the hollow of Tybal’s shoulder and then stiffened, jerked to a seated position, adrenalized by the palpable panic
coming off of Xander. He started shaking his companions, his voice adding to the alarm.

“Stupid undead bastard always going off to be the hero...” ranted Xander, tossing crossbows and scabbards and stakes at all and sundry. “...I find him and I’m killing him... again...he is so dead...or...deader...or...” he flung a cross-bolt belt over his shoulder and strapped his lucky ax to his hip while all around him patrolmen rushed to dress and arm themselves. Xander ranted, “... damn vampire. Thinks being evil is some kind of get out of jail free card ...

Berynn gave his shoulder a hard steadying squeeze as he passed.

“Uh, yeah, thanks,” said Xander. Spinning on one foot, he followed the patrolmen out of the room.

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Spike was halfway down the West cliff face when he heard them. He was in an unfortunate position as it happened. Spread eagle on a narrow ledge, his back pressed to the sheer face of the cliff, edging along sideways. He and Angel had come this way many times
before, and Spike could do the corner with his eyes closed.

But it was a Hell of a place to be caught.

He froze and listened to the approaching voices. Amazed that he hadn’t heard them sooner. His mind immediately began sorting through the available plans. With despair he realized that his repertoire of plans, devised over centuries, all required two vampires to carry out.

The heavy footsteps and whispered demonic words were getting closer. Spike thought that if he dared to inhale, he’d be able to smell them by now.

He began very slowly sliding back the way he had come. There was an indentation in the cliff face about twenty paces back. If he could make it there without them discovering him...

A heavy damp hand came down on Spike’s shoulder. “Plsxts,” said a deep nasally voice. Spike didn’t know the language, but the satisfaction in the voice was clear. He had to crane his neck to look up into the creature’s face. A delighted fleshy smile and rheumy green eyes gazed into his own, the hand on his shoulder tightened.
Spike managed a cheeky grin. "*That’s all right, Angel,*” he yelled to a place above and beyond the demon’s left shoulder. "*I can take these two little uns...*”

And there was darkness.

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As Xander and the patrolmen rounded the top of the ridge, part of Xander still expected Spike to be there waiting for them. An obnoxious grin on his face, probably picking his teeth with a bit of demon bone. Xander was already planning exactly how he was going to tell Spike off when he saw him.

It wasn’t until they arrived and found Spike not there that Xander really began to react. The adrenalin surging into his heart muscle, until it pounded like a fist against his ribs. Breathing hard, he looked around himself. The patrollers seemed at a loss, wandering around the pre-arranged meeting place, looking behind rocks and around the periphery of the clearing as if they expected Spike to suddenly pop out. Xander reflected briefly that these people had lost too much too often. They were giving in to that feeling of failure. Well, Xander Harris had worked himself beyond that feeling of failure a long time

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ago. He jumped up onto a largish boulder, waving his arms. It was kind of cool when all the guys' heads turned expectantly. Like he knew what he was doing.

“*Listen, he’s been caught,*” he stated.

He noticed Berynn’s expression. He seemed to think Xander was being overly optimistic.

“No,” said Xander. “If he were dust, I’d know.”

Berynn’s eyes evaded his, unhappily. But Xander knew he was right. Something had happened between him and Spike last night. Or maybe it had been happening all along. But if Spike were dust, Xander was sure he would feel it.

“*We’ll need Dahla’s help,*” he announced. “*And volunteers.*”

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Spike loved it when life turned poetic. And normally, he would have been enjoying the irony of his situation. He twisted his wrists in the manacles that held him aloft. If he ignored the pain and arched his wrists back, he could
grab hold of the suspending chain and twist his body infinitesimally towards the cave entrance. At least this way, he’d see it coming. Spike hated the idea of death catching him from behind.

He could see the outline of the guards, like large soft boulders, resting at the caves entrance. One of them glanced up at his movement and grinned malevolently. “*Not long now*” he promised Spike in an eerily spot on pronunciation of the villagers’ dialect. He grinned again, his grayed shark-like teeth protruding from thick lips.

“*If he’s bored, we can play again*” said the other guard without turning, nodding at the clubs leaning against the wall of the cave near where they sat. The clubs were covered, already, with a certain vampire’s blood. A great deal more of the blood was clotted in Spike’s hair and drying it streaks down his naked torso.

“*Thanks, mate,*” said Spike, hoping the villagers’ word for ‘mate’ sounded suitably sarcastic. He ran his tongue around the inside of his lower lip and spat the blood he gathered there as far across the room as he could, towards his tormentors. He twisted again.

He wasn’t sure how long he had been out, but he knew that by now the villagers, and Xander would have found him missing. The irony was, Spike had purposely pursued
this action to keep Xander safe. And now the damned whelp would be coming for him. Probably butting that stubborn, dark head right into one of those ugly clubs. And there wasn’t a damned thing Spike could do to stop him.

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Xander, Berynn, Tybor and Tyren poked their heads cautiously above the moss-covered hillock and peered through the darkness at a distant light source flickering across the ground between them. Illuminating the boiling night sky.

Tybor nudged Berynn and he nodded and looked an inquiry at Xander.

‘And how bad off are we when I’m the guy that knows the answers?’ thought Xander nervously. “Fire,” he said, in a tight tiny whisper. The light of it shifted over the awed faces of the twins. Xander allowed himself a small smile and noticed Berynn watching his mouth fixedly.

Oh Hell.
While Xander struggled with the quandary of guilt, remorse and friendship, Berynn lifted a hand and touched his lower lip. Xander flinched back.

That bitter wisdom tilted up the corner of Berynn’s mouth again, and Xander figured he didn’t have to say much else. But Berynn didn’t seem to get the message. He touched Xander’s lip again. Or, actually, that little wound Spike had made just below Xander’s lip. It tingled. Berynn’s gaze traveled from the wound to Xander’s eyes, his expression awed.

“Oh, yeah,” Xander mouthed the words, and felt himself flushing, his tongue automatically moving to brush the wound where it opened inside his lip. And how many times had he repeated that action today, he wondered, the sensation of peace buzzing through him every time he touched it.

Berynn said a word in hushed tones in his own language that Xander had never learnt. Tybor nudged Berynn again, hard, and gestured towards the firelit campsite. The demons were moving about with some sense of purpose.

Per their previously discussed plan, the four men rose and ran at a crouch around the back of the campsite. Tybor and Tyren dropped off halfway round and Berynn
and Xander went on another forty yards before securing themselves behind some boulders. They peered through the thickening smoke. It smelled, oddly, like pine trees, thought Xander.

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The good news was, thought Spike through the haze of pain, trying not to pass out again, the good news was that he and Angel’s reputations were still secure. The demons had beaten him for some time, despite his being bound, before they had seemed convinced that he was safe. Some of the blows to the head would have killed a mortal. The bad news was, Spike was having trouble staying conscious. He ground his teeth and twisted his wrists again, the pain forcing a kind of clarity, and tried to think.

The manacles were enchanted. He couldn’t even bend the weird metallic material from which they had been constructed. And his feet, hanging bound but free, were held in some kind of enchantment as well. When he had struggled against the blows the last time, he hadn’t been able to raise them to defend himself.
So the demons had a wizard. Or access to some kind of magic and the intellect to use it.

Spike thought of that bewitched cloaking device they had found up in the woods and the Bad Feeling he had been having since he saw it only mounted. Demons with a wizard, and the mind and determination to learn the local dialect. There was more to this plan than bash, eat and dash, obviously. These demons were planning something larger.

“*So, mate,*” said Spike as casually as he could past a broken lip, “*since I’m gonna be dust soon, mind tellin’ me what the plan is?*”

The grinning demon only grinned some more and shook his head. “*What do you care?*” He nodded towards some horizon which Spike could not see. “*In an hour, the sun will set, right through this doorway*”

“*You should be wondering how things are in Hell,*” added the other guard with a nasally laugh.

“*Yer no one to talk, you slimy toothed cretin,*” spat Spike. “*’spect I’ll be seein’ you there soon enough*”.

“*I’m not going to Hell,*” said the creature, confidently. “*I am serving the True Lord, and I will be rewarded with The Kingdom*”
What the Bloody Hell?

“*Glad to hear it, mate,*” said Spike, thinking fast. “*Cuz Angel should be comin’ through the bushes any time now.*”

The first guard cast a look back at him, and raised a lumpy, stubbled eyebrow at his partner. The guard who was confident of salvation, covered with a contemptuous look. “*Never heard of any Angel*” he said. Spike wasn’t fooled.

“*Didn’t think I’d be stupid enough ta come down here alone, didya mate?*”

The guards smirked with a little less confidence, and glanced outside nervously.

“*Nah, I’m just a distraction.*” Spike made himself chuckle with apparent glee. The vibrations rattled his broken skull and he thought soon he’d pass out again. “*Yep, he’ll be comin’ straight towards me,*” he managed to murmur before a wave of grayness rose and swooped over his mind. Spike gave into it.

The guards regarded the hanging, unconscious vampire in silence.
“*Bluffing,*” said the one to the other in their own tongue.

The other demon nodded. But he watched the bushes outside more attentively.

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A good fifteen minutes of cautiously searching around the periphery of the campsite, and the four men had met back at their hiding spot empty handed. Xander peered out at the chaotic camp, then fell back from his observation point in despair. He ran his hand desperately through his hair, as Berynn crawled over and hunched down next to him. “I just know we have to find him soon,” Xander said in an intense whisper. Sunset was coming; Xander could feel it down his spine. He had the worst kind of feeling about the sunlight today.

Berynn studied him and reached towards the mark on his lip again. Xander ducked away a little. He wasn’t sure what Berynn’s fascination with that spot was.

“Heh. Yeah, always wanted a tattoo,” he said, feeling the warmth in his cheeks. Berynn shook his head and pressed forward, insistently putting his fingers on Xander’s mark.
Xander backed up towards the tree behind him a bit. “Uh, hey, man. That’s sort of a personal thing. I don’t know what you want...”

“Hey,” he said, as Berynn’s fingers pressed firmly into his chin and his other hand came up and held Xander’s head steady. The endorphins rushed over him, a stronger wave than Berynn had ever thrown at him. Xander felt literally chloroformed by them.

“I don’t want...” he weakly protested the violation. And then he felt something else. Berynn’s head was down, as in concentration. His fingers delicately positioned over Xander’s bite, which sang with a sensation. As if electricity were passing through it.

Xander huffed in breath and kept himself motionless, a wave of heady, rich endorphin prickling over his head so palpably he imagined his hair rising as if brushed through. The electrical sensation smoothed out into a humming feeling, Berynn’s hands almost playing Xander’s lip. As if Xander were an instrument.

Berynn looked up at him and his eyes were so weird Xander flinched away despite the headiness of the hormones seducing him. The iris completely gone, filled with the darkened pupil. He could have sworn he saw a yellow, demonic color rise in their center. Berynn’s
normally gentle countenance suddenly twisted into a cynical and bitter sneer.

“Whelp,” he hissed in an altered and definitely British voice. “Get yer sorry arse back to camp before I kick it for you.”


“Fuck,” said Xander. “Don’t have a seizure here, Berynn.”

The heavy lashes fluttered and lifted to reveal Berynn’s normal eyes. “*I know where he is*,” he communicated. Patting Xander. He struggled to his feet, waving urgently. And ran off through the trees.

“This never gets less weird,” thought Xander, running in the dark as hard as he could after a possessed empath. Berynn’s lithe form flickered in and out of the dark silhouettes of trees, like an evasive memory. Xander felt as if he were chasing a very old dream.

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Spike was struggling to pull himself up from
unconsciousness again, when one of the guards grunted and gestured towards something outside. Spike watched through one eye, the other closed with his own sticky blood, straining to hear beyond the ringing in his ears.

“Hey guys!” the clear American accent sailed through the air like the alien thing it was. “Is this a private party, or can anybody ... oof.”

Damned foolish boy and his heroic impulses.

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That had gone well, reflected Xander, twisting on the floor awkwardly. He assessed the damage and found his wrists bound, his head with the nauseating ache. He wiggled his toes and fingers and found nothing broken. Not dead, yet. Which was always a good sign. He rolled onto his back and looked around the place he had been stashed. A dark stinky damp cave. Yep. Standard. There was the intimidating demon bulkage blocking the doorway, the requisite large scary weapons. And, you know, the fear.

The gorgeous vampire, hanging in the moonlight, dripping with blood. Madder than a wet cat.
“Harris, get the fuck out of here,” Spike hissed, twisting his bloody wrists in the manacles.

Oh, yeah, this was exactly as he remembered it.

He grinned around his gag at his furious boyfriend.

Spike glared, twisted, spat blood and said something in another language that Xander was very grateful he could not understand.

Xander wriggled his butt on the floor until, with relief, he felt the uncomfortable package he had stashed up his ass. As he had hoped, the demons had neglected to search his body cavities. Guess they didn’t have terrorists highjacking airplanes in this epoch.

He rolled onto his side, arched his back, slid his bound hands down and wriggling and gasping with the discomfort, drew the carefully wrapped package from his ass.

Above him he heard a snort and a chuckle and a hushed British voice mutter. “Remind me ta check before I stick anythin’ in there next time.”

Now came the manual dexterity part. Xander fiddled by touch with the wrapping until he was able to poke one finger through. The curved end of the little folded knife
slid into his hand. He flicked it open, managing to not
prick himself and flipped it carefully around to apply to
the ropes around his wrists.

He heard Spike hiss appreciatively. The ropes fell away
and he reached up and dragged the gag free of his
mouth. “Ta da,” he whispered, rolling to see Spike’s
reaction. Spike decided that Harris looked altogether too
proud of himself. Despite the pounding in his head, Spike
managed to raise an unimpressed eyebrow, trying to
stretch his swollen lips into a sneer.

This didn’t faze the whelp one wit. That crooked grin
widened as he rolled to his feet, and raised a secretive
finger to his lips, grinning like the devil himself. Xander
inched his way into the shadows by the wall. There was a
loud clunk outside and one of the guards left the
entrance.

“Hey!” yelped the fool child loudly. And the other guard
spun around.

The next few moments seemed to Spike like one of those
old black and white films he had seen hundreds of years
ago. His stuttering consciousness added the cinematic
flicker. All the scene needed was a wild player piano in
the background.
The remaining guard charged through the door towards Xander, who scampered as fast as he could around Spike’s hanging body. In the smallish area where Spike had been hung, the kid had a minor advantage over the larger demon, he kept barely one jump ahead of the dangerous club. Spike jerked uselessly at his manacles and spat helpful curses at all and sundry.

He could swear he heard the kid giggling.

And as Harris and the lumbering guard played a ludicrous game of ring-around-the-bloody-vampire, that little empathy fairy came sprinting through the door, a small sack held aloft. Excitedly throwing some kind of powder around as he ran, like Tinkerbell in a damned burlesque show. A good quantity of the powder was hurled in Spike’s general direction and he felt the tingle and sting of magic over his hands and feet.

“Fucking Hell, I hate magic,” he said, just before the manacles released and he fell in a heap to the floor.

He got to his feet painfully, struggling to find his balance. Harris was already screaming, of course. “Little help here,” his voice several octaves higher than usual. Spike grit his teeth, spun and kicked. Five centuries of experience count for something. He instinctively caught the guard in the jaw. And fell to the ground in time to see
a hollering Xander bringing the lost club down on the guards head with a disgusting crunching noise.

Berynn and Xander were grinning at each other like the two fools they were, they leapt towards each other and slapped hands in a mutual high five.

“Can’t believe that rock trick worked,” said Xander breathlessly, loping over to his collapsed boyfriend. He raised Spike carefully to his feet. “Haven’t any of these guys ever seen a John Wayne movie?”

“Rock trick,” repeated Spike. The cave walls were heaving ominously. He gripped Xander and ground his teeth, trying to stay conscious.

“Berynn drew the other guard away by throwing a rock,” Xander explained. “Geez, Spike, we’ve got to get you...”

“You mean he ain’t dead?” Spike blinked furiously against the blood in his eyes. “Geez,” he expostulated. “These bastards mean business, you idiots. Get yer sorry arses out of here!”

Berynn yelped and ran for the door, and was brought up short by six feet and two hundred pounds of hard gray flesh. With a club in its hand.
He bounced right off the meaty hide of the guard, and that is probably why he survived the encounter. He literally flew backwards, landing on his ass with a squeak, and sliding another two yards backward, flailing. Xander thoughtlessly leapt between the guard and Berynn.

The demon raised his club and swung and Xander ducked. Two seconds later, Xander noted with surprise that he had ducked successfully and was still standing, slightly to the demon’s right, with his brains not bashed in. His hand went to his skull, as if surprised to find it still there.

There was a shout and Spike’s white and blood-black torso shot across the air behind the first guard. A sickening crunch and the wet splatter of something that looked like a demons lunch flew out from around the guard who halted in his approach towards Xander and spun around to face Spike.

Over the demon’s bent shoulder, Xander saw Spike standing unsteadily. Blinking hard and swaying, as if he were confused. Hoping to distract the guard, Xander ran at the back of the demon. Berynn seemed to have regained his feet and joined him. They threw themselves jointly at the bulky back, and the combined force of their
bodies shoved the great hulk forwards, slightly off balance.

Spike swung sloppily, but made enough contact to snap the guard’s head sideways. Everyone stood for a moment in shock. Then the demon roared, spinning on the two humans, Spike screamed and kicked, weakly, but he made contact. Xander threw a punch that would leave him nursing his knuckles for a week, and Berynn jumped a bit and forced the fingers of one hand into the demon’s eyes. The guard roared with rage and spun about again. He raised his club.

Xander managed at this point to find his ax where it had been tossed against the wall. He swung it around without hitting Berynn or himself and planted it with a solid wet sound, in the demon’s behind. The guard roared and took a punch in his snaggled teeth from Spike. He dropped his club and Berynn ran forward speedily and fetched it away.

The swarm of locusts technique seemed to be working and they kept up their assault, gradually beating the monster down until Spike, weaving on his feet and blinking hard, his mouth wide as he attempted to focus, reached down and, crying out with pain at the effort, snapped the unwieldy neck.
They all stood, panting and staring.

Berynn was the first to react. He whooped and ran out of the cave, like a boy chased from a haunted house. Xander followed, dragging a confused and stumbling Spike behind him.

They were well into the woods before they stopped running.

Berynn fell against a tree, his breath coming in sharp, high-pitched gasps. He looked back at Xander and Spike, his face a white moon with an open dark mouth. Xander still had hold of Spike. He stumbled to a stop and and Spike fell into him. Xander righted him carefully.

“You okay?” he hissed, his hands stroking and patting the cool, bloodied body.

Spike nodded, shaking his head and blinking away blood. “Yeah, wouldn’t mind restin’ a bit, though,” he whispered.

Xander looked over at Berynn, who scanned the terrain with more than his eyes, apparently, then nodded cautiously.

Spike’s whole face was black with blood. The stripes of it, where it had run down over him, carved his torso into
long rectangular strips of white marble. He leaned over to one side, gripping Xander’s shoulder hard, and Xander let himself finally pull Spike into a fierce hug, burying his face in his neck. He could feel Spike’s body trembling. His hand brushed against a bit of broken bone above Spike’s ear.

“You fucking asshole,” said Xander fervently into Spike’s bloody throat.

Spike chuckled and let himself enjoy the hug. “Sorry, Xan.”

“No you aren’t,” Xander said, nuzzling Spike. He raised his head slowly, rubbing his cheek, his chin, his mouth, against Spike’s injured face. “God, look what they did to you, look at…” an odd instinct was taking hold of him. He lay his tongue on Spike’s skin and licked hard across a bloody cheekbone. Spike’s blood, dried and dirty as it was, seemed to revive in his mouth. Like carbonation, it fizzed, and he forgot that they had a witness. He forgot that they were in a slimy wet wood. All he felt was Spike’s injury, his need, the precariously close loss of him. Xander found himself clutching Spike close against him and licking him, open mouthed, finally ending at Spike’s lips where he remained, kissing him hungrily for a full minute before the stunned vampire pulled away.

“You need me,” said Xander, holding the slender, bloodied body close to his. “You need blood.”

“What?” Spike struggled away from him. Xander nuzzled him, rubbing his head against him. When Xander arched his chin, exposing his neck to him, Spike groaned. He cast a panicked look over at Berynn who was staring, open mouthed.

“Xander,” hissed Spike, unaccountably embarrassed. He couldn’t believe he was forcing a horny hot body away from his own, but he was. “Let’s get back to camp, ‘kay, pet?”

“Spiiiike,” said Xander, ignoring the hated endearment. He licked Spike’s neck again, his tongue seeking more of that blood, his hands seeking and finding Spike’s more tender bits. He fondled Spike’s cock with one insistent hand, rubbing up and down over his ass cheeks with the other.

Spike’s body was responding with an enthusiasm he wouldn’t have thought possible given his injuries. Xander’s mouth was becoming his whole focus. His eyes
strayed, dazed over Xander’s shoulder and he saw the villager still leaning against the tree, watching them. Berynn’s eyes were wide-open green spheres of amazement.

“Yer scarin’ the boy,” Spike hissed into Xander’s ear. Xander drew back, licking his lower lip lasciviously.

“Okay, Spike,” he said. Something in the slowness of his voice, its thickness, drew Spike’s gaze from Berynn back to Xander. He looked up and saw nothing in those eyes but fog and darkness. “Okay, I’ll wait,” said the were-Xander creature.

Spike could feel another wave of pain and blackness rising up in him. He gripped Xander and perhaps that's what shook the boy from his fugue. He caught Spike as he slithered to the ground. The last thing Spike heard was Xander calling out to Berynn for assistance.

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“They must have a wizard,” said Spike to Dahla. He was laid across the big bed, his head covered with gauze, so that only one blue eye peeked through. His countenance
had a liquid quality to it; he kept sliding in and out of
gameface as the pain came and went.

Dahla paced the room, looking grim. The presence of
magic constituted a serious enough weapon to warrant a re-assessment of their plan.

Xander perched beside Spike on the mattress. He dabbed carefully at the dirt and blood on Spike’s arm with a wet cloth. Schooling himself to not look at the bare-chested young man sitting at Spike’s other side.

Despite himself, the boy’s white arm kept appearing in his peripheral vision. Poreless, flawless white skin, blue veins delicately laced below the surface. Xander slid his cloth over a spot of dirt and looked up at Spike from beneath his brows.

Spike didn’t appear to be openly lusting after the treat sitting next to him. He watched Dahla, his expression serious. Xander dipped his head and focused again on his task. The language flowed over him like a rough wind. Recognizable words poking out as the vampire and the shaman spoke at a rapid pace.

Xander removed his cloth from Spike’s arm. A dribble of blood, released from a cleansed scab, trickled over the
contours of Spike’s chest. Xander watched the crimson stream, entranced.

Spike’s sharp voice and a tug on his arm, and he looked up, startled.

“What?”

Spike frowned. “Was tellin’ the witch ‘bout the cave, Harris. You remember anythin’ else?”

Xander shook his head dumbly.

Spike regarded him intently, his sharp perception seeming to hone in on something in Xander, when a flare rose in his eyes again. His pupils flashed gold and he grit his teeth.

Dahla murmured in a concerned voice. Xander leant forward, watching for any sign of something that might ease Spike’s suffering. From the corner of his eye, he saw the young man move closer to Spike on the mattress.

After a moment Spike’s pain seemed to pass. He exhaled and re-opened eyes once again blue. “Bugger this,” he said harshly. “Don’t have time fer healin’ and such…”

Xander saw Dahla and the young man exchange a look. He clutched at Spike’s arm. “Wait,” he said.
Spike turned his gaze on him and waited. Xander kept his hold on Spike’s arms, desperately searching his eyes for something. “Spike, I can do it…” Xander shrugged towards the man who waited patiently to give Spike his blood. He avoided, still, looking at him. “I can…” he whispered. He watched Spike’s eyes and saw something flicker there, some understanding.

“It’s too soon, Xander,” said Spike carefully.

Xander shook his head in rough denial.

“Harris, I can’t…” Spike’s eyes went briefly from the stranger to Dahla and came back to Xander. He lowered his voice a bit more. “Can’t live off you, whelp,” he said, very low.

Xander dipped his head, flushing, and glared at the mattress. He wanted to shove Spike away. Shout at him that he was full of himself, some kind of crazy demon. Why would Xander want that? Why would he want?… In his mind he saw that white arm, those blue veins pulsing. He fought an overwhelming urge to plant his fist in the young man’s face.

“You’d die, Harris,” persisted Spike softly. He shook Xander’s arm gently and Xander could see the tremor in Spike’s muscles. And he felt a surge of guilt as he realized
how hard Spike was holding back his signs of pain. Trying to make this easier for Xander.

Xander stood quickly, spun around before he had to look at the villager. “I’ll be outside,” he said, striding for the door.

He didn’t hear Spike’s reply.

12

“Giles?” Xander gaped and felt reality wobble a bit. He checked all the corners of his mind. Mentally pinched himself. His old friend sat there, mildly amused, light reflecting off his glasses.

“Yes,” said the Watcher calmly. “Yes, Xander, it is I.”

This was a miracle on so many levels. Insane, behind-glass Giles had been, to Xander, the same as a memory. Intangible and untouchable. But here before him... Xander took a step and saw Giles getting closer. He took another step. Here before him, where if he took one more step and reached out, he would be able to touch him, was a friend who had died. Xander had been to his funeral. Had thought of all the things he had never said. Had missed him over and over in little tidal waves lapping into his mind, ever since.
Xander took the step.

“Really, Xander,” huffed Giles, embarrassed and flushing as the dark head sobbed into his shoulder. He looked up at the doctor for help. But the little white faced man withdrew, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Ikntlev it,” Xander snuffled into Giles’ hospital gown.

“I beg your pardon?” said Giles politely, patting Xander’s shoulder.

“I can’t believe it,” said Xander, drawing back, holding Giles in place with both hands on his shoulders. “God, its great to hear your voice.”

“I’m pleased to see you, too, Xander,” said Giles.

Xander checked all the corners of reality again. “Are you really you?” he said wonderingly. He lightly touched Giles’ face. The Watcher endured the contact; a small smile tipped his mouth.

Xander let go, grinning with chagrin, rubbing at his wet face with the back of one hand. He laughed.

“Xander, are you all right?” Giles asked gently.

“What? Me?” Xander looked puzzled then, “Ohhh... you mean the whole ‘raised from the dead in some futuristic

Giles patted the heavy volume that still rested under his right hand. “I saw your rune figures, the ones you had reproduced and I…” his brows came down, his eyes narrowed in thought. “It was like the needle was stuck on the record and this,” he indicated the book, “pushed it forward. They told me you did this.”

Giles sat beaming at him with pride. Xander felt the wonder of a child receiving the gift he never thought he’d have.

“‘I did…?’ said Xander; he looked at the book disbelievingly. “I was just trying to remember, you know, the thing I messed up.”

Giles shook his head. “The figures are perfect,” he said warmly, and a metaphorical fairy wand seemed to thump Xander in the chest. Sparkles of happiness flowing to his head, his arms.

“Heh,” said Xander, weakly. “Hard to believe.”

“Perfect,” Giles repeated. “Thank you, Xander.”

Xander basked.
Despite sitting in a hospital bed in a gown tied together with string, Giles got a look on his face that spoke of tweed and Oxford cloth. He pulled the book into his lap and touched the rim of his glasses thoughtfully.

“It’s a particularly apt passage, as it happens,” he said, his fingers sliding easily along the borders of Xander’s drawings. “And, oddly enough, could be interpreted as an accurate assessment of our current situation.”

“Oh no,” groaned Xander, “let me guess. It’s a …”

“Prophecy about a pending apocalypse,” Giles finished for him.

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Spike was punching out a pile of bed linen. It wasn’t that the linen had done anything to him. And the sheets and coverlet hadn’t displayed any particularly demonic tendencies. Actually Spike had been going to just strip their bed and deposit the soiled linens in the laundry baskets Dahla kept off her main rooms. He was stuffing them deep into the hamper when he suddenly was overcome by a fit of rage.
The innocent linens were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When one of Dahla’s girls came in some time later, she found Spike and the remains of the sheets from the guest room. She skipped backward out of the room as quickly as possible and ran to fetch Dahla.

The Master was having one of his ineffable tantrums.

Spike sat in the middle of the cold laundry room floor, his head in his hands, and tried to find something outside his own interior to be angry with. There was nothing. His demon, snotty rooster that it was, was crowing joyfully about its Mastership and Ownership of the Boy. It would not shut up, even when Spike wrestled it to a whimpering crouch with threats of starvation and exile.

He had ruined him. Tainted him thoroughly. Everything light and clean about the boy now had that blood lust saturating it, like a white shirt washed in rusty water. Xander was stained.

And it made Spike only want him more. He rubbed his hands through his hair, tugging at the new growth, as if he could pull some idea out of his mind. He didn’t know what to do, what action he should take.
Spike wasn’t given much to moral imperatives or ‘shoulds’ and ‘shouldn’ts’. After several centuries, the ambiguity of morals and ethics was more than even an above average mind could handle. He didn’t dwell on his guilt. What was the point? He used his instincts and gut feelings of right and wrong as guideposts.

And when he wasn’t sure, he looked to Angel.

But Angel wasn’t here, and Spike was fairly certain that his instincts were wrong. Because his instincts demanded that he hunt down the boy and shag him silly. Lock him in a room and feed him blood and semen until he was saturated with Spike thoroughly.

If Angel were here, he would know what was wrong. He would... Spike raised his head and tried to visualize the old poof sitting across the laundry room from him. That weary, beleaguered forehead creased as he grappled with yet another situation created by his errant child.


“Oh come on, Angel,” Spike said impatiently. “You can’t tell me you never had this happen with a human?”

Angel gave him a look. “The curse?” he said.
“Convenient excuse, that,” muttered Spike. “Nah,” he said to the Angel in his mind again, waving off Gypsies with impatient fingers. “Before that.”

“Spike, before the Gypsies, I DID turn them.” Angel nodded at him grimly. “Look at you. And how well that went.”

“Hey!” said Spike, offended. “I didn’t say I wanted to turn him,” he added quickly.

“Didn’t you?” Angel could be so bleedin’ annoying when he got that ‘I know you better than you know yourself’ look on his face, thought Spike irritably.

Dahla cleared her throat and Spike jumped a foot.

“Fuck!” he exploded. “Don’t just…” he reviewed the last few minutes in his mind. Shook his head, burying it once more in his hands. “*Sorry,*” he said.

“*Do you need anything?*” asked Dahla calmly.

Spike looked around him. The bed sheets seemed to have multiplied as they were shredded and he was now surrounded by a sea of torn fibers. Dahla’s laundry room looked as if a cotton bomb had exploded in it.
“*Sorry*” said Spike again, thinking he should just have a sign with that word on it that he could hang around his neck. Like a leper. Permanently penitent. He banged his forehead with the heel of his hand when he realized how like Angel that sounded.

“Fucking poof picked a fine time ta...” he cut himself off, looking guiltily at Dahla, and forced himself to shakily find his feet. “*I’ll, uh,*” he waved around himself, “*clean this up.*”

Dahla shook her head and waved off the mess. “*What can I do for you?*” she insisted.

“Well...” Spike reflected. “*You got anythin’ ta drink?*”

~*~*~*~*~

“They had fire, Giles,” said Xander excitedly. He was sitting at the edge of Giles’ mattress, the little meal tray pulled up over his knees, excitedly sketching out a blueprint of the demon encampment as he could remember it.

All those hours in Technical Drawing class had really paid off, he thought, watching as Giles went over his little map with interest.
“Fire?” Giles looked up at him.

“It smelled like pine,” reported Xander.

“Hmm. Interesting,” said Giles. He reached up and took off his glasses, absently cleaning them on the edge of the bed sheet, and Xander was suddenly overtaken again by tears.

“God,” he said.

Giles looked up at him, and smiled gently. He raised one hand and clasped Xander’s shoulder warmly. “I have no idea why they chose to bring you here, Xander,” he said, his eyes shining, “but I can’t tell you how grateful I am that they did.”

Xander nodded, cleared the lump from his throat. “Do you remember?” he asked. Not even sure he himself knew to what he was referring.

Giles studied him. “My death?”

Xander looked back at his drawing, his finger traced around and around an ellipse. “I visited, you know. I don’t think you remember...”

Giles was silent for some moments. Xander looked up and saw his old friend, glasses removed, eyes shining. “I
don’t remember the pain, Xander, if that is what is concerning you.”

Xander nodded. He could not speak.

“The Powers have been kind in that regard. I remember...I remember friends around me. Love. I do remember being loved.” Xander had to look away again and didn’t see the thoughtful eyes suddenly look inward, pause, troubled.

“You know when you’re old, there are things you wish you could have changed,” said Xander slowly. “And I always wished I had told you ... told you how much...” he stopped, tongue stuck in his throat. Staring at the paper on his lap, shaking his head helplessly.

“Did you become old, Xander?” asked Giles wonderingly, gazing at the healthy adolescent boy sitting beside him, struggling with his emotions.

“Well, yeah,” said Xander. “I, uh...” It was weird. Even though it was in the past, thinking about his own death was difficult. His mind kept slipping around it, like it was a greasy sphere that couldn’t be grasped. “I guess I died in my sleep.” A short laugh. “Like everybody wishes they could...”

“And then you woke here.” Giles said it like a statement.
Xander nodded, chewing his lip. He thumped at his drawing with his thumb. “You know,” he said slowly, letting his mind return, relieved, to the present. “A lot has happened, Giles, since you, uh…” his eyes widened and he stared up at Giles, stuck.

“Well,” Xander took a big breath. “First, uh, Angel became human…”

“What?!” Giles jumped forward, grabbing Xander and staring into his face at very close quarters. “What are you saying?”

“Angel became, uh, human?” repeated Xander.

“The shanshu prophecy? Dear Lord! It really happened?” Giles looked as if someone had just proved the existence of God. “That’s, that’s amazing, Xander. Absolutely amazing. I must speak to him immediately!”

“Well, there’s a problem,” said Xander. “He’s uh…Giles, are you sure you’re ready for all of this?”
Giles was now impatiently pushing himself up out of bed. Xander averted his eyes with some haste as the eager Watcher immodestly loped around the room in his hospital gown, looking for his clothes.

“I can assure you, Xander, that my faculties are fully restored and in no danger of slipping away, so to speak, in the near future.” Giles found his slacks neatly folded in a cupboard and pulled them hurriedly on. “That, um, lapse was merely my mind’s attempt to restore a memory. One it found necessary under the current circumstances.” He had fastened his pants and was sliding on the dark rayon shirt he had been provided.

“Well, good,” said Xander. “Because Angel is dead.”

Giles paused in his movements. “I beg your pardon.”

“He died,” said Xander, staring at the blanket flung over the foot of the bed. “Demon got him,” he explained.

Giles was appalled. “Dear God,” he said. He came and sat down wearily next to Xander. “Dear God,” he repeated. They sat there in silence for some minutes. “All those years,” said Giles, finally. “One wonders what the point was after all,” he said. And he sighed.

“Yes,” said Xander uncomfortably. “But, um, Spike is still doing the...”
“Spike,” said Giles distastefully.

Xander glanced quickly at him. “Yeah?”

“I was not pleased to find him still here,” said Giles.

Xander was silent.

“If any demon were to be granted a soul. Any demon,” Giles shook his head, “why did it have to be Spike.”

“He…” Xander felt that he was about to say something foolish, but he barreled ahead. “But he won his soul, Giles. Didn’t he?”

“So he says,” said Giles.

Xander was silent again.

“So,” Giles sighed. “What is the bleached menace up to now. Now that Angel is not around to keep him from mischief? Harassing the local maidens, I presume? Causing bar brawls?”

“No!” Xander flushed and reined himself in a bit. “I mean, no, he’s not doing anything like that. He’s been helping the villagers. Training them. He’s trying, Giles,” he added.
Giles pursed his lips, looking unimpressed. “Well, I suppose the head woman and I, and you of course Xander,” he added warmly, “will have to carry on.”

“Sure,” said Xander. Finding himself pleased to be so easily included. Like getting picked first in gym class. “I... I can ...”

Giles stood. He picked up his book. “Well?” he cocked his head to the side expectantly.

Xander looked up at him.

“Aren’t you going to show me where you live?”

~*~*~*~*~

‘Grog with a kick’ Spike had called it. And he had meant it. This was definitely alcohol. He glared hard at the bottom of his glass, which had allowed itself to become empty again and growled menacingly at its cheek.

Definitely. Alcohol. Spike half crawled, half fell sideways and came up against the large smooth earthen jug that Dahla’s girls had helped him drag up to the camp. The tiny spigot opened for him and more of the soothing blue liquid spilled into his cup.
“Thas a goood girl,” Spike patted the jug as if it was a tremulous heifer. He tipped his cup back and let the blue liquid just flow to the back of his throat and into his stomach.

“Ssss not ... not a bad thing ya know,” he told the jug, nodding. “I wouldn’t hurt him...” He wobbled and slid softly from the jug to the floor. The alcohol slopped over his hand. “Just wanna little ... “ he sighed. “Xander,” he said. “Bloody Hell,” he added. He turned his head miserably to the side and heard the earth vibrate with approaching footsteps.

“Says he loves me,” Spike told the tent ceiling. He raised a finger and pointed. “Thas the... the thing. Brat.” He wiggled his finger, flexing it back and forth in the air for a minute. “Hafta tell ‘im,” he said after a while. “Hafta...” The thump of footsteps was loud enough that even a human could have heard by now, and Spike’s supersensitive ears, and alcohol sensitive head, could not ignore them.

“Whas out there, huh?” he asked the jug, owlishly. “Whas...”

“Spike?” It was Xander’s voice. Xander was calling him. Spike sat up too quickly and toppled immediately over again. He giggled.
“That’s weird,” said Xander cheerily. “He usually comes out here and starts yelling about now.”

“Yelling?” asked Giles, looking around, still slightly askance. He hadn’t expected Xander to be living up here with the vampire, clearly. And he was even more surprised to see the lights, the various human additions, benches and tables.

“Yeah, yelling about how I’m waking the dead, summoning the demons, you know…” Xander chuckled to himself. “Just Spike. Bitching like he does. Yo!” he yelled again. “Spike!”

“I see,” said Giles. He stepped carefully over what looked like a broken bit of crockery. They had made it to the crest of the hill and were approaching the tents.

“Its kind of a mess, still,” said Xander, looking around puzzled, as if seeing the place for the first time in weeks. “I guess after the party, and then everything that happened…” he strode up to one tent door and poked his head inside. “Spike?”

“Party?” said Giles.

Giles was coming up behind him quietly. Actually Giles had been progressively more and more quiet ever since Xander had informed him that he lived up here with
Spike. Xander looked around the tent for his lover and suddenly saw its interior with the eyes of the older Englishman rapidly coming up behind him.

The unmade, grungy, palette bed. Obviously the only bed in the tent. Clothes strewn all about. Several half empty bottles of oil lined up by the bed. The huge brass tub in the center of the room. He pulled his head quickly out and jumped back. “Not there,” he said brightly and spun about as if to march back down the hill.

“Xan!” Spike fell out of the other tent and ran at Xander. He came up against him with such force he nearly bowled Xander over, then still hanging on, sort of melted down his chest.

“Whoa,” Xander barely kept his balance. His nostrils were blasted with an intense ethyl sting and he registered Spike’s drunkenness about the same time as Giles.

“Dear God,” said the disgusted Britisher. “How does he manage to do it?”

Xander was wondering the same thing himself.

“Hey, Spike.” he wrestled briefly with the remarkably malleable body before managing to get Spike back onto his own feet. But Spike just leaned back into him, leering suggestively.
“Whereavyabin,” he said, blasting him with more alcohol fumes.

Xander flinched, glanced nervously over Spike’s shoulder at Giles and gently pushed Spike upright again. “Hey, Spike, look! It’s Giles!” he said loudly, giving Spike’s shoulders a little shake. He shoved Spike a bit harder away from him.

But Spike had spun, elbows out and wildly flapping, around to confront the Watcher. His mouth gaped and he pointed.

“Look, Xander!” he flapped a hand behind him as if beckoning the boy forward. “it’s the ol’ Wacher. All woken up like... like wut’s the bint’s name Cinder or Sleeper or ...” Spike pointed, and swayed back onto one foot, looking down a critical nose at Giles. “What’re you watchin’ now, Watcher?” And he grinned at his own joke, swayed sideways. Caught himself.

Giles made a disgusted noise.

Spike stomped forward before Xander could stop him. He peered at Giles and put his hands on his hips in an exaggerated pose. “Wut?” he asked.

“Xander,” said Giles with an obvious effort. “I really think the best thing would be to leave him here to sleep it off.”
“Sleepitoff?” said Spike. He reeled in an arc and looked at Xander again. “Not sleepy Zan, don wanna sleep.” He grinned. “Wannnaaa shaa...”

“Whoa, Spike, look at you,” said Xander loudly, coming forward quickly. “Here, lemmee help you, fella, lemmee get you into your tent.”

“My tent?” Spike looked around confusedly. “I got me own tent?”

“Sure, Spike, sure. See?” Xander had Spike by the shoulders again, and gently swung him to face their tent. “See, your very own little hidey hole. Why don’t we just go on in and get you settled.”

“Get me settled, Xan,” said Spike, wriggling his backside just a little too obviously into Xander’s pelvis as the boy urged him forward.

“Good Lord,” expostulated Giles behind them.

“It’s not a problem, Giles,” Xander laughed. “He’s just. This is really kind of strange for him.” He wrestled the vampire, who was now happily collapsing against him as they walked.

They made it through the tent door and Xander managed to get Spike to the bed. Spike was agreeable and cuddly
until they reached the bed, then he spun around and grabbed Xander by the neck, pulling him down. “Mizzed yoooyooy…” he said through a mist of alcohol.

“Spike,” hissed Xander intently, laughing, but still trying to unlace the strong fingers from around his neck. “Spike, Giles is standing right outside.”


“Man, that pun is as old as you are, Spike,” said Xander, still struggling to free himself. Spike gave a good tug and Xander tumbled forward onto him.

“Gotta tell you, Xan,” said Spike in that mournful tone of the serious drunk. “Gotta tell yooo.”

“Spike,” said Xander. “I am so not ready to …” he protested breathlessly, nevertheless wriggling into the pliant body beneath his, as Spike applied a broad wet lick to his chin. Xander made a huge effort and managed to twist himself free of Spike’s inebriated grasp. “Spike, I’ve got to walk Giles back down to the village, okay? Then… then I’ll be back.”

“Yer leavin’ me,” pouted Spike. He flung his arms out dramatically to either side. “Xander, don’t leave me!” he howled suddenly loudly up into the sky.
“Quiet! Geez!” Xander laughed but looked nervously towards the tent door. He hopped up and bounced towards it.

“Xander?” Giles voice sounded just outside. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” called Xander, bounding out the door, leaving his howling drunk vampire behind. He almost ran right into Giles as he emerged. “Yeah, yeah, everything is...” he skidded to a halt. “Everything is of the good, G-man.”

Giles looked him over with a frown. “You’re sure?”

“Sure I’m sure,” said Xander cheerily. “Just, you know, drunk Spike.” He waved his arms and bounced. “Can do that in my sleep.”

“Do me in yer sleep, Xaaanderrr,” slurred Spike from the tent door behind him.

Giles expression was going from disgust to a kind of low boil anger.

“I believe we’ve heard enough, Spike,” he said snappishly.

Spike sneered, wobbled, blew Giles an exaggerated kiss.
Xander found himself forcing down a smile. “C’mon Giles, let’s...heh heh,” Xander thought he should put some distance between Giles and the leering vampire. He came over and looped one arm through Giles, urging him in the direction of the path back to the village. He saw Spike’s eyes narrow and focus on their linked arms. He wobbled and opened his mouth. “Giles!’ said Xander, desperately tugging.

Giles relinquished his position and, with one last steely glare at Spike, allowed Xander to lead him back down the hill. “Xaaannnderrr,” they could hear Spike calling in a suggestive voice. “Come baaaack.”

“Really, Xander,” said Giles after they had distanced themselves somewhat from the tents and the caterwauling vampire. “You shouldn’t be expected to babysit him.”

“What? No, I’m fine with it, Giles. Really.” Xander babbled desperately. “Spike and I are getting along fine. It’s just like the old days, when we were roomies, isn’t it?” Without the denial, he thought to himself. “Heh, just like the Good Old Days. With the patrolling, and the wet towels everywhere.” And it appears that we still have someone in a closet. “Except now, he doesn’t steal my money because, hey, I don’t have any! And a plus! We
don’t have to keep blood in the frig, because we, er, keep it down in the village. Walking around.” He rubbed at his bite nervously.

Giles nodded, distracted by this new and equally disturbing subject. “Yes,” he said, “the arrangement. I... I don’t know what to make of that.”

“Yeah, itwiggedme out at first too, Giles, but it seems to work for them.” Xander frowned and thought of the young man who had helped heal Spike last night. “Seems a little indiscriminate sometimes, though,” he muttered.

“Indiscriminate?” Giles stopped walking and looked at him sharply. “You mean Spike is feeding at will?”

“At will?” said Xander confused. “Uh, no, I don’t think so, Giles. I mean, I think it’s mutual consent and all. Of course it is,” he said at the look of increasing concern on Giles’ face.

Xander was starting to feel that he had over compromised his loyalty to Spike.

“Spike takes it very seriously, Giles,” he said. “He’s extremely conscientious.”

“I’m sure the vampire takes blood seriously,” said Giles coolly.
“No, I mean, he really respects these people, Giles. He ... he cares about them.”

Giles didn’t look convinced in the least. “You are sometimes too naïve, Xander,” he said.

Xander felt like a chastised child.

~*~*~*~*~

Magically accelerated healing abilities bring with them, unfortunately, magically accelerated sobriety, and Spike was miserably hung over and wishing to die within an hour of Xander and Giles’ visit.

He could, unfortunately, remember the entire episode quite clearly.

Or at least he remembered the incidents. His perception being slightly distorted by the alcohol and his own special Spike-point-of-view. Xander had brought the watcher up here and then pretended he and Spike were just acquaintances. Like Xander was Spike’s ‘keeper’ or something. Of course. Spike had played this little scenario out before. He knew how it went. And Giles’ dislike had obviously survived his mental lapse. He was
undenably, now, trying to influence Xander to hold the same opinion as he.

Spike, at the moment, wouldn’t blame Xander if he did.

He rolled his head carefully to the side, so that the pounding ache would travel across his frontal lobes and slowly drain into the other side of his brain. Giving him a temporary respite from the most intense pain.

He stared at the tent wall and let his mind drift over the swell and ebb of pain.

But Xander had said that he loved him. And that made all the difference in the world.

Love wasn’t something Spike had thought about for many years. Centuries actually. He couldn’t even remember how long it had been since he had let go of the idea of eternal love, or fated love, or even soul love. It was all a crock, if you asked him. Some wanker’s idea to talk shy birds into dropping their panties. That he, himself, had essentially been such a shy bird was a fact he could accept now.

Oh, yeah, he had been love’s bitch. Willing and eager to throw himself into any mouth of Hell for his romantic ideal. Something pure. Something worthy. Anything
would be better than to turn around, finally, and face the monster he had become.

But Angel had taught him to see all that twitter for what it was. An escape, a high as heady as the blood lust. Family. Responsibility. Duty. These things were real. His relationship with Angel, dutiful friend, sidekick, almost manservant. Had been real and useful and in the end had had more longevity than all his dallying after the girls. He had been willing to accept that. Embrace it with a maturity that the demon shrank from.

And then had arrived Xander Harris.

He wasn’t sure what had happened the other night. Something had taken control of him. Maybe it had been his demon. Spike thought that he felt the deep tidal pull of that influence more of late than he had in many years. Something about Xander brought it out. Something made him want to mark the boy, possess him, keep him close. The words he had spoken had risen out of an ancient memory Drusilla had raved, a thousand moons ago. Spike wasn’t even sure what they meant. Only, after he had said them, he had felt peace.

For a moment the pain about his head and back and arms disappeared as Spike saw again Xander Harris. He could almost feel the warm hands on him, hear him
speaking those words, see those eyes, opening to him a world of sincerity and passion and warmth. No one had ever looked at Spike that way. He couldn’t imagine why they should.

Why should anybody love Spike? The flood of blood was now throbbing on the side of his head that he pressed to the mattress, and Spike carefully rolled his head to ease the pressure again. His eyelids were weighted and his torso felt numb. He thought maybe he should pass out.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander walked Giles down to Dahla’s house. She opened the door, and it was like two magnets clicking. She immediately dragged him in, babbling at high speed in her own tongue. Giles responded with excitement and they went hurrying off into Dahla’s parlor. Xander heard the frequent repetition of the word for magic, and waved at Giles over Dahla’s shoulder, as he beat a hasty retreat.

“I have a feeling you guys are gonna come up with something soon that’s going to involve a lot of mayhem and stuff, so I think I’ll get back and get some sleep,” he called, heading for the door.
“Wait, Xander,” Giles gently moved Dahla aside. “Do you have to go back up there to sleep? Can’t you...” he looked around the spacious house. “Can’t you take a room down here?”

“I...” Xander found himself stumped. “I...” he looked at Dahla. She gazed back at him, nonplussed.

“I live up there, Giles,” said Xander simply. “With Spike.”

Giles looked exasperated. “Yes, yes, I understand, Xander. But you should in no way feel an obligation...”

“It’s not an obligation,” Xander interrupted. “I want to do it.”

“That’s very admirable, Xander,” said Giles. “Very altruistic. Giving up your own comfort and convenience to keep an eye on...”

“Actually,” Xander interrupted again, a bit testily. “It’s kind of selfish.”

This silenced Giles. But still he stood there patiently, waiting for an explanation.

Xander studied the floor. He shifted to one foot and thought about things. It didn’t take him long to make up his mind. “I want to do it, Giles. Because Spike and I
are...” What the heck were they? Xander wondered. “We’re together,” he finally said.

There was something about light reflecting off glass that could make the wearer of the glasses look blind. “I don’t understand,” said Giles.

Xander looked again to Dahla, who clearly did not understand the situation at all. “We’re lovers,” said Xander. A little thrill escaping across his tongue as he spoke the words. He grinned suddenly. “I love him.”

Giles’ face, behind the blind glasses, was immobile. Xander didn’t know what he expected Giles to say but it certainly wasn’t what he said next.

“Nonsense,” said Giles calmly. “You will move your things down here tomorrow.”

“I...uh...what?” stammered Xander.

“Obviously you have been taken advantage of. The situation, the stresses of this place. The surprise, your undoubted vulnerability...”

“No, no, I thought of all that, Giles, it’s not any of that, it’s something...”

“He’s a vampire, Xander.”

“You spent a good portion of your life fighting his kind.”

“Not Spike’s kind, Giles...” began Xander.

“Demons,” snapped Giles a bit impatiently. “I thought you knew better.”

Xander thought briefly of a small blond former vengeance demon and flushed with anger. “I’ve rethought some things, Giles.”

Giles folded his arms across his chest. “And you are not a homosexual,” he said.

Xander rocked back on his heels. “Huh?”

“I have known you for most of your life. You had a wife. A child.”

Xander’s jaw set. “Giles, they have nothing to do with it.”

“Was that all a lie, Xander?”

“God!” exploded Xander. “Stop it...just stop it, Giles. I.... You don’t know how I....” He flung himself around and towards the door. “I have to get back,” he announced over his shoulder. “He...he might need me...” He grabbed
the door handle, thrust it open with his shoulder and bolted from the house.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike woke feeling a lot less sick and a lot more repentant. He lay on his back, arms spread across the mattress and wished Xander were here. Because he needed to talk about stuff. Trouble was, Xander was the stuff he needed to talk about.

Funny thing, that.

He heard the familiar loping footsteps when they were still distant from the tent, and forced himself to sit up, noting the lack of headache. He ran a hurried hand over his tangled and sweaty hair, and yanked perfunctorily at the wrinkled bed sheets.

He worried about what he would say, how he would apologize. What the whelp must think of him, reeling about drunk as a fool.

When Xander burst through the door, red faced, distraught, his mouth a tight line of withheld hurt, Spike forgot about all of that.
“Hey, what’s all this?” He was on his feet and cradling the upset man in a second. Xander simply folded into him, like a child. His head pressed into Spike’s neck. The damp silky hair catching in Spike’s mouth. His hands gripped Spike’s back and pulled him down with him onto the mattress.

“Xander, what’s wrong, what’s happened, pet?”

Xander shook his head against Spike’s neck and punched him softly in the back with the knuckles of one hand.

“Right,” Spike chuckled and rubbed his cheek in Xander’s hair and stroked the hot tense back. “Sorry about that. Pet.” He smiled when the knuckles punched him a little harder.


Spike tried to look into his face, tipping his head back, gently caressing Xander’s cheeks with his thumbs.

“You and the Watcher had a nice talk, I take it?”

Xander’s mouth drew into that tight line again.

“Ah,” said Spike.

“He doesn’t get it.”
“Of course not,” said Spike. He brushed the dark hair back from Xander’s eyes. “What doesn’t he get?”

“Us.”

“Wha...” Spike drew back. “You told him? What did you tell him?”

“That we’re...” Xander shrugged. “I don’t know. I told him that I love you,” he said.

Shivering corkscrews were released in Spike’s belly. He pulled Xander in and hugged him hard. “Why’d you do that, Xan?” he whispered.

“Because it’s true,” said Xander simply.

Spike felt suddenly that he could conquer the world. Or destroy it. Fight a thousand demons. March across the face of the planet, leading an army of humans. Climb to the top of one of those gushing volcanoes they had in the south. Stand in the sunset. Anything. Whatever Xander wanted.

Instead he folded his arms just a little more closely around the unhappy boy and rested his cheek on the top of his head. “You hungry?” he asked softly.

“No,” said Xander.
“You hafta eat, luv. If I make somethin’, will you try to eat it? For me?”

Xander nodded and Spike rose and went to the kitchen area. He pulled out the little container of food and pushed a couple of the packages into the stove.

Xander curled in a fetal position on the bed, pulling at a bit of sheet with one hand looking like a small child about to suck his thumb.

“Hey,” said Spike, coming back to Xander and gently drawing him upwards again. “Lemme make up the bed again and get you a warm blanket…” He wandered over to the piles of clothing. “Probably should clean up in here,” he added, poking at the heaps of laundry.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Xander woodenly, having fallen back to the mattress. “God,” he addressed the tent ceiling. “I feel like such crap. Like... like it’s all back to what it was again.”

Spike found a relatively clean blanket, brought it back to the bed. Xander accepted it without comment or movement, still staring with great sorrowful eyes up at the ceiling.

Then suddenly he sat up, miraculously energized. “Hey, Spike?” he asked. “Where’d you get the booze?”
Xander stood, legs wide apart and arms folded across his chest, looking with disdain down upon his fallen comrade. “There,” he said, “that proves it.”

“Don’t prove nothin’,” said Spike to the dirt. He pushed himself up on his forearms and his head swiveled in a liquid arc to find Xander. He glared at Xander’s kneecap.

“Come down here with the rest of us, whelp,” he demanded.


“Yeah?” said Spike. He pushed himself up with great concentration and victoriously found himself sitting upright.

Xander looked down at the ringlets of gold and brown hair falling around Spike’s face. At the soft pink lower lip. From this angle Spike looked like a pretty doll. Xander laughed.

“What?” said Spike.
“Nah ah ah...” said Xander, shaking his head solemnly from side to side. When Spike pouted and frowned, that luscious lip poked out further. The scar showed more prominently against the black eyebrows. It made Xander feel all tingly. He laughed again.

“Damned irritatin’ fool child,” growled Spike. “Would you get yer arse down here and tell me what is so funny?”

“I would,” said Xander. “But I can’t.”

Spike carefully placed his hands behind him and successfully tipped back far enough to look up at Xander without falling over once more. The lights in the tent behind Xander’s head swayed back and forth. Back and forth. “Stand still,” said Spike. “And sit down,” he added.

Xander laughed again. “I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I can’t bend my knees.”

“Oh,” said Spike. He regarded said knees for a few long moments. Then he tackled Xander.

~**~*~*~*~
Giles frowned at the wall in front of him and reflected that he really did not have a stick or any other particularly stiff object stuck up his ass.

He wasn’t rigid in his thinking. He wasn’t narrow-minded. He certainly wasn’t a bigot. He couldn’t think what had possessed him to so cruelly attack Xander. It was just that of all the creatures in the history of the human race the last one he would have hoped to see survive to the end of time, was Spike.

And to find his young friend involved with the obnoxious wastrel of a vampire was intolerable.

Dahla came back into the room with the newly filled pot of tea and Giles sat up, taking the things from her helpfully and setting them to the side of the books and sketches laid out across the table.

Then Hope entered the room and Giles was completely distracted from his musings. He felt again that almost hypnotic fascination with the child. She came shyly up to him, her eyes curious but intelligent.

She handed him a plate of cookies.

“*Thank you,*” said Giles and she dimpled when she smiled. He reached impulsively to tuck a strand of flaxen
hair behind her ear and she turned her head slightly into
the small caress. It was a movement so oddly familiar it
made Giles ache.

Dahla murmured something, bent over the drawings.
Giles pulled his attention away from Hope.

Later, perhaps during the sunset ceremony, he would
speak to Xander again. He would make things right again
between himself and the boy.

~*~*~*~*~

“*PlatenspalllIImmmm....*” moaned Spike, panting.

Xander released Spike’s cock with a little ‘pop’. “You
know,” he murmured, laying his tongue against the
crease at the top of Spike’s thigh. “I hope you’re just
babbling,” he mumbled into the cool, soft flesh he found
there. He laved the skin and dragged his tongue into the
curling hair, “and not putting a curse on me or
anything...”

“Bluuurgn...” whined Spike and thrust his cock urgently
towards Xander’s mouth.
Xander smiled and allowed his tongue to run up the underside of Spike’s cock. The soft foreskin tugged under his tongue and he felt a throb in his own cock as he wrapped his lips again around the head, sucking gently, enjoying the taste, the feel.

He could so get used to this, he thought, with absolutely no sense of surprise in his own mind.

“Xan…” Spike whined and panted, trembling as he fought not to thrust.

Xander dipped his head obediently, taking Spike’s cock to the back of his throat in one easy movement. There were certain things at which Xander had always been a very quick study.

He gently pushed Spike’s balls up against the underside of his cock and started swallowing rhythmically. The body beneath him jerked and quivered and nonsensical vowels and cries filled the air.

Xander felt taloned fingers buried in his hair, a voice screamed ‘luv!’ and cold salty cream flooded his throat and spilled out the corners of his mouth.

He could so get used to this.
Giles and Dahla set aside their various research materials when the patrolmen arrived to escort Dahla to the sunset ceremony. Giles smiled at their surprise to see him alert and apparently sane, and at their easy acceptance almost immediately afterwards of his presence.

For such a formal people they were remarkably flexible, he thought. He was a little taken aback at their reactions to Hope. The child apparently did not usually attend the sunset ceremonies, and her appearance at Giles’ side, and apparent determination to remain there, was obviously noted with a kind of nervous rolling of eyes and occasional glance backwards.

He wondered what it was about the little girl that made the other villagers so nervous.

Berynn had fallen in beside him, as if Giles were his by some kind of default and he readily accepted the attractive young man’s easy company. Berynn didn’t speak much. Although Giles had quickly learned the villagers’ language, it was after all merely an evolved form of Gaelic, he was more comfortable when he didn’t
have to converse in it constantly. Berynn glanced up at him occasionally and sometimes he would touch his shoulder. Now and then he would gesture at some landmark he thought Giles might find noteworthy. He was altogether a pleasant companion.

They were almost past the vampires’ tents, approaching the cliff stairs to the greenhouses when they heard the unmistakable moans and cries coming from the tents.

Giles was stunned to a halt. He looked quickly, blushing, around the gathered people. Expecting to see, he knew not what. Fear? Disgust?

They appeared, instead, to be tolerantly amused. Berynn grinned up at him. His cheeks glowed pink in the dim light.

The voice coming from the tent was unmistakably Xander.

“Ah! Spike, yes!” followed by a thud and a loud groan.

Berynn dipped his head, still grinning. Some of the others smiled knowingly at one another.

Giles wanted to put his hands over Hope’s ears. He wanted to march up to the tent and demand that they stop.
What he did was stride away as quickly as possible. Hoping that the sounds of passion would not interrupt the solemnity of the ceremony.

He and Xander were going to have to have a little chat.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander blinked the sweat out of his eyes and shook his head heavily from side to side to clear his brains a bit.

Spike lay under him practically folded in two. His heels above his head. His bound hands stretched up to the foot of the stove. A big grin on his face. A glob of cum slowly slid from his chin and fell with a soft plop to the floor.

“Fuck,” said Xander. “I think that sobered me up.”

Spike laughed softly.

Xander found his limbs still attached to his body and eased himself slowly out of and off of Spike. He helped him lower his legs and reached to untie his hands.

“No, leave it,” growled Spike, yellow amber flickering in his eyes.
“Yeah?” Xander grinned down at him. His gaze, like a soft caress, stroked the planes of Spike’s body and rested with possessive pride on the already hardening cock. “Yeah, oh fuck yeah,” he whispered, crawling down to gently touch that member with his sensitized mouth.

Spike moaned and arched against him.

~*~*~*~*~

It takes a people many years to design a religion. Because it’s an emotional creation, not a logical one. It evolves from a need for some sense of meaning. A need for resolution, for redemption. A need to release the past in order to get on with the living. And a need for hope.

The people of Earth solemnly lit their tiny precious lights, one at a time, as they recited the lore of the birth and life of the sun. How the evil had conquered it. They told of the ones who had stood by the light until the end. Of their reward in the times to come, when the sun would return in glory.

They shared the lights amongst themselves, passing them from hand to hand with the ritual words. Then they
all gathered near the small altar of burning incense and flowers, and in unison, repeated The Promise.

Giles stood respectfully at the back of the small throng and watched as the ritual was performed.

Dahla emerged towards the end and came towards him holding in her hands one of the tiny flickering lights. With an awe that surprised Giles, given his adopted role of non-participating observer at this event, he took the small light and repeated the words to Dahla. She smiled up at him and he saw something soften in her eyes. Some pain lessen just slightly.

He wondered what she hoped for.

They finished the ritual, and attended to their gardens. Giles followed Berynn and his family, curiously. He noted the distance between the young man and his relatives. They seemed to avoid his touch. It was very strange, reflected Giles. Knowing how soothing Berynn’s touch could be.

When they came away, walking slowly and contentedly back to their village, Giles found a place next to Berynn and purposely looped his arm with the other man’s. Berynn looked up at him in surprise and pleasure. And Giles reminded himself that different didn’t necessarily
mean bad. And that when he spoke to Xander, he should keep that in mind.

As they once again passed the tents, Giles paused and released Berynn’s arm. He gestured “*Go on,*” he said. He stood there as the villagers departed and wondered what he was going to say.

~*~*~*~*~

Once, Xander had been given an ice cream cone by a strange man. Even if his parents had bothered to tell him not to accept offers of candy and rides from strangers, Xander would have probably accepted this man’s offer. It was late in a long hot summer. One in which his friends had gone to camp, or spent days at the pool participating in YMCA events. Things Xander’s parents hadn’t thought to enroll him in. So he had had nothing to do for weeks, and no one to do it with. His hollow, overly tall, boy’s body was perpetually hungry, and he had no allowance money with which to buy treats.

The man was obviously harmless, Xander had thought. He had had a soft, friendly face, and was smallish and looked not at all dangerous. And he was standing in the door of an ice cream parlor on a very hot summer’s day,
gesturing towards Xander and offering to buy him a treat. For no reason whatsoever.

Later, Xander would look back on that and realize that there had been some kind of cruel joke in the gesture. Some want to humiliate. But all he really remembered was the size of the ice cream the man had bought him. Five dips of chocolate ice cream, teetering perilously atop a slender sugar cone.

“Now don’t let it melt before you eat it,” said the man, grinning.

It was over a hundred degrees in the shade, and as Xander stepped out onto the sidewalk, the ice cream began immediately to dissolve into liquid. Xander had devoured the confection as fast as he could. But still, his brain wincing with the freeze, his throat convulsing to try to stop the cold liquid from flooding it even as his mouth continue to bite off and lick great mouthfuls, the ice cream melted helplessly down his hand and his face, down his neck, great chocolaty rivers staining his shirt and pouring in pools of brown liquid to the concrete below.

He felt like that as he moved now over Spike. His mouth hungrily sucked and licked the satiny, cold skin, his tongue seemed not wide enough to catch it all, his lips
were sore but couldn’t stop gnawing at the delicious taste. He rubbed his hot chest and pelvis into Spike’s agreeably aroused flesh and groaned as he tried to consume him before he disappeared.

Somehow he found his teeth pressing into the soft bit between Spike’s collarbone and Adam’s apple. Blindly, instinctively, with overwhelming hunger, he tried to bite into and swallow Spike.

The vampire yelped beneath him as his teeth gouged bloody holes into his skin. Xander chewed ferociously. He held Spike down and devoured him, vaguely registering the skin beneath his lips shifting, the pelvis thrusting into his, increasing the urgency and force of its thrusts.

Spike’s blood was cold chocolate ice cream on a hot boring summer’s day. It was a glass of pure sparkling mineral water. The first beer after a morning of yard work. A nutrient in which he had unknowingly always been deficient.

Xander licked and sucked and drank. He felt hard hands lift his head away and whimpered, trying to go back to the source.

“No, luv,” said Spike. His mouth closed over Xander’s. Xander felt teeth prick at his lips. His hands came up and
pulled that sensation closer. More. He wanted more, he needed more.

~*~*~*~*~

Giles stood pensively, some ten paces from the tents, and pondered what he would say to Xander.

He was surprised to realize that in all the years of Xander’s adolescence and early adulthood, although Giles had spent time with him daily, and although he was, obviously, the only real adult influence in Xander’s life, the boy had never asked him, and they had never discussed, sex.

There had never even been the quick passing of a package of condoms or the meaningful nod of the head and ‘be careful’ that was standard between a man and a boy for whom he had some responsibility.

Giles felt slightly ashamed and confused about this.

But Xander had seemed, really, to manage it all quite nicely without Giles’ help. And Giles acknowledged to himself now, standing several centuries later in his quandary, that it had been something of a relief not to have to discuss the subject with Xander.
Giles had his own obsessions and nebulous dark past to wrestle. Xander only brought up issues with which he had made an uneasy and shaky peace. He had been happy not to have to approach those topics with the boy.

But now, Giles found he was both trying not to hear, and listening avidly for, the sounds issuing from the tent in front of him. Now, the subject was raised and staring him in the face like a medieval Gryphon guarding the path. Now he had to deal with it.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander flailed and managed to pull the shirt off his face from where it had fallen. He rose on one elbow and found Spike’s face, by touch, somewhere down the length of his tingling body.

“Hey,” he said.

“Agh,” said Spike. He raised his head slowly, a pair of silky boxers sliding off it, and stared up at Xander. His tongue came out and licked at something clinging to his upper lip. Xander blinked and grimaced and wondered what it was.

“God,” he said. “We lost control again, I think.”
Spike laughed, raised himself and crawled up to collapse across Xander. His lips pressed into Xander’s and just stayed there.

“Lvooo,” said Spike, his eyes wide open and burning, two inches away, into Xander’s. Xander pushed Spike’s face slightly away, with weak and shaking hands. “What?” he whispered disbelievingly.

“I love you,” said Spike breathlessly, his voice rough and broken with all the screaming. His eyes a pure blue, like new cornflowers in an untouched field. Vulnerable as an innocent boy’s.

Xander’s thumb softly stroked Spike’s jaw.

“Xander?!“ Giles voice. Just outside the tent. Xander’s heart leapt and his body came alert with a painful suddenness.

“Yip?” he squeaked. “Yeah?” he squeaked again. Pathetic much? He cleared his throat. “Yes, Giles,” he managed to call out in a general approximation of his normal voice. He and Spike stared at each other.

“May I speak to you for a moment?” Giles sounded uncomfortable.
Xander became suddenly horribly aware of his face. He brought a finger up and rubbed it at what felt itchy and dry on his cheek. Looked at his finger. Rusty red. And gooey. He had blood on his face. He wriggled free of Spike, who jumped away from him immediately, looking scared and almost transparent in his insecurity and Xander really really wanted to grab Spike and fix that fear right away but...

“Give me a minute, Giles,” he shouted. He tried to give Spike a reassuring look, while he desperately searched for, found and yanked on some clothes lying nearby. He scrubbed at his face desperately.

“Do we have any water?” he whispered. Spike’s eyes jerked to the extensive supply of water jugs propped against the one wall of the tent. Xander ran over and wastefully tipped a full jug over his face, splashing his entire head and neck and a good part of the shirt he wore with the liquid.

He stood, shaking his head hard, water spraying from his flopping hair.

“Xander?” called the old man outside.

Spike was looking up at him. And Xander wanted to call out to Giles to go fuck himself. That he had better things
to do. He wanted to grab Spike and tell him things. And show him things.

“I’m coming, Giles,” he called, and turned to the door of the tent.

~*~*~*~*~

Giles was grateful for the darkness when Xander emerged from the tent, dipping his damp head through the flap and stretching unconsciously as he stood outside, looking for him.

Giles could feel how red his face must be, from the heat in his skin. He cleared his throat, and Xander’s shy, dark gaze found him where he stood beneath the trees.

Giles gestured towards one of the benches that had been placed there.

And then they sat there, looking out over the darkness at the end of time. A man and a teenage boy. And talked about sex and love and what those things meant. Or rather, Giles being wise, Xander talked and Giles listened.

Xander talked about being surprised by miracles and finding compassion where none was expected.
Giles recommended perspective and caution.

Xander laughed because this was a conversation he had had once with his own son.

“I told him, he should think about what he wanted *in the long run*, Giles,” said Xander, shaking his head and gazing into the distance at some fond and self-mocking memory. “You’d think I’d know better, growing up on a Hellmouth. There is no guaranteed *long run*. There’s just here and now and what we have.”

Giles thought uncomfortably of a similar conversation he had had once with his own father. “There’s duty and obligation, still, Xander,” he said.

Xander glanced at him. The remaining distant glow in the sky slid across those dark eyes, and for a moment Giles saw the man Xander had become. A man with a life of experience, in an adolescent body. “I have an obligation to live my own truth, Giles,” Xander said. The words seemed so incongruous spoken by the young earnest face.

Giles felt suddenly a moment of heart-piercing doubt. He thought of the passion his father had warned him against and for the first time in many decades remembered the ache of roads not taken. “Perhaps,” he murmured.
“But…” he shook off the memory. “But, Xander, think. This is Spike.”

“He’s not as bad as that, Giles,” said Xander softly, leaning forward on his knees, looking off towards the boiling clouds as they hung, barely glowing still from the setting sun.

“His demonic status notwithstanding, Xander, Spike is quite old. Ancient, really. Don’t you wonder what agenda he might have?”

Xander swiveled slightly to look at him with disbelief. “Agenda? Spike?”

Giles smiled at this. “Yes, er, well perhaps that word implies too much thought.”

“He’s not stupid, Giles,” snapped Xander. And Giles wondered if Xander realized just how protective he sounded. Xander sighed and shook his head. “Sorry. It’s just... Spike’s not the planning type, you know? He doesn’t work out some game ahead of time and then play it. He’s not like Angel,” he pronounced the last word with an unconscious but obvious distaste.

“Yes, I would agree with you there, Xander,” said Giles, wondering what had happened between Angel and
Xander during his period of instability. “Spike has no sense of mission, no remorse…”

“Just because he doesn’t walk around moaning about his sins doesn’t mean he’s not sorry, Giles.” Xander rubbed at his neck fitfully. “There’s a lot of guilt in there. I don’t think even Spike sees it. But he hates himself so much, thinks he doesn’t deserve anything…” he drifted, seeing Spike’s eyes as he had left him in the tent. He rubbed his bite again, feeling unsettled.

And that was what drew Giles eyes, finally, to the scars. The small wounds. “Xander,” he said, the blood rushing to his head, his temper unfurling and licking through his blood. “What is that on your neck?” he said distinctly.

Xander froze. “Ah…”

“Xander,” said Giles, icy and precise. “I think that now you are going to tell me that those marks on your neck are the result of a freak accident and not…”

“Bite marks?” said Xander softly.

Giles could not speak. He could not move. He looked at his hands, the fingers were clenched, the knuckles white.

“It’s not uh, what you might think,” Xander began lamely.
“That you are addicted to vampire bite?” said Giles.

“It’s not exactly an addiction.”

“Really,” said Giles, his mind sailing smoothly over his rage like a windjammer over a rough sea. “How long has it been since the last time that that…’’ he couldn’t say the word, “that thing bit you?”

Xander looked away, his voice seeming to come from a distance. “Maybe half an hour.”

Giles wondered if he would have to sneak up on Spike, or if his rage alone would give him the strength and speed he needed to stake the vampire. At the moment, the anger felt superhuman in its power.

“I asked him to,” said Xander. “It… it makes me feel connected to him.”

Giles wanted to weep. “Yes,” he said. “I have heard that.”

“I… I bite him too,” said Xander, turning back to his friend, a hopeful look on his face as if somehow this changed things. Made the taking mutual.

But Giles was staring at him with, if possible, even more horror. “My God,” he breathed, “he’s trying to turn you.”

“No!” said Xander.
And the alarm horn sounded from the village.

Xander jumped to his feet and spun around. The horn sounded again. There were sounds of hurried movement in the tent, and even as the boy sprinted down the hill, a half clothed Spike burst from the tent, running after him.

Giles followed as quickly as he could.

13

Giles was irritated. Like a business man interrupted by a fire drill, pulling on his metaphorical jacket and checking his pockets to realize with annoyance that his cell phone was still on his desk. Giles was not at all pleased with this current apocalypse.

All his other End of World crises, he recalled, had had a proper timetable. After the initial discovery of its imminence, the apocalypse would wait a respectable period of time during which each of them would have come to terms with its significance. And, of course, after a few dramatic speeches. Finally, when they were ready, they would pit themselves against the evil, in a satisfyingly climatic event.

But as Giles ran into the village he realized that here and now, unplanned, unexpected and for no discernible rhyme or reason, the apocalypse was upon them.
This apocalypse had no proper sense of drama.

Giles headed towards a light emanating from the center of town, then veered wildly off course and ran behind a close building when he realized that the light was actually the Town Hall on fire. He wondered if the patrolmen had managed to remove their weapons before the demons had destroyed their arsenal. He looked around and saw no obvious signs of resistance from the villagers. But perhaps that was a good sign. Perhaps they were planning their moves.

~*~*~*~*~

“*So what’s the plan*?” Xander hissed into Berynn’s ear. They were literally lying in a small puddle of mud behind the Town Hall, watching it burn. Several of the patrollers and a few children crouched and lay in various stages of shock around them.

Berynn looked up at him with huge, pale eyes and shook his head rapidly.

“Okay,” muttered Xander to himself. “No plan. Well, I can work with that. Hell, I did my whole life like that.” He turned back to Berynn. “*Weapons*?” he asked.
Berynn grinned and pointed. Several of the people around them wore crossbows. Berynn dared to raise his body enough to pull back his soaking muddy shirt and reveal the small sheathed broadsword beneath it. *So the villagers had managed to arm themselves,* thought Xander with unbelievable relief. That left only two unanswered questions.

“*Did you bring my ax?”* he asked Berynn. And, searching the gloom worriedly, “Where the Hell is Spike?”

~*~*~*~*~

Spike did two things very well. Love and Death. And today he was doing both.

He crouched behind a tree, grinning madly. He was muddy and already covered with demon blood and looking forward with a great deal of hot expectation to shedding more. His body was buzzing still with post sex endorphins and a bit of Xander blood. And he was looking forward to more of that also. He only had to take care of this tiny apocalypse first. Kill a few thousand demons.

Piece of cake.
Behind him a respectable pile of dead demon bodies had already mounted. Taking them out one at a time, though, was far too slow. Spike was impatient, as always. And besides, the innocents he uncomfortably admitted to wanting to protect, were still running about being captured and such. He had to stop that sooner than later.

He was looking around, trying to formulate some plan to eradicate more of the monsters at a time, when he saw that Bloody Watcher crouching behind a building.

Spike ground a curse out and resisted the urge to fling about in a temper. Stupid, bloody, interfering Rupert Giles. Now he’d have to rescue the prat before he could get back to the business at hand. Which just meant more time wasted. More innocents taken and possibly hurt.

More time before he could get back to shagging Xander.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander tisked more in annoyance than worry. He was strapping on his ax as he and Berynn huddled on the far side of a large, practical looking building at the other end of the village. They had managed to herd their little troupe there and safely shuffle them inside, where Dahla
met them and led them to an obscure and dark corner. In the gloom, she carefully opened a door so small, that Xander had to duck to pass through it. They followed her down a steep set of cement stairs and suddenly emerged into a huge hall brightly lit with solar lanterns.

Xander spun on his heel as their rescued villagers marched past him and stared at the high tech equipment, the well stocked shelves. Rows of cots, stacks of blankets. It was a bomb shelter.

Berynn tugged at his shoulder and motioned with his thumb back towards the stairs in a gesture he had learned from Xander.

As they hurried out topside, Xander looked around the rooms they passed through. The place appeared to be some sort of manufacturing center. Great twenty foot long bolts of the rayon which he and the others wore, were suspended from ancient looking metal chains high over their heads. Machinery. Xander skidded to a halt and had to be prodded forward by Berynn.

“But what runs all this?” he asked hopelessly as he was pushed unceremoniously out the door.

He, Berynn and one of the twins were to take turns watching the town hall and circling around the buildings
looking for more patrolmen, and dragging back the occasional lost and hiding villager.

Xander had not had a single glimpse of Spike. He tisked his annoyance again and grumbled to Berynn, “He’s out there having the time of his unlife and we’re back here chewing our nails.”

Berynn shrugged and looked like maybe that arrangement suited him somewhat. Xander grinned. “Don’t know what it is,” he said, wriggling his shoulders, “but I’m all itchy and I kinda wanna fight.” He poked his head around the corner and scanned the dark for signs of errant vampires. He didn’t see Berynn’s face, nor his reaction when he whispered back to him, “Let’s just see what kind of trouble we can stir up on our own.”

~*~*~*~*~

Giles was beginning to worry a bit. He hadn’t any weapons. He had no idea where anyone was. He could see and hear the demons and the occasional cry of a villager. But he could do nothing.
“Hsst, Watcher,” came from just behind his ear and he jumped wildly and would have screamed if a cold hand hadn’t rather ungently clapped over his mouth.

Spike held him still, pressed tight up against him, and hissed, “Shut up, you prat. and follow me.”

Giles would reflect later, with a certain grim amusement, that his desire to stake Spike had completely disappeared when the vampire had come to his rescue. He stumbled along behind him, disoriented and grateful. Spike moved rapidly, not glancing back to see if Giles kept up. Giles sensed that Spike’s heroic obligation was taxed by the act of leading Giles from danger. Any further consideration would be too much to expect.

They had just made it to what Giles thought resembled a factory, when Spike came up short with a curse and stood straight up. Giles slammed into him and was shoved back hard.

“Bleedin’ child,” hissed Spike, and took off at a run. Giles looked up and saw what Spike was running to. Across the street, brightly lit by the fires. Xander and the tiny villager whom Giles had befriended were surrounded by a small pack of demons.

Thoughtlessly he, too, ran to help them.
Spike had fought so many creatures in so many places for so many centuries that it was like a job to him. He approached it as would any professional. Assessing the situation. Six demons? Right then; take ‘em out in twos. Army of similar demons all about? Do it fast and silent, before they can raise an alarm. Big mothers? Then use their weight against him. It was easy. Except now it wasn’t. Because one of them had hold of Xander, and as a doctor cannot treat a relative, Spike could not think like the professional killer he was, could not plan strategy, when two hundred pounds held his whole world in its arms.

He went berserk.

The demon holding Xander died instantly. A splatter of guts and skin on the pavement where he had been standing. Spike foolishly let the smallest and fastest demon escape so that he could viciously pummel the demon that had presumed to grab at Xander when his now-dead companion had released him.

Giles chased down the escaping demon and he and Berynn managed messily to dispatch it, but the scream
and racket of Spike’s attack was already attracting other demons from nearby buildings.

Xander was lying on the ground. Alive, but obviously dazed and possibly injured. Giles had sprained his elbow stabbing through the demon’s thick hide and could no longer use his fighting arm. Berynn seemed more dazed than adrenalized for battle. They needed to retreat, and Spike wasn’t stopping.

Giles attempted to grab hold of the whirlwind that was Spike, and was flung backwards. He looked wildly up and down the street. Even a centuries old master vampire could not take the number of demons that could be in this town. Giles pushed Berynn towards the shadows, hissed “run”.

But Berynn didn’t run, he scrabbled over to Xander instead. Helped him to his feet. Xander rose slowly, still looking dazed, his eyes only on Spike.

“Xander.” Giles shook him. “Xander!” he yelled. “We have to stop him!” Xander’s eyes came into focus. He seemed not to get the situation, but just watched Spike, grinning appreciatively. “God look at him,” he whispered.

Giles shook Xander violently, pointing down the street, until Xander noticed the demons there, coming towards
them. Xander shook his head hard, as if coming up from under water. “Shit,” he said. “Spike!” yelled Xander. And it was like magic. The vampire stopped immediately and spun around, mid pummel.

“Xander?”

“Too many,” Xander gestured.

Spike looked around, clarity returning to his eyes. “Right.”

They all ran like Hell. Following Spike, who knew like any demon should, how to lead others astray, they ran the opposite direction they were going towards, then through an empty house, circling around and coming back to slide quickly and safely through a rear door of the old building in which Dahla was holed up.

They slid the door to. Everyone collapsing, gasping, against a wall. Except Spike, who didn’t need to catch his breath and who was in a temper that knew no boundaries.

“WHAT WERE YOU THINKIN’?” he screamed at Xander, shaking him so hard Giles swore he could hear the boy’s teeth rattle.
Xander, Giles was surprised to see, merely grinned saucily into the screaming vampire’s face. “You were great, Spike,” he said, his voice coming out wobbly from the shaking, but with puffs of laughter mixed in. “But Berynn and I could have taken them…”

“Flamin’ Idiot!” pronounced Spike in outrage. He shoved Xander back against the wall. But it was a gentle shove, Giles noted with surprise. As if even in his rage, Spike knew and took care with Xander’s fragility. “You were about to get yer neck snapped when…”

“Nah, we were handling it. Weren’t we handling it, Berynn?” Xander nodded at the smaller man who looked like he would rather not get into the middle of this argument.

Spike needed something to hit. Finally swinging around and planting his fist in his own palm. “A few minutes later,” he said, “and I could have … they were…” He shook his head, seeing Xander in danger before his eyes again. “Xander…?”

“Hey.” Xander pulled Spike towards him, looking around in some embarrassment as a dozen curious villagers watched the Master breaking down. “Hey, commeer, let’s, uh…go into this room here.” He looked pleadingly
towards Dahla, who nodded and gestured towards a smaller alcove off in the corner.

Giles slumped against the wall, fighting the adrenalin still surging through his heart. Berynn’s hand appeared on his arm and he suddenly felt quite calm.

“*Thank you,*” he gasped, not knowing what the villager had done. Berynn smiled into his eyes and looked towards the little alcove Xander had disappeared into with Spike.

“Ah, yes,” said Giles uncomfortably. “I daresay it will be just a matter of moments before...”

A loud moan filled the air.

“Dear Lord,” sighed Giles unhappily.

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“Keep it down, Spike,” Xander laughed, nuzzling away at Spike’s neck.

“You say that, then you oooohhh,” moaned Spike as Xander drew his tongue hard over the bite he had left on Spike’s neck.
“Now you know how it feels,” said Xander nastily. He sat back on the little cot they had found and looked at Spike seriously. “What are we going to do now, Spike?”

Spike sighed. “WE ain’t doing nothin’, Harris. I am gonna go up there and kill a few hundred demons. Thinkin’ the trick is ta get them all in one place, and maybe Dahla has some explosives…”

“You’re not going out there by yourself,” said Xander, matter of factly.

Spike growled a bit, just to make it clear to whom Xander was talking. “Don’t think you should argue with me, whelp.”

“And I’m starting to think you should stop calling me that, you know? I’m not some puppy. You need help. We can help you.”

“It’s no help at all if I’m wastin’ all my time rescuing yer sorry arse.”

“Oh, hey, look who’s talking about rescuing all of a sudden. I recall a certain vampire who was definitely not going ANYWHERE until…”

“Are you goin’ ta give that a bleedin’ rest anytime soon?”
Their voices rose as did their tempers.

~*~*~*~*~

“Well that is somewhat better,” breathed Giles when he heard the sounds of passion rapidly turning to sounds of war.

~*~*~*~*~

“You don’t respect me.” Xander was standing against the wall sulking, his arms folded tightly across his chest. And he was quite deliberately, Spike was sure, making The Face.

Spike wanted to beat his own head on the mattress. The tiny alcove in which they sat was apparently some sort of makeshift medical ward. It housed a cot, a metallic tray covered with impressively sinister looking instruments, jars of Dahla’s herbs tidily organized on shelves. And something that looked very much like an IV drip rig. It bounced and squeaked as Spike jerked around on the cot, quelling his frustration.

“Yer acting like a bloody bint again, Xan.”
“See,” said Xander petulantly. “No respect, I heard no respect in that statement.”


“I am not a child, Spike. I am a grown man. I am an old man!” Xander gestured at himself. “Me. I survived over seventy years.”

“And I’m a six hundred year old demon,” roared Spike, “so mebbe you should respect yer elders, pup…”

“I am not a puppy! God, Spike, all you do is order me around and talk to me like I’m stupid!”

“Xander!” Spike stared.

Xander was almost immediately sorry. “Well, maybe not,” he said.

“I don’t think you’re stupid, Xander,” Spike said quietly, frowning at the floor.

Xander shifted uncomfortably where he stood, but he didn’t drop his defensive posture. He shrugged towards the door to the alcove. “You yelled at me.”

Spike’s shoulder moved in a tiny dismissal. “I yell a lot.”
“Yeah,” Xander found himself smiling. “You’re a yeller.”

Spike caught the reference. He glanced at Xander. A glint of bright blue. The scarred eyebrow twitched. “You make me shout,” he said slowly, and his tongue touched his lower lip.

“Yeah?” Xander dropped his arms.

“I meant what I said before,” said Spike, quietly. “Up at the tent.”

Xander could feel his insides softening. Just like that, one hundred and eighty pounds of melted Xander-taffy. “Yeah?”

Spike looked up again and Xander could see it all in his eyes. Six hundred years of loneliness and hopelessness, one second of joy and then a random demon takes it all away.

“I’m sorry, Spike,” said Xander impulsively. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“I respect you, Xan,” said Spike. “Yer a hell of a pain in the arse most of the time, but you’re not a bad fighter. For a human,” he amended.
“Now you’re lying,” said Xander, grinning. He held up his hand. “No, no, I’ll take it. Lie to me, please.” He approached Spike slowly, letting his hips do a little dip and swing.

“You must need it really badly if you’re willing to lie,” he said in a husky voice.

Spike began to grin as well. “I do,” he said, low. “I really, really do, Xander.”

Xander plunked down on the mattress. “Say something else,” he said, his head dipping to caress Spike’s throat, finding that bite mark again and following a memorized path up to Spike’s ear.

Spike shivered. “Yer a formidable warrior, Harris. Demons tremble. Your name strikes terror...aaahhhhh,” as Xander found that spot beneath his chin where there should have been a pulse.

“Mmmm,” said Xander appreciatively. “Now tell me how well hung I am.”

“Oh, Xander,” said Spike in his most honest and sincere voice. “I don’t have to lie about that.”

Xander raised his head and regarded him narrowly. “You’re a shitty liar for a demon, you know that?”
“Not lying, pet,” said Spike. He oofed when Xander slugged him lightly, then grinned. “I’d cross my heart on it, but it’d probably leave a mark...”

“Don’t care.” Xander’s mouth closed over his. His hands moved down and found parts of the silenced demon that could never lie.

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Giles sighed when the moans and rhythmic rattle and thump of a bed frame against the wall became too loud to ignore. He looked around the room at the wide-eyed children scattered amidst the refugees.

“*Erm, who would like a story?*” he said loudly. The children’s faces turned to him with happy expectancy. Giles stood, gesturing towards a far corner of their space. “*Why don’t we move over there?*” He followed the children to their story hour, shaking his head.

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“Don’t ... oh... yeah, that ... ah, ah ...” Xander allowed his mouth to make words. He lay on his belly on the narrow
cot, his knees digging into the thin lumpy mattress for purchase. Behind and draped over him, Spike worked, his hips twisting and pumping to push the head of his cock over and over against that spot inside of Xander. Strong fingers dug into his thighs, cool lips pressed against the back of his neck.


“Oh, Gaaahhhd,” moaned Xander loudly. He was so in love with his prostate. He shoved back harder and felt Spike just there, felt the heat and fullness of him. Felt some higher, better sensation just out of reach. His hand grabbed blindly behind him and grasped the cool skin of Spike’s ass, feeling the powerful muscles bunching and flexing to drive him mad.


Spike’s frustration had no release. He was afraid to pound into Xander too hard. Couldn’t let himself bite
him. He was so hard and so close he wanted to scream, and Xander’s channel clenched at him. Its warm wetness throbbing around him, his blood-hot torso twisting beneath him, demanding that he take what was his...

“Can’t,” Spike sobbed into Xander’s neck, grinding his hips in a fury of denial. “Can’t take Xan, can’t”

His will-power slipping from his grasp, he rubbed the tips of his fangs against the sweet, beckoning marks. Xander shuddered and groaned and arched his neck and Spike felt his fangs just slide in. The tiny bites seemed to clench around him even as Xander’s channel clenched around his cock and Spike had to gag himself with his own tongue, something like holding ones breath, to keep himself from drinking.

They both came in an agony of crying neediness. The orgasms physically draining, but emotionally not quite there.

Afterwards they lay kissing softly. “Sorry, Xan,” said Spike. He watched the boy’s mouth, unable to meet his eyes.

“I don’t understand, Spike,” said Xander. “You don’t take enough to hurt me.”
“Not sure about this biting, Xan. Not sure what we’re up to here. I’d never... I couldn’t stand it if I hurt you, luv.”

“What harm could there be?” Xander snuggled closer, his hands traveled down cool muscular flanks and squeezed. “and it’s really really a turn on...”

“See, that’s it, pe... Er Xander.” Spike’s forehead brushed Xander’s as he allowed his body to move in response to the caress. “your not acting like yourself since the biting started.”

“What’s not me?” said Xander, his fingers sliding up and down that small hollow from the base of Spike’s spine to his crack. The hair there was soft and fine as a baby’s.

Spike made a low noise against his shoulder. “Well, like the fighting, you know?”

Xander’s movements stilled. “Are we gonna start with that again?”

“No, no, fuck, Harris, just think. Why did you go off and chase down those demons?”

Xander chuckled and gathered Spike’s body closer to him on the narrow cot. He rubbed his cheek against Spike’s hair. “You don’t get to have all the fun.”
“Fun,” said Spike flatly. “Gettin’ pounded by a coupla three hundred pound demons is fun?”

Xander laughed lightly, his breath tickled against the back of Spike’s ear. “Okay, so maybe I was a little bored...”

Spike struggled to push Xander back. He made the boy look him in the eye. “Do you hear yourself, Harris? That is not a normal statement for you to make. You like boredom.”

“Hey!” said Xander good-naturedly.

“Seriously Harris. Same old same old. That’s what turns yer crank. Tell me it ain’t true.”


Spike smiled slightly and allowed himself to be handled. He oozed into all the little warm crevices of Xander’s body. “Yeah?”

Xander pressed their foreheads together. “You bring out the demon in me,” he said gruffly, leaning into Spike’s mouth.

Spike laughed and found his mouth full of hot lively tongue.

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Well the noise had finally stopped, thank God for that, thought Giles, determinedly not imagining Xander with a vampire sucking on his neck. He scanned the group of eager faces and felt a lightening in his chest. At least he had successfully distracted the youngsters. And it had been unexpectedly pleasant.

“*Why did the God want shoes?*” asked a small girl with enormous serious eyes. She was studying her own feet, the ends of the soft rayon boots moving as she wiggled her toes. Giles smiled and impulsively stroked the top of her head.
“*She was very vain and very stupid,*” he said easily.  
“*she didn’t care about anything important.*”

“*But she was a God,*” said a tall boy standing near his shoulder.

“*Not all God’s are good,*” said Giles. He saw the children absorbing this bit of information as if it were the first time anyone had suggested such a thing. The serious little girl looked up at him worriedly.

“*But how are we supposed to tell them apart?*”

_How indeed,_ thought Giles.

Dahla put out plates of some treat and the children rose en masse and abandoned him. Giles sat back, smiling at the vision of himself he suddenly had as the ancient village storyteller.

Berynn slid quietly into the seat beside him. Giles felt once again that sense of well being the smaller man exuded. But when he looked at him, he saw a face tired and drawn with worry.

“*Are you all right?*” he asked solicitously.

Berynn looked up and nodded unconvincingly. Instinctively, Giles wrapped an arm around the narrow
shoulders. He could feel the man’s frame trembling under his arm.

“*What is it? What’s wrong?*” he asked, resisting the urge to draw the dark head more closely against him.

“I’m okay,” said Berynn in an eerily close approximation of Xander’s accent. “*Everyone is so afraid,*” he added quietly.

“Yes, well...” sighed Giles. The slim shoulders under his arm were still vibrating. “It is quite normal to be afraid.”

“You are not,” stated Berynn, the dark head tilting up, the pale eyes studying him with a serious openness so much like one of the children,

Giles smiled. “What makes you so sure?”

Berynn shrugged and turned his head so that Giles could only see the smooth back of it. He noticed the hair lapping slightly over the top of one ear and fought an urge to straighten it.

“*Is... forgive me,*” said Giles carefully, “*but is your family safe?*”

Berynn nodded. His head bowed and the sheath of silky hair fell to either side, revealing his pale slim neck.
Giles found himself wondering how these people tracked the passage of time, and in that context, how old Berynn might be. “*Do you... do you have a wife?*” he asked awkwardly.

“No,” said Berynn softly in English. He looked up at Giles, his eyes, darkening to a grassy green, danced beneath the thick black lashes. “No one wants me, I’m too ugly.”

Giles seriously doubted this. The young man held in the crook of his arm had that ethereal beauty that all young men possess during that brief period of late teens to early twenties. He was slender but well muscled, his beautiful eyes held a world of emotion. His mouth promisingly mobile, frequently smiling to reveal even white teeth, and a dimple on either side. Small, kissable freckles scattered over his nose. Even in this town of attractive men and women, Berynn’s charms were distractingly obvious.

Giles wondered again at Berynn’s seeming isolation. At the distance that seemed always maintained between himself and the other villagers. Except for the twin brothers and Xander, Berynn seemed almost ostracized.

It brought out Giles’ protective instincts. “Never mind,” he said warmly, hugging Berynn closer. “I was too ugly, too.” He was pleased to see the boy laugh.
Some time later Giles noticed that Spike had emerged and was sorting through the small arsenal of weapons the patrolmen had amassed. He approached him.

“Ah, Spike,” he said. “I wanted to speak to you.”

Spike did not look up from his task. “Welcome back to the world, Watcher,” he said, applying his focus and a cleaning rag to a small hand ax. “Now bugger off.”

“Yes, well,” said Giles, not obeying the command. “I suppose I’ve made no secret of my feelings about you either...” One of the children he had been entertaining came toddling up to him. Spike glanced over at the intruder, and the child flinched back, wide eyed, and immediately scurried off.

“That was rude,” said Giles.

“Can’t help if they’re skittish,” said Spike lazily.

“Perhaps it comes of you drinking their blood.”

Spike set down the weapon he had been cleaning and leaned back against the wall, arms folded. The eyes that
met Giles’ were cold and Giles suddenly remembered, as he was often wont to forget around Spike, just how old the vampire was. And just how many Watchers he was purported to have killed.

“We gonna have a problem here, Rupert?” asked Spike.

“I hope not,” said Giles honestly.

“The boy was upset earlier,” Spike mentioned, dropping those unnerving eyes to study his nails. “About some things that were said.”

“That’s between Xander and I.”

“Nope, don’t think so.” Spike stepped up into Giles’ personal space, and leaned in close enough so that Giles could feel the air stir as Spike spoke. “Any problems Xander has become my problems. I think I should make that clear.”

“I believe Xander’s relationship with you is unwise and dangerous. I believe you are taking advantage of him. I will continue to advise him to that affect. I think I should make that clear,” said Giles calmly, not backing down.

Spike regarded him for a moment. “You got a set of ‘em, Watcher,” he said.
“Your esteem means so much to me, vampire,” Giles retorted.

“Guess we should let Xander tell us what he wants, then,” said Spike, leaning back and refolding his arms, with a cockiness he did not feel.

“Perhaps if you could stop biting him long enough, he would be able to make up his own mind,” said Giles sharply.

Spike felt an unfamiliar hot burn in his cheeks. He opened his mouth to retort, but Hope chose just that moment to approach the two men. She stood by Giles, her eerily pale eyes trained on Spike. Spike raised an eyebrow and appeared, to Giles, to kind of bow an acquiescence to the small girl, and back away somewhat.

Giles took the object that Hope had brought. Nodded and thanked her and urged her to leave. He and Spike needed to discuss this now, he felt. Before Xander was any more deeply involved. But Spike had become distracted by Hope. He watched her go, glanced at Giles. Laughed and shook his head.

“Figures she’d hone in on you,” Spike said cryptically.
Giles was surprised by Spike’s interest and his comment. “Yes,” he said. “But, oddly, I feel a connection to the girl. I have no idea why…”

Spike laughed. “Course you do,” he said. He shrugged a lackadaisical shoulder in the general direction of Hope. “Bleedin’ kid’s a Slayer, ain’t she? Course you feel drawn ta her.”

“A… what?” Giles stared.

Spike made a small raspberry with his lips. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know.”

“I can assure you, Spike. I did not.”

“Angel knew,” said Spike wisely, realizing this even as he spoke the words. “That’s why he did it, you know? He killed himself protectin’ her.”

Giles was watching Hope with a look of dawning comprehension. Like all the cherries were lining up in the slot machine. Spike came up to him and spoke softly at his left shoulder. “Reminds you of somebody, don’t she?”

When Giles didn’t respond, he prodded, “Spunky little blonde girl with a yen fer bloodshed?”

Giles felt tears uncontrollably filling his eyes.
Spike turned back to his small arsenal and casually lifted an ax. “Wants to stake me, she does. But she knows we have a connection. Knows we’re alike in a lotta ways. Just like her.”

“But...” Giles regained his mental faculties enough to think about this information. “But she is far too young. And she hasn’t been called...”

“Last Slayer died in the Apocalypse,” said Spike in a brisk voice that spoke of years of regrets, then years of burying those regrets. “Angel never forgave himself,” he added sadly. “Sent him over the edge, it did. This un,” he shrugged that uncaring shoulder again and Giles could now see how badly Spike needed to not care, to not feel an attachment this time, “this un sprung forth sort of full grown. From a cave.” He frowned at a long knife as he drew it from its sheath. “Don’t think she’s completely human. If any Slayer is,” he added.

Giles nodded numbly.

“’Spect she’ll want training,” said Spike.

Giles leaned against the wall behind him.

“Gonna go check on the whelp,” said Spike. “Mebbee I can talk him into resting for a little while.” He began to walk off, but then he paused and looked back at Giles, his
face sharp and hostile. “Mebbee bite him a bit. If he begs me.”

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Another group of villagers, led by a blood spattered and shell-shocked patroller, found their way to the factory. They were questioned thoroughly. It seemed the demons were settling in above, methodically going through the town house by house searching, pillaging, killing and burning. Spike had soon heard enough and headed towards the door.

“Whoa,” said Xander hastily, gathering up his things and following. “Wait up, pal.”

Spike paused, one foot on the bottom stair and turned, his jaw clenched. “Not gonna get into another fight with you about this, Xan…”

“Well, good then,” said Xander, trotting up.

“Yer not goin’ up there again.”

“And you aren’t going off alone again.” They glared at each other.
“Perhaps some form of strategy would be wise,” Giles volunteered from the little circle gathered around the new arrivals.

Spike gave Giles his grudging attention. “What do you suggest, Watcher?”

“Well…” said Giles, a bit surprised to be asked. He looked around the room of frightened, innocent faces and realized how little these people knew of war. They were all gazing at him expectantly, waiting for pearls of wisdom, no doubt, to fall from his lips. It was rather daunting. And terribly poignant. He glanced back up at Spike. Saw for the first time the grim exhaustion, that determined strength. If nothing else, Spike felt an obligation to these humans. He was in it for the long haul.

And Xander. Who of course would always jump in with no questions asked if the people he cared for were in danger. He stood at the foot of the stairs below Spike. A worn and used looking battle ax strapped comfortably against one hip. One hand on Spike’s arm in a kind of casual possessiveness.

They were it for these people, Giles realized. They were the war chiefs. And they had better get along.
“I suggest you wait five or ten minutes, Spike. So that you and Xander and,” he scanned the room, “the patrollers and I, can come up with a plan.”

Xander nodded eagerly. Giles thought he saw a kind of guarded relief in Spike’s eyes.

“You got five minutes, Watcher,” he said, swinging back to the floor. He slid an arm easily around Xander’s waist and drew him towards the big table in the center of the room.

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It was a simple plan but those can be the best. Spike and Dahla would take a group of fast runners up to the back of the village and begin to methodically herd off small groups of demons and dispatch them. The idea would be to isolate the horde to one area. Which then would probably have to be destroyed.

Xander and Giles and the remainder of the patrollers would first lead the villagers to a cave that was defensible against large creatures, then sneak down to the old demon camp, working their way slowly back
towards the village. Reconnoitering and ascertaining the lay of the opposition’s army.

They were all given the anti-magical device bags. Plus a lot of something Xander identified as magical gunpowder. It seemed it would ignite with words, not fire, but the effect was the same. Cross bows were set aside and large swords, knives and any other tool that could stab and wound was found and somehow strapped on.

Spike had a feeling the vampires were out there. He expected they’d meet up with them soon. This whole thing smelled like blood to him. But for now they would deal with the infestation. At his insistence, everyone was armed with a stake as well.

Giles led the people up the stairs. Xander stood at the bottom, counting heads. Spike slid up and grabbed his boyfriend close.

“Don’t do anythin’ stupid now,” he said, his nose touching Xander’s. “Remember that.”

Xander smiled and leaned into Spike’s lips.

Giles looked down the stairs and sighed. Xander and Spike were blocking the stairway and oblivious to the whole world. In any other place, under any other
circumstances, with any creature but Spike, he would have thought the two were in love.

But, of course, that was nonsense.

“Coming Xander?”

Xander looked up, as if startled. His cheeks crimsoned and he extracted himself from Spike’s arms. Ran up the stairs towards Giles, casting one more look back at Spike.

“Meant what I said, Xan,” said Spike.

Xander nodded.

Spike watched Xander go. It was the safest job for the boy, he felt. Far from the worst of the fighting, and under the watchful eye of Rupert. But still, he would have rather gone with him. He sighed and turned back to Dahla. She was busily tying packets of gunpowder to a wide belt, her mouth a determined, thin line. Her hands moving quickly and efficiently.

Angel would be proud of her, Spike was surprised to find himself thinking. He moved to her side and hoped his Sire would be proud of him too.
The cave was one that Angel and Spike had dug out of the cliff many years ago for just such an event as the one they were having. Halfway up a sheer cliff face, it could only be reached by one long ladder, which would then be pulled up and stashed along the wall.

Long, sharp pikes guarded the floor, which thrust out from the cave entrance, so any creature rappelling down from the edge high above, would be in imminent peril of impaling themselves. And a battery of crossbolts and spears were stored there to repel any further assault.

Giles and Xander followed the last villager up the steep ladder and rested there for a bit. The patrollers taking that moment to get some food from the storage rooms deep in the cliff, say goodbye to relatives or just sit dazedly trying to come to grips with the situation.

Xander went off to a corner by himself and thought about Spike.

“Were you injured, Xander?”

Giles squatted down next to him. He picked up a bit of the cinder that made up the floor and crumbled it between his fingers, studying the charcoal and ash as it fell from his hand.
“When? You mean those demons? No, just a bruise or two...” Xander studied the cave wall intently. He had been sort of avoiding Giles since their little conversation up at the camp before all this had begun.

“I’m sorry I reacted so badly,” said Giles.

Xander shrugged.

“You can understand my concern,” Giles said, He saw Xander’s jaw set, his brow come down.

“Sure, Giles, I understand. You hate Spike and think he’s a bastard.”

“I think he’s a vampire, Xander. And wait...” Giles said as Xander looked as though he was about to deliver a heated retort. “I am NOT being a bigot. A demon is not a misunderstood minority. Humans are a vampire’s prey, Xander. We are their food. If one is kind to you, I’d say it’s more of a master-pet relationship, not one based on true companionship.”

He thought he saw his words hit home. But Xander shook his head. “Spike’s not like other vampires,” he said.

Giles nodded, giving him that. “Yes, of course. You’re right. But Xander...” He edged closer and dared to put his hand on Xander’s arm. “How much of this is just about
the bite? Do you even know? Maybe Spike isn’t doing this intentionally but you must realize that this is how a vampire seduces a human to become his Childe?”

Xander had that look on his face of a man beleaguered from all sides. “I don’t know, Giles. I just know... I just know how I feel,” he said helplessly.

“You don’t understand,” he added unhappily. “So you can’t know.”

“You think I don’t understand about love, Xander? About passion and hunger and need?”

Xander continued glaring at the ground.

“I am not without feelings, Xander.”

“I know that, Giles. “D’you think I don’t know every argument you’re about to throw at me? D’you think I haven’t said them myself, to myself? This is different.”

“Yes, of course. It is easy to forget that you are actually NOT a teenage boy in need of guidance,” Giles said, just managing to keep the sarcasm from his voice. He paused. “Well, Xander, drawing upon that wealth of experience, I’m sure you recall that at the beginning of any ill-advised venture there is a certain amount of conviction that the current situation is different...”
“And a certain amount of studied, well-meaning advice from people who don’t know what they’re talking about,” Xander interrupted angrily.

“I’m just trying to be sensible, Xander.”

“I’ve done the sensible thing my entire life, Giles,” said Xander. He took a deep breath, then sighed. “Okay, maybe this is crazy. But I’ve got a pretty good track record with crazy, don’t I, Giles?”

This made Giles smile. “You do seem to manage it quite well, yes.”

“I mean, I’ve followed my instincts into some pretty bad situations, I’ll admit. But I survived them, didn’t I? Maybe with a little help, but still…”

Giles considered this. “Perhaps because your instincts have always been essentially heroic.”

Xander was taken aback. “Wow,” he said., “that almost sounded like a compliment.”

Giles shook his head, grinning. “Are you trying to make me feel guilty, Xander?”

Xander let his lip curve up in a small smile. “Learned a few tricks from my son, I guess. Is it working?”
“Do you mean, is it distracting me from the issue at hand? Then, no, it isn’t working.”

“The issue at hand,” said Xander slowly. Listen, Giles,” he said. “I know you’re only trying to help, but…”

“All I ask is that you consider this,” Giles interrupted gently. “Perhaps step away for awhile. Just... just resist the bite. Get over the craving and see how you feel then. If Spike really cares about you…”

“He does, Giles. This is huge for him, you have no idea…”

“Well, then I should think he’d want you to be sure, also. I should think he’d be concerned about the long range effects of these actions.”

“Yeah,” said Xander after a while. “He has said stuff. I guess.”

“Well, then, perhaps you should move into the village for a time. When this is all over.”

Xander was looking at the cave wall again. “I’m not leaving him alone up there, Giles. He couldn’t survive it.”

Giles knew better than to ponder out loud just why Xander should care about Spike’s survival. “Just promise me you’ll think about it, Xander?”
Xander nodded.

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Well, this was easy, thought Spike. He swung out in an inside roundhouse, came down into a jumping kick and back slapped a demon’s head into a wall. The sounds of gooey body parts splattering, echoed around him for a few minutes after he landed. He looked around happily.

The sprinters would dart in front of a group of demons, the demons would give chase. They would be led back towards the little corral of buildings, fence and magical barriers Dahla had constructed and between Spike and the shaman, they would be exterminated.

The only escape was a small barricaded building in which several dozen demons were now trapped. Spike had a little interrogation planned for later in the day.

The heaps of dead demons were rising rapidly and they had not lost a man. Spike had barely begun to feel the thrill of fight. This was so easy. This was too easy. As the thought occurred to him he felt the prickle up his neck and whirled around to see Dahla, head jerking up like an
alerted rabbit, wide green eyes meeting Spike’s with realization.

Spike barely heard it coming.

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“What was that?” whispered Xander, raising his head and looking around with flared nostrils. As if he could scent the air, thought Giles disturbingly.

“I didn’t hear anything Xander,” he said quietly.

They were trudging through a particularly thick, darkened part of the forest. An area with sticky, twining roots and branches that curled around their arms and legs. Something like mushrooms squishing underfoot and giving beneath the palms of his hands when he leant against the trunks of the damp, spongy trees.

Berynn and one of the twins were slipping through the complex undergrowth with ease. And Xander seemed to just tear through it, absently grabbing hunks of the white clinging stuff and tearing it off his arms and legs as he walked. But Giles was getting hung up in it again and again.
Xander rubbed, for about the thousandth time, at the scar tissue on his neck. “Something doesn’t feel right,” he said.

*Beginnings of withdrawal*, thought Giles to himself.

And then he heard the sound as well.

In a place where there is no life but one’s own, silence is so profound and so much a part of existence that the sound of undergrowth rustling and feet moving quickly is chilling and odd.

Everyone froze, looking around.

And then everything was a chaos of confusion. Xander’s body came up against Giles’ hard and he felt himself shoved to the ground. Nearby, one of the villagers screamed in that particular way a man does when in great pain. Xander was crouched in front of him, ax withdrawn, so Giles barely saw the attacker.

Hairy and low to the ground, red eyes and pink nostrils flaring. The crooked and filthy tusks waving threateningly in the air. It dug its cloven hooves into the foamy ground and snorted.

“Boar!” yelled Giles, pushing to his feet and trying to drag Xander back. “Wild boar!” The air whistled, Giles would
recall later. And like something from a child’s fairy tale book, the bronzed ax sailed in a perfect elliptical arch through the air and landed squarely and with a loud, wet thunk in the middle of the creature’s skull. It stared at them with frozen eyes for a moment then collapsed.

Xander ran to the fallen man while Giles absorbed the fact that Xander had just accurately hurled an ax from twenty paces.

“Berynn? Oh Christ, Giles help us.” Xander was cradling the man on the ground.

~*~*~*~*~

There was blood in places it ought not to have been. This alone was confusing to the demon. Blood has certain properties, certain behaviors. It flows, it pumps, it pounds. It doesn’t burn, or evaporate into the air from the heat. But he smelt burning blood, demon’s blood and human’s, mixed together. It was all around him. Trying to pull himself into consciousness, the wrongness of the blood was disorienting.

Spike’s hand made contact with his face and he felt blood there. It smeared across his lips and he knew it wasn’t his
own. Parts of his body were making themselves known to his brain, as well. They were not happy with their status.

His ears were parsing and carrying sounds to his brain. Translating until he realized that all around him creatures moaned with pain. Spike thought one of the voices he heard might be his own.

And his brain wisely suggested that further attempts at contact with the rest of his body be avoided. His brain recommended a nice little lapse back into unconsciousness. But Spike could still see Dahla’s face the instant before the explosion. He saw in his mind's eye, too, the young men that had been nearby. He bared his metaphorical fangs at his reasonable brain and forced himself somehow up on his side to look around.

It was worse than it had smelt. Finding focus, Spike recognized an object on the ground near him as a hand. There was no arm attached to it. Spike recognized the shape of the hand, a peculiar slender ring on the finger. Pain worse than anything his body could generate shot straight past his nerves and pierced his dead heart with its narrow point. He purposely looked beyond the remains of the young patroller.

Dahla’s long skirt protruded from under a pile of debris. Spike crawled across the dead and their blood and found
Dahla’s foot. With a kind of instantaneous prayer to the nothing he believed in, he wrapped his fingers around her ankle and felt with unbelievable relief a steady, if weak, pulse.

“’Ang on luv, gonna get you outta here,” he promised, focusing his will on the living.

~*~*~*~*~

“*So much blood, so much blood*,” Berynn was clawing and chanting hysterically. Xander could barely hold him still as Giles tried to tie off the puncture wound in his thigh.

“Xander, please,” he ground out as Berynn jerked once more and Giles lost his knot.

“The wound isn’t that deep,” said Giles, pulling aside the torn material. “And there isn’t that much blood. I’m surprised...” Berynn twisted and his arm barely missed Giles’ face. “Really! I’m surprised he is so affected.”

“Something’s wrong, Giles. Berynn isn’t like this, whoa!” As a knee came around and clipped him.

“We should get him medical attention,” said Giles.
“*so much...*” Berynn chanted. And Xander looked up at Giles, as if suddenly struck himself.

“Xander?”

“We have to get back, Giles. Something really bad has happened.”

~*~*~*~*~

Someone had blown a hole in the world.

Spike stood crookedly amongst the rubble and ash and looked around. Like a great broken molar, the remains of the building jutted up around him. The caved, rotten insides bloody at his feet. Spike was barely aware of it, but his own injuries were extensive. He had tied his shirt closed over the parts that kept protruding from his abdomen and ignored the blood running steadily down his left leg.

If he noticed the blood he’d go mad. Dahla was still unconscious, but he had cleared the rubble from her body. Spike’s knowledge of human physiology was extensive, for unfortunate reasons, but he ran his hands over her and was able to ascertain that the majority of her injuries were mendable bones.
He had found a few, a very few, whole bodies. One other barely survived villager. When he had come across one of the patrollers, still alive, Spike had had to stop and hold his insides to keep them from falling out as he sobbed. He uncovered a live demon who would regret his entire existence when he was conscious again, and ... Spike looked around desperately... a kind of pounding panic surged into his frontal lobes. As if his dead heart were beating with fear. He was surrounded by the tissue and liquids of exploded creatures.

The heat was fantastic. Whatever had exploded had been incredibly powerful. Steam rose from the ash and gravel around him. It stunk of cooked flesh. A thin silt of ash continued raining down around him. It, too, had that dampish smell of flesh and blood. Having no circulation, Spike could not go into shock, but his brain wanted to shut him down. His brain had had enough of this place, this knowledge.

Spike stumbled against a bit of fallen stone and let his brain have its way.

~*~*~*~*~
Berynn was unconscious again. A remarkably heavy weight that Giles and Xander carried between them.

“This happened the last time,” said Xander, panting a bit with exertion. “I didn’t get it then, but Berynn can feel it when somebody...when somebody is in pain, Giles.”

Well-oiled cylinders clicked into place. “Oh,” said Giles. He was amazed he hadn’t realized this before. “Of course. How interesting.” One of his feet slid on a bit of damp. They were very near the main approach to the village. “The empaths are mentioned in the texts, of course...”

Xander would have laughed, if he hadn’t been concentrating on carrying Berynn backwards through the woods in the dark. Trust Giles to refer everything back to his prophecies.

Tybor had been running ahead and behind, scouting for the rest of the troop as they slowly accompanied Berynn. He stumbled back into their visible space, his face so white the freckles seemed to hang above the surface.

“Oh my God,” said Xander. You didn’t need to be an empath to know what Tybor was feeling. Tybor’s mouth
opened and closed as he waved his hands behind him. He looked like a pained mime.

“Somebody...?” Xander carefully eased his share of Berynn’s weight into another man’s hands. He jumped and ran as Tybor preceded him. A couple of other patrollers ran behind him.

He knew it was selfish but all he could think of was Spike.

~*~*~*~*~

“Dear Lord.”

It was the first such expletive to have emerged from Giles’ lips.

The sight of the village had silenced them all.

It wasn’t so much the presence of destruction as the absence of what should have been. There was a blackened crater where several dozen buildings had stood. As if an enormous giant had stubbed out his cigarette there. There was no debris in its center, only towards the crisp edges; rubble, shards of buildings like bits of broken glass stood up here and there.

The air was still thick with the ash.
Like mindless antibodies, in a host suddenly ravaged by disease, the men didn’t think. They surged over the decimated ground, throwing their puny ineffectual selves at a disaster so overwhelming their individual minds could not understand it.

They looked for wounded buried under the debris. Found the dead, instead and moved on.

Towards the outer edge, on the northern road that led to the factory, Xander and Giles found an entire wall still standing. All around it, debris had been pulled aside and piled, almost compulsively, in neat stacks. A row of injured and dead lay in front of the wall. Like dolls lined up in a child’s bed.

While Giles knelt beside the first prone figure, Xander stumbled along the cleared trail. Every few steps coming across another individual. They were men he knew, some distant still waking part of his brain informed him, although he couldn’t put a name to the faces, coated in beige ash, painted with dried blood.

He came to the end of the crooked cleared path and found its maker. Seeming very small, Spike was curled around his spilling guts, one broken hand still clutching the remains of a shirt to himself, the other splayed out in the puddle of blood in which he had fallen.
From the moment he had seen the blown apart village, Xander’s mind had been stepping though what it encountered one blink at a time. He couldn’t hang onto anything firmly enough to give it a name. But some inner cell had been seeking Spike constantly, wondering at every drift of dust or ash if he was stepping though his lover, watching him dissipate and blow away. So the sight of Spike in any condition was a relief.

Which was half the reason he vomited.

Giles came up behind him and saw the torn mess that was Spike and uttered the expletive.

“He needs blood,” Xander crawled across blood and muddy ash, pulling his body as close to Spike’s face as possible.

“Xander.” Giles’ hand on his shoulder as if to restrain him. Xander shook him off. Although the violence of his movement was distant, not conscious really. He heard, rather than felt, Giles body fall away, as if some great strength had hurled him.

Xander also heard a voice making a whining sound. Like a puppy he had had once, when left outside at night.

Spike’s face felt too soft, the usually tense muscles completely flaccid. Bent over in the mud and blood,
Xander pulled Spike’s head until his blunt human teeth were pressed to his claim marks. The mouth remained unresponsive, the teeth dull. Xander could hear that whining sound going on and on.

Giles cursed again and fell over blasted masonry. Spike looked almost blown in two. His dry and empty intestines spilled out of blue and gray torn flesh, the filthy remnants of his clothes twisted into the mess. Xander was wrapped around his corpse, covered also with blood and the filth of the ground. He had his neck pressed into Spike’s face and as Giles watched, almost immobile with this additional horror, the disgusting mess of a corpse rippled and transformed into a gray skinned demon with claws whose filthy face turned into Xander’s proffered neck and savagely bit down.

The sound of the teeth entering Xander’s throat was loud and crunching, as if he broke through tendon. Giles turned his eyes away. Behind him, beside him, men and women writhed and moaned in emotional and physical pain. They had need of him. And the triage in his mind abruptly left Xander to foolishly feed the dead while Giles tended the still living.

~*~*~*~*~
Everyone has demons. They people our nightmares and plague our lives. They drive us to cut off travelers on the freeway and snap at our children. We spend money and time in an effort to control them. With chanting, prayer, juice fasts and yoga. And still they circle and snarl, like mad dogs, in the cellars of our psyches.

Spike’s demon could have squashed any of ours like a bug. The injuries were so extensive that Spike’s human persona had withdrawn and the stronger, survivalist demon had risen to take full control.

The demon was somewhat comforted when the blood began to behave itself. His claimant had found him and had moved him to a building underground. Cool and dark and safe, cooed the demon contentedly. His claimant was trying to give him more blood, but the demon refused to take from him. His senses told him that the taking would harm his claimant. Something in the blood was still too weak, after the last taking. So although he ached for the new rich hemoglobin to flood his dead cells and restore this corpse in which he walked, the demon withheld itself.

“He won’t drink anymore,” Xander said desperately. He cradled the bandaged, unconscious corpse in his arms.
Giles stood wearily beside him. So exhausted with shock and grief and twenty-four hours of hospital duty he could barely stand. He had come to check on Xander and Spike before collapsing on a cot in the corner somewhere.

He was disturbed by what he found. Xander had apparently completely neglected himself since he had found Spike. He lay on the cot next to the vampire, holding him. His own clothes still filthy with mud and blood and ash. His skin, under the grime, had a sickly pallor. The eyes that turned to Giles were black and dull, like dusty marbles. The whites were yellowed, as if Xander had jaundice.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t try to give him anymore,” suggested Giles, careful to keep his voice neutral. “I’m sure it takes a while to heal, at any rate.”

“Is that how it works?”

Giles sighed. He had no idea how to heal a vampire. He had spent his life learning to exterminate them. But he knew something about how to protect a human from a demon. He stepped closer to the limp corpse. “What have you tried?” he grimaced, “besides feeding yourself to him? Really, Xander, that seems quite...”
The demon smelled new blood. It rose fast and vicious and desperate and reached for it.

“Whoa, Christ!” screamed Xander, barely holding on as Spike flashed into gameface and surged towards Giles.

Through his exhaustion, Giles felt a feeble lap of anger. “He tried to bite me.”

“He doesn’t know what he’s doing, Giles.”

“Nonsense, he’s a vampire. He is, quite reasonably, attempting to feed because he needs blood. He is dangerous right now, Xander. You should restrain him.”

“I’m not tying up my boyfriend while he’s hurt and unconscious Giles.”

Giles carefully removed his glasses and rubbed at his eyes tiredly. His temper was frayed and his nerves were shot. “It is somewhat ridiculous to continuously refer to a vampire as a ‘boyfriend’ or ‘lover’, Xander. Spike is a powerful demon and could eat anyone here. You and I would be hard pressed to stop him. I think he should be restrained and you should get some rest.”

Xander tightened his arms around the struggling demon. He said loudly, to the mattress beneath them, “Giles,
you’d better move on before I let him go ahead and attack you.”

“Xander!”

“Right now,” Xander took a breath, “I have an overwhelming urge to just feed you to him. D’you hear what I’m saying? I mean I feel almost compelled to do it. I can barely restrain myself.”

“That isn’t amusing, Xander.”

“I’m not trying to be funny, Giles.”

Giles stood another full moment, watching Xander. “Very well,” he said sadly, and walked away.

The blood moved away and the demon writhed painfully. But his claimant restrained him and he obeyed, turning back into the comfort and warmth and ignoring the hunger as best he could.

“It’s okay, buddy,” said Xander, carefully laying Spike back down on the mattress, smoothing back a damp bit of hair. “I’ll take care of you. If I start eating flies, though, pal, you are gonna owe me big time.”

~*~*~*~*~
Giles found his way to another cot and had barely lain down. No blanket or pillow, just his hands folded across his chest, when Berynn appeared suddenly beside him.

The young man limped noticeably, but seemed otherwise well. He lay a blanket gently on Giles knees and stepped back quietly, as if to go.

“*Wait*” said Giles, struggling to sit up. Berynn flinched and drew back. Giles was surprised, and then he suddenly understood. He gestured in a non-aggressive manner. A beckoning motion.

“*No. No you don’t have to touch me.*”

Berynn’s eyes were dark and still. His mouth was drawn into a thin line. He smoothed his filthy shirt against the bandaged thigh and Giles could see him trembling. He gestured again.

“*Please, sit. For a moment. Are you better?*”

Berynn regarded him solemnly. He did not answer.

“Xander *explained*,” said Giles carefully. Berynn’s eyes reacted to this. The iris flinching. Like water touched by wind, or water bugs, little reactions of the color. Giles
wondered if Berynn’s ‘gift’ was considered a blessing or a curse in this village.

“*It must be very painful,*” whispered Giles.

The green depths darkened again. Berynn nodded.

“Why do you endure it?” asked Giles gently.

Berynn’s raised his head and his eyes scanned the room of injured and mourning people. He looked at each one in turn with compassion and regret.

“Yes, of course,” said Giles. “One does what one can.” He could see now that Berynn was shivering. Giles wanted to take wrap his arms around the young man, and warm him, but he suspected the contact would drain the empath more than comfort him. He thought for a second. “*I might be able to help,*” said Giles.

For just a moment, something very small and wild appeared in Berynn’s eyes. Like a wish from his boyhood. He blinked and it vanished. He shook his head, eyelids lowered.

“No, really,” said Giles. “I learned some techniques a long time ago.”
Berynn looked up at him. The skepticism in his face making him look suddenly old.

“Sit down,” commanded Giles. He awkwardly assumed a semi lotus posture on the cot, spread his hands, thumb to ring fingers circled, across his knees. “Take a deep breath.” He waited while Berynn sat on the floor. Assumed the same posture, and looked up at him with an expression of full of both cynicism and hope.

“*Now this may take a while,*” said Giles. And slowly, carefully, he pronounced the Sumerian chant.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander had been in thrall, and he had been possessed. He had also been a parent. On the scale of 100, in protectiveness and compulsion to serve another, parenthood was a ninety nine to the other experiences’ tens and twenties.

He didn’t want to mindlessly obey Spike. Hell, half the time, he wanted to punch him in the nose. And he didn’t feel that Spike controlled his actions, made him do things he would not normally do.

He just couldn’t imagine being alive without him.
It was a lot like being a parent, he reflected. Like the time James had broken his arm and Xander and Patricia had spent the night sleeping in chairs next to his mattress. Unable to leave him, as if they could somehow bleed their strength into the little body.

This time he had literally put his strength into Spike, and still it wasn’t enough.

Xander had finally fallen asleep with exhaustion. He was still curled around Spike. Partly protective, partly to give himself comfort. His marks ached and itched and burned with need. He wanted to feed Spike blood. His own and others. He wanted it so badly, he had had a few bad minutes during which he had run through his mind all those villagers he might not mind sacrificing to his vampire. He had gotten control of that insanity finally when he had imagined Spike waking to find that he had drained one of his innocents.

His own blood would have to do, but Spike would take no more.

On some deeper level, Xander understood. It was as if he and Spike were standing on a seesaw, holding hands. Keeping each other from falling backwards or forwards, keeping each other moving up and down, by their own equal give and take.
He knew he was weak with blood loss. When he raised his shaking hand, or tried too quickly to stand and felt the gray dip into his vision. He knew. And somehow he knew that Spike would not take from him because of this.

But he also knew, because of that shared instinctive balance between them, he also could feel that Spike was still needing blood. And there was no one Xander could ask. They had all given everything they had, the villagers left here. Those that were still whole in body were too weak in spirit. There was no one who could afford to donate to Spike.

He lay, shivering with cold and blood loss and exhaustion. He had been too afraid to leave Spike’s side, and his blood sugar levels were dangerously low as well. His arms draped around Spike’s still and chilly body. His lips pressed against his cold flesh. He could feel the helpless tears pressing at the corners of his eyes when he heard a soft step behind him. He rolled his head back and half opened his eyes, his arms closing protectively over Spike.

Giles stood beside their cot, rolling back his sleeve. “I have had a conversation with myself. And we have come to a conclusion,” he said. He held out his strong, steady arm. “I understand that in this village there is a rite of
adulthood, that involves the giving of blood to the vampire who protects us.”

“Can’t believe you’ve never been bit, Rupert.”

“I was never foolish enough to be caught,” said Giles. In his own ears, his voice sounded extraordinarily pompous and stuffy, but Giles couldn’t help but take refuge in pomposity. He doubted he’d ever be able to look at Spike quite the same way again, having felt his fangs in his arm, his tongue against his skin. That sense of fulfilling another creature’s deep physical need.... Giles paused for a deep breath and to clear his mind. He took that moment to adjust the strap of his backpack carefully with one hand, the other still firmly gripping the nylon rope that ran down the steep stairs hewn into the rocks of the cliff face.

Below him, Spike seemed to be navigating the steep path with ease. Every now and then he would pause at a natural platform and wait for Giles to catch up to him. He stood on one such plateau now. Hands on hips, head tilted to one side, those cool eyes appraising in a slightly unnerving fashion.
“Weren’t you ever curious?”

“Really, Spike,” said Giles in a tone he hoped was disparaging and long-suffering, rather than embarrassed and self-conscious. He straightened the backpack strap again, unnecessarily. “Vampires are not drugs one experiments with during one’s school days.”

“Nah, but guess maybe magic is,” said Spike wisely. “I could taste it, you know.”

Giles was startled enough to look around and directly into Spike’s eyes. His laughing, merrily sparkling eyes.

“You’re playing with me,” said Giles gruffly, looking away. He managed the last bit of stairs and stood a few feet from Spike, carefully dusting off his hands.

“A nicely aged, rich bouquet,” said Spike in a beautifully cultured voice. “With just a touch of wickedness…”

“Oh, really,” said Giles peevishly. He was still a bit fagged from their last steep descent, but he headed for the next series of stairs quickly, eager to escape this game. “And how would you describe Xander Harris’s blood?”

There was a pointed silence. “Shut up about that, Watcher,” said Spike, finally.
Giles paused at the top of the flight of steps and looked up. Spike was glaring at the ground, an unhappy frown creasing his forehead.

“It’s not about blood with Xander,” said Spike in a low voice.

Giles hadn’t intended having this conversation on a three by six foot precipice at the edge of the world, but now the conversation had presented itself, it seemed as a good a time as any. Giles climbed back up onto the platform, slipped the backpack from his shoulder and tossed it against the wall pointedly. He walked over, and slid himself down next to it, his back to the cool stone wall.

“What is it about, then, Spike?” he asked.

Spike’s frown deepened. He wrapped his arms around himself and looked off into the sheer black space beyond the edge of the cliff. He mumbled something.

“What, Spike?” asked Giles again. Trying to sound patient and not worried, sickened, distressed. “I’ve seen the marks, I’ve... I’ve spoken to Xander about some of the effects. What are you hoping to...”

Spike mumble again. “...don’t know...” Giles heard.
“You don’t know what, Spike?”

“I don’t know, Watcher!” yelled Spike suddenly, whirling about, fists clenched. “I don’t know what is going on! I don’t know why I… did what we did… we.” He flailed at the air ineffectively and finally spun and hit at a bit of rock wall.

“Ow,” he said absently. He rubbed the top of his head with a now bloody hand. “It was all of a sudden, Rupert,” said Spike softly. “I just wanted him…”

Giles was unable to stop himself from making a noise of disgust.

The look of desperation on Spike’s face completely disappeared. His face went stiff, eyes slits. He closed his mouth with a little snap and turned away. “Best get on, then,” he pronounced coolly, heading for the stairs.

“Wait, Spike,” said Giles. And when Spike appeared not to acknowledge this request, “I’m sorry.” Spike hesitated and turned, his expression still guarded. “I’m just worried about Xander,” said Giles slowly. “Surely you can understand that.”

“Worried about him, too,” said Spike, the truth of this in his voice.
“Have you…” Giles looked out into the space at the edge of the small shelf they occupied. Thought about the possibility of being hurled over it. Weighed that possibility carefully before speaking. “I wonder if either of you have thought of trying to stop.”

“Have stopped,” said Spike testily from between clenched teeth. “’S the problem.”

“Oh,” said Giles. A dozen veiled looks, mysterious comments. The tension around the two men over the past few days as he had visited the healing vampire and attempted to speak to a sullen Xander. “Oh,” he said again.

Spike ran both hands through his hair; it stood up wildly around his face. He made a frustrated sound. “The demon knows, I told him. It’s ... it’s not a lack of feelin’, it’s somethin’ ta do with the claim...”

“Let me get this straight,” said Giles. “Your demon, which you choose to identify as an entity separate and individual from yourself...”

“Yeah, yeah, so lock me up, Watcher...”

Giles sighed. “Your demon, as I said, will not allow you to drink from Xander?”
Spike muttered something richly surrounded with expletives.

“I beg your pardon,” said Giles patiently.

“I said, the bloody demon will allow me to drink. Just... Christ on his bleedin’ cross, Watcher. What I’m tellin’ you stays between us, do you understand that?”

Giles considered carefully. “Yes,” he said finally. “I understand. I won’t repeat what you are telling me, Spike.”

“Wants to go further,” said Spike at a mumble so smothered Giles had to strain to hear it.

“Further?” he asked, dread rising in him.

“Wants to keep him safe, you understand?” said Spike, his voice a whine. “Wants to keep him...”

“You can’t turn him, Spike,” said Giles in a voice like ice.

“You think I don’t know that?”

“You’ll have to stop.”

Spike made a noise of frustration and pain. “Don’t know how. Don’t you see, Rupert? It’s all... it’s all tied up with being with him and tasting...”
“I understand,” said Giles hurriedly, hopefully forestalling any clear descriptions of Xander and Spike having sex.

“Haven’t you ever heard of anything? In all yer books? Anythin’ about vampires and humans?”

“Spike it is very rare for a human to survive their first meeting with a vampire. Surely you know that? And on the rare occasion when vampires and humans interacted on more than a violent level, romantic relationships were highly unlikely…”

“Happen to know yer wrong there, Watcher,” Spike pointed a thumb at Giles. “On a coupla occasions.”

“One would hardly call Buffy’s unfortunate lack of judgment romance, Spike.”

“Oi, watch what yer sayin’ there!”

Giles gave him a look laden with meaning. Spike held his eye for a minute, then dipped his head and looked away. The hot wind curled up over the lip of the plateau and lifted stray wisps of hair from Spike’s neck in light dancing patterns, as he stood there obviously wrestling some internal dilemma. “Xander’s different,” Spike said finally, still looking off into space.
Giles mind’s eye immediately flashed before him a recent memory of Xander and Spike as they had stood in the kitchen preparing for this journey. Spike’s rambling on in his bragging way about his knowledge of some demonic such and so. Xander sarcastically cutting him down a peg. Spike laughing and turning his back so he didn’t see Xander’s unguarded expression. Spike hadn’t seen the look. But Giles had.

“Yes,” said Giles. “I believe you. But Spike,” he pressed on, “I have never heard of a human indulging in this repeated biting who wasn’t eventually killed or turned.”

“That Riley bloke of Buffy’s did it.”

Giles chose not to tell Spike of Riley’s fate at the moment. “He quit, Spike.”

“Oh.” Spike ran his hands through his hair again. “Well, that’s clear then.”

“Yes.”

“Just gonna hafta stop it, that’s all. Just gonna have to control it. Don’t want any harm to come ta him.” He sounded very unsure.

“I am pleased to know you feel that way.”
“Course I do,” said Spike snappishly. “Not a bloody monster. Despite what you think. Just…” Spike frowned and glanced quickly at Giles, then away. “Just can you explain it to him? He thinks I don’t want him, you see? He’s all strung out about it…”

“That’s simply withdrawal, Spike. He’ll adjust.”

“No, Watcher, yer wrong there. It’s not about the rush, altogether. It makes us... it makes us together, you know. Like we’re part of each other somehow.”

At one time the idea of a vampire and a human finding romance in the sharing of a bit of blood would have moved Giles to a kind of disgusted pity. Now he found the admission poignant.

“Yes,” he said honestly. “I understand.” He pushed himself slowly up from his crouching position. “I’ll speak to him, Spike.”

“Thanks, Rupert.”

Perhaps letting a vampire feed from him had weakened Giles. Or perhaps there was more in this new world than could be found in a Watcher’s philosophy. But Giles watched the unhappy creature working his way down the cliff below him and felt truly sorry for him.
“So they sent suicide bombers?” Xander set the plate of food in front of Giles and sat down at his own place, just managing not to meet Giles’ eyes. He had been managing this all week and was becoming quite good at it. Quick looks at eyebrows, or cheeks, chins, never sharing what lay in the depths of his mind with his old friend.

“Yes, it appears that the epicenter was actually a couple of demons. It really ties in with the ritualistic materials we had found at the camp.”

“Spike said that guy they’ve captured is crazy with some religion.”

“A demonic Jihad,” said Giles. “Really quite terrifying if one thinks about it.”

Xander was looking again at the door.

“He should be back soon,” said Giles. “He just went out to...”

“Get a quick bite to eat,” said Xander tightly. “Yeah. Funny how hungry he’s been lately.”
Giles tried to think of something to say. Found nothing. He looked around the tiny room, wishing for a change of subject to pop out at him. They were sitting in one of the small temporary houses erected near the old factory. Spike and Xander had moved a few belongings down from the tents and were staying here through the current situation. There was no ornamentation and very little in the way of furniture. Table, chairs, a cupboard on legs leaning against the wall.

Xander loomed larger than usual in the confined space. Unable to sit still, his shoulders and elbows seemed constantly about to bump into a wall, knock over an empty chair or bowl. He dragged his hands across the surface of the table, his eyes slid up to meet Giles chin again, slid back to the door. He shoved a hand through his hair.

The door rattled and opened with a whoosh and a loud thunk as it hit the wall. Spike strode in, with all the enthusiasm and storm-blowing-through-town energy that was typically Spike. Xander stood, picked up his plate and pointedly turned his back.

Spike observed this. “Hey, Watcher,” he said. Xander shoved the remains of his essentially untouched meal into a receptacle for garbage. He carefully put the plate
into the cleaning unit that was installed in the counter for that purpose.

“Hey, Xan.”

Xander moved stiffly. He looked at Spike, or rather, looked at his chin. Giles thought how well Xander was mastering the art of hiding his feelings. “Feel better?” Xander asked Spike, his voice weirdly light.

“Sure,” said Spike.

“Full?” said Xander very snidely.

Spike was silent. Xander glanced up quickly, a sharp dark slice of a look. Spike nodded barely.

“Anybody I know?” said Xander, his face growing dark. Giles discovered a sudden urgent need to be elsewhere. He rose quickly.

“Erm well, thank you, Xander. I think now I’ll just…”

“No, stay, Giles,” said Xander quickly Giles hesitated. “We want him to stay, don’t we, Spike?”

Giles was surprised at the pity he felt for the vampire standing helplessly in the still open doorway. “Sure, Xan?” said Spike weakly.
“Sit down,” commanded Xander. “Both of you. I’ve got something to say.”

Spike and Giles exchanged a look. They both quietly sat down at the table. Xander turned, arms folded, and regarded them both. Giles was surprised at how tired Xander looked.

“You both have decided things about me without talking to me about it,” Xander said.

Spike swallowed. “Xander, ol’ Rupes was just tryin’ ta help out. It weren’t his idea…”

“Shut up, Spike,” said Xander. “You sent Giles to tell me to back off. You couldn’t tell me yourself.”

“Don’t want you to back off, Xander,” Spike’s voice sounded almost childish.

“Shut UP, Spike,” said Xander. Giles saw Spike’s jaw clench, though his gaze dropped. Xander continued glaring at the top of Spike’s head, but he addressed Giles. “Do you know what’s been happening since our little chat, Giles?”

Xander didn’t wait for an answer. “We have sex,” he said angrily. “Lot’s of it,” he added, much to Giles’ dismay. “Its like we can’t stop. And then,” he jabbed a finger at Spike,
“he runs off to drink from somebody else. Sometimes the cum isn’t even cooled ...”

“Xander!” Spike looked shocked, Giles grimaced. “Xander, Giles doesn’t wanna hear...”

“I TOLD YOU TO SHUT UP!” screamed Xander and Spike was on his feet and halfway across the table separating them before Giles had time to react or realize what was going on. He jumped up from his seat, just as the table reacted to the force of Spike’s feet and fell loudly onto its side. Glasses and plates crashed around them. Barely masking the feral roar emanating from Spike.

“You will not speak to me like that!” he roared, backhanding Xander hard enough to make the boy’s entire torso spin around.

He rippled into gameface even as Xander fell back against the kitchen counter. Utensils and pots and pans rattled and fell to the floor. Giles found his legs and was just moving forward to protect Xander from Spike, when Xander turned around with a huge butcher’s knife in his hand and leapt at Spike.

After that everything seemed to move in slow motion. Later, when, after several drinks, Giles tried to sort the events in his mind, he would be surprised that Spike
hadn’t protected himself with more alacrity. Of course, he had grabbed the furious human with both hands and lifted him over his head as if to hurl him against something hard. But he hadn’t moved quickly, for a demon, and he hadn’t really thrown Xander.

Like something from a bad horror movie, the butcher’s knife descended.

Spike shoved Xander away from him, the knife still vibrating from the force of its thrust into his shoulder. He reached up and yanked it quickly from his body, threw it clattering across the floor. Blood leapt from the open wound. A high arching fountain of crimson. Xander’s eyes followed it, and he smiled. A hungry, knowing smile. Giles felt the hair lifting on the back of his neck.

“Come here,” said Xander silkily, as if sure of Spike’s obedience.

Spike hissed. He shook his head and moved his feet, but instead of backing away, he walked unsteadily sideways. His feet seemed to fumble and slip in the blood spraying across the floor. Xander, eyes predatory, mouth still fixed in that grin, danced sideways, countering Spike’s moves, so that they circled each other. Spike looked more confused and frightened than Giles had ever seen a demon look. And then Xander jumped him.
Spike made a helpless noise that was completely at odds with his gameface. His clawed hands seemed to simultaneously push away and grasp closer the larger torso as Xander wrapped himself around him, his mouth wide open and clamping down over the open wound. Giles saw the flash of Xander’s teeth as they gripped Spike’s skin; blood smeared his lips and cheeks as they hollowed.

Spike moaned and seemed to almost swoon. But Xander held him up with both arms and sucked and gnawed and devoured Spike’s shoulder as if he were feeding.

Giles turned away, covering his mouth as he gagged. He saw the open door and staggered towards it, hearing the two creatures falling amidst the debris, growling and moaning.

“Xander,” he heard Spike’s voice whining behind him. And something in the tone. Some helplessness turned Giles around at the last moment.

They were writhing on the floor; Xander tearing at Spike’s clothes, manhandling the nonresistant vampire, and Giles was unhappily treated to the vision of the young man he had come to think of as a son, apparently performing the rape of a demon.
There was blood everywhere. They rolled in it, squirmed in it. A multitude of images threw themselves into Giles eyes as he stood there, frozen. Xander’s dark, muscular hand gripping the underside of Spike’s pale thigh, forcing it into the air. Xander’s dark head bent to Spike’s wounded shoulder, still moving in little circles. A blood splattered demonic visage, yellow eyes unblinking as if dazed. Giles could hear grunts of effort, the rhythmic crunch of broken pottery as bodies jerked across the bloody floor, punctuated by Spike’s cries and helpless whines as he was ravaged.

Giles fled.

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If Spike could have purred, he would have. They were warm and sated and curled around each other in the cozy bedroom. Xander’s blood whirled in happy eddies and pools in all the nooks and crannies of his body. Xander’s softening cock was still half embedded in his hole and Xander’s hand still possessively clasped his own relaxing penis. They were sticky everywhere.

“Pet?” Spike whispered. “You awake?”
“Geezus,” mumbled Xander into Spike’s uninjured shoulder. He raised his head groggily and stared at Spike. “What the Hell, Spike?”

Spike laughed. “You were amazin’ Xan,” he said happily.

Xander’s mouth made a small ‘o’. He stared at the wound in Spike, looked down their spunk and blood covered torsos. Looked around the room. Panic started to show like twin small beacons in his eyes.

“Giles?”

“Think we scared the Watcher off.”

“Fuck, Spike!

“You did that, Xan. But if you want another go...” Spike leered suggestively.

Xander shoved himself up to a sitting posture. “I stabbed you!”

Spike shrugged. “Guess you wanted the blood, luv...”

Xander raised a hand to his blood encrusted mouth. “Fucking stabbed you, Spike! And Giles! Oh Christ!”

Spike ran an appreciative eye over the body sitting next to his. Lean and bloody, with a vivid red and pink claim
mark and some new and assorted bruises and puncture wounds scattered over his torso and arms. The mouth red and swollen, black eyes alive with fear?

“Xander?”

“I went nuts, Spike!”

“Weren’t so bad, Xan” Spike soothed him. “Nothin’ to a vampire, really. Just a little rough with yer tumble, you know?”

“Spike! I stabbed you!”

“Oh. That,” Spike pooh poohed the wound, a feeling of unease washing through him. “Hardly felt it Xan. You were upset with me, only fitting really. I belong to you…”

“Crazy.” Xander said.

“Course,” said Spike, still smiling, though his heart was feeling the dread.

Xander pushed himself further away. His hand traveled slowly to the mark on his neck. “It’s this,” he said.

The face Xander turned to him was not the face of the man who had told Spike, within the past hour, that he loved him. Kissing him everywhere, pledging his devotion. It was not the face of the man who had begged
him, forced him, to drink from him. The face Xander showed to Spike right now was hard and chill and deadly grim.

“You’ve changed me,” he said.

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Spike drew the stake from its holder on the young woman’s belt and carefully inserted it into the slot. “Like that,” he said. He handed it to her. “Now you try it.”

He looked up from his student and across the room. On the other side, Xander was helping Berynn and Tybor load weapons onto a small wagon. Xander looked thinner these days, thought Spike. Wan. Likely the vegetarian diet, he reflected, not knowing that he, himself, seemed thinner and less robust than usual.

A great surge of yearning, so present Spike felt sure the humans in the room would surely see it, swelled out from him and reached toward the quiet dark boy. He took a deep breath, startling his student. She fumbled with the bolt and almost accidentally released it into Spike.
He chuckled. “Now wouldn’t that solve all our problems,” he said, gently wrestling the weapon once more from her hands. “No, luv, pay attention this time...”

Xander looked at Spike again, for about the thousandth time, from beneath his bangs. They hadn’t been near each other in over a week. Spike had moved out of the small hut and back into his tent after a couple of days of torment. Both had agreed that the closeness was just too difficult. But Xander had found that not being close was harder still. He thought about Spike constantly, worried about him incessantly. Imagining him up on the hill alone. Next to Angel’s empty tent, surrounded by all the stupid stuff he and Xander had, like squirrels, collected around them. He had fought the urge, night after night, to just go up there and see if the lone vampire was all right.

It was the bite, he told himself. He was still addicted. It would go away.

But he missed the sex, too. And, oddly, the constant bickering. He missed getting up in the morning to the bitching and the harping, all masking the concern and the affection. He missed being nagged at to eat. He missed flipping coins with the cheating vampire to determine who would do the pile of stinky laundry every week. He
missed losing at cards. And winning at football/soccer. He missed Spike.

Berynn tried to lift a launcher that was too heavy for him and Xander dipped to grab it, bumping his elbow against the wagon’s fiberglass side in the process. He yelped, and saw, as he rubbed his elbow, a brief flash of concerned blue before Spike’s head turned once more to the small girl he was helping.

He missed Spike.

Berynn came up and patted him tentatively. Xander sighed and managed a small pained smile. He had friends, at least. Spike… he glanced at him again. Spike’s seclusion had closed around him once more. All the pals they had accumulated had really been Xander’s. Spike was still the ‘Master’. The immortal on the hill who fought the gods and demons on their behalf. He wasn’t one anybody here would really call ‘friend’.

Spike was looking thinner and paler than usual, if that was possible. Xander wondered, with a mixture of jealous anger and genuine worry, if the vampire was feeding at all.

He wondered how Spike got through the long dark days. Xander had found that masturbating and crying could
take up at least a couple of hours. And then there was the dwelling and regretting. And of course, the wishing.

Sometimes he gave in to despair and stumbled about in the tiny dark kitchen until he found some of the vicious ‘grog’ and put himself to sleep that way.

And meanwhile they had this apocalypse. Xander looked over towards Giles and almost smiled. Boy, Giles was really having the time of his life. Or second life. Life after life.

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“He’s lookin’ a bit pale. Think he don’t know ta feed himself, foolish boy.” Spike set down the load of clean linens one of the patrollers had insisted he carry back with him and looked across the empty dark tent. He nodded at the nothingness across the way. “Yeah, well, you try tellin’ the brat what ta do.” He sighed, shuffled over to the stove.

“Can’t boss him, he’s not mine is he? Not... not anymore. Shut yer trap!” he said angrily, making a threatening gesture in the general direction of his vivid imagination.
He sat down heavily and seemed to be gazing at the empty fire grate. But sometime later he still sat there and no fire had been made. What was the point anyway? He was cold, of course. What of it? He was a cold creature. Should be used to it by now. And it wasn’t as if anyone would complain. It wasn’t as if anyone would care if he sat here all night doing nothing, thinking nothing.

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“I wonder what he’s doing?” said Xander wistfully. He toyed with the small knife Giles had asked him to sharpen and looked up at Berynn. “He looked...” Xander smiled painfully, “of course he looked good, but he looked kind of thin, you know?” Berynn blinked at him, his eyes sympathetic and non-judgmental. He nodded and then shrugged.

Xander’s crooked self-deprecating smile flashed in the low firelight. “I talk about him a lot, huh?” Berynn nodded again, returning the smile.

“Sorry,” said Xander. He carefully wrapped the knife in a cloth then drew out the tough swine hide case Berynn had fashioned for it. “This looks really good,” he said, veering steadfastly away from his personal problems.
“Giles is going to love it, Berynn. Though you know...” he fingered the symbols painstakingly stitched into the leather. “He’s never gonna stop asking you about these.” He observed Berynn’s normally open gaze, drop a bit, a secretive smile on his lips. Berynn blushed. “Huh,” said Xander. “Oh, I get it.” Although he did not.

Xander lay the gift down. “So, swine skin and pigs feet. How many have we trapped so far?”

Berynn thought for a moment, held up eight fingers.

“Wow,” said Xander. “Mighty hunters!”

Berynn laughed. He shook his head and they both rolled their eyes remembering the disastrous hunting parties.

“We need practice, I guess,” said Xander dryly. Berynn nodded enthusiastically.

There was a rap at the door. Giles came in without waiting for an answer. “Xander, I came to tell you... oh.” He looked at Berynn, his eyes widened. He blinked. Xander thought, for a minute Giles looked all of twelve years old.

“Hello,” said Giles stiltedly.
“*Good evening*” said Berynn, his voice very formal and melodic, the end of his nose bright pink. Both men stared as if stunned, then quickly looked away from each other.

Xander felt that surprise followed by the big ‘Ah Ha’ that happens when a million little clues and subtle hints suddenly fly up in your face. He wondered if Berynn knew that Giles only liked women. Then he wondered if Giles did only like women. “What’s up, Giles?”

“We...erm, we seem to have found an advantageous moment.” Giles eyes flicked briefly over Berynn before he brought them back to Xander. “We are planning an attack for the morning.”

“This morning?” Xander asked, the dread any soldier feels on receiving orders, and the excitement, coloring his voice.

“I’m spreading the word, I hoped you... erm you two would help me?”


Giles pressed his lips together for a minute before he spoke. “If you think that’s wise.”
“Don’t Giles,” said Xander. “Just. Don’t.” Giles bowed his head as if formally stepping back. Then he looked up, cautiously, at Berynn.

“Perhaps you would care to?” It was a polite request, as if he were asking the young man out for a meal. Xander almost expected him to extend an arm. He quelled his smile.

Berynn nodded eagerly and maneuvered around the table until he was standing in front of Giles. He saluted in a vague facsimile of a gesture he had learned from Xander. Giles started and laughed. He proceeded for the door, but turned before he exited. “Be careful, Xander.”

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After the end of the world, after his madness and grief, Angel had gone through the phase that humans would have recognized as a kind of remembrance and nostalgia. During that time, he had talked to Spike at length about his son. The mystery and tragedy surrounding the young man’s life. At one point he mentioned the time Connor had locked Angel in a steel casket and thrown him to the bottom of the sea.
Spike appreciated the creativity of the boy. Just the thought of an eternity alone in total darkness made the hairs stand up all along his spine right into his hairline. “Evil,” he commented to Angel. “But brilliant. Guess we know where he got that from.”

“Connor thought he was doing the right thing,” said Angel, his eyes glittering dangerously.

“How long were you down there?” asked Spike, still mulling over the wonderful horror of it.

“Three months.”

“Bleedin’ eternity! How’d you stay sane?” he cast an amused glance at his sire. “Assumin’ that is, you ever were...”

“I controlled my thoughts. I meditated.”

Spike laughed outright. “Bloody Hell, you did! This is me, Angel. How long until you stopped wankin’ and dreamin’ of revenge?”

Angel managed to maintain a show of indignation for a full minute before he broke. “Two weeks, maybe three...”

“Should share some secrets with you,” said Spike, with an evil grin. “I coulda lasted a full month, maybe.”
“It’s amazing,” said Angel, slowly. “How little one really has to think about. Five hundred years of torture mayhem and war and I ran out of things to think about.”

“Then what did you do?”

“Made things up. Imagined it all right again. What I’d do differently.”

Spike pondered that. “Think that’d make anyone half mad.”

“It did,” said Angel.

Spike sat alone in the dark in front of an empty fireplace and picked at his nail and frowned and tried to remember without imagining it all right again.

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It had only been a week since he had last climbed up this hill, but Xander felt somehow that the journey was twice as long as he remembered. Maybe it was that his legs had unlearned the discipline of it, climbing over the steep embankments and jogging up the series of flat carved steps. Or maybe it was his eagerness to be there, to see once again.
“Spike,” he breathed softly. Or mouthed really, as he came over the crest of the hill and saw the small tent silhouetted there against the gray clouds and turbulent sunset. The tent itself was dark, and Xander felt a moment of crushing exhausting discouragement at the thought that perhaps Spike was not even there. Maybe off scouting, or ... feeding.

With a last burst of energy, he ran the few feet to the tents.

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Spike was having a philosophical discourse with himself about time again. The length of it, measure of it. He could not imagine, for instance, how long he had been sitting here, staring at his hands and remembering every moment he had spent with Xander since the boy's arrival. Of them all, he tried to do the math and figured that eighty-five percent had been spent arguing, ten percent joking, a good three percent fucking. He was remembering the point oh-two percent now of Xander looking into his eyes, warm strong hands holding his face so Spike could not look away while Xander told him, with his earnest intensity, just how much he needed him.
Point oh-two percent of a tiny mote of time in Spike’s long existence and he had been sitting here for hours playing the memory on repeat, feeling it throughout his body as a swell and as a current, warming himself with it.

But now the tent was growing cold. The memory already seemed thin and worn with use and Spike thought perhaps he had an entire unlife still to get through.

“Hey.”

That one word, said by that particular voice had the effect of a flare going off overhead. He felt the warmth of its fire on his face. His existence lit up. Spike raised his head and smiled at the shaggy haired boy who stood in the entrance to his tent. “Hey yerself, whelp. Didn’t hear you come up.”

Xander hovered in the entrance. He seemed to be having some trouble there. His hands shook and his knee couldn’t lock into a stable position. Spike could hear the pounding of his blood.

“Shouldn’t be so sloppy, Spike,” Xander said, his voice shaky and weak. He cleared his throat. “I could have been a demon...”
“Like ta see the demon stupid enough to come at me here,” said Spike, with that thoughtless braggadocio. Why had Xander come here? Was he...what did he want?

“Say that a little louder, Spike, I don’t think the gods that punish pride heard you clearly.”

“Feckin’ gods seem ta punish everything,” said Spike roundly. “And I ain’t proud.”

Xander managed a credibly derisive snort. “Right.” He took a deep shaky breath.

Spike didn’t know if he should stand. Should he offer the boy a seat, a drink? It seemed overly formal, since this had been Xander’s home until just a few weeks ago. Xander was still trying to breathe, shaking where he stood and Spike would have normally jumped to help him but he was unsure of that, too. Afraid of scaring Xander off.

“Yeah, well.” Xander’s heart was hammering so hard in his ears, he felt his head must be shaking with it. “Giles had a message.”

“Oh.” Spike turned back towards his dark corner. He wondered if his face showed his disappointment. Of course, the Watcher would send the whelp with his
messages. No one else would dare the vampire’s den alone.

“There’s… there’s an attack planned for tomorrow. We…” Xander felt his voice disappear. He took a deep breath. Gripped the edge of the tent with one tight fist.

“Ah,” said Spike. And because that had a feeling of finality about it, “Come up fer some last minute instruction?”

“Something like that,” Xander managed to both draw breath and take a few wobbly steps inside. “Do you have everything? Are you, uh, ready?”

“Always ready for a fight,” said Spike, automatically rising as Xander stumbled towards him.

Both men gaped at each other speechlessly as the dizzying proximity occupied their whole consciousness.

“Spike, I…I…” Now without the tent walls to cling to, Xander’s hands fumbled at his pockets.

Spike watched those large warm hands with their thick fingers. “Xander…” he began, not knowing what he wanted to say, except that name.
Xander opened his mouth to speak, but the only sound that came out was like a sob, like his voice was broken, and Spike was across the few inches left between them and in his arms.

They stood there, shuddering, wrapped up in each other.

“Just tonight, please,” Xander whispered against his lover’s shoulders, his neck, into his curling soft hair.

Spike’s mouth found its way to Xander’s as if it were a newborns finding the teat. Instinctive. Needy. He just clamped on.

Somehow they stumbled across the tent and onto the bed.

Xander hadn’t thought this far but if he had he might have imagined that this would be a little like the first time. Needing and thrilling and more than a little with the ‘oh god’, arms wrapped around him in a rib crushing hug, demanding mouth traveling hungrily over his face, voice growling in his ear. Then back to the kissing that reached right into his center and pulled the plug. His mouth unlatched from Spike’s and he realized this time seemed less thrilling and more of a relief. As if he had been a tight knot for weeks and was finally coming loose.
Spike’s fingers untangled him, working busily through the stiff wound threads of him. Xander shuddered and moaned and managed to whisper against a cool earlobe.

“We don’t have to do this. I…I didn’t mean to…”

Spike hushed him with a kiss.

They rolled each other on the bed. Somewhere shirts were shed. Xander felt a weight on his foot and realized his shoe and slacks were wrapped around his ankle.

“Wait…” he drew back from the Siamese twin that was their shared bodies and smiled into the lust ridden face inches from his own. Spike looked up at him, his eyelids half-closed, pupil huge, lips red.

“What? Don’t you...don’t you want it,” Spike panted confusedly.

“Oh yeah, buddy, I want it, but…” Xander flopped his weighted foot. “Little uncomfortable here.”

Spike smiled. One of those big happy unguarded smiles that Xander got to see maybe once or twice in a lifetime. “Okay...” He sat back and dragged the shoe and slacks off of Xander’s leg, flung them carelessly behind him.

“Messy,” said Xander happily.
“Yeah, I’m a pig,” Spike flopped back down on him, wiggled a bit to get himself worked down into the warm niches of Xander’s body properly. “You okay, now?”

“I love you, Spike,” said Xander spontaneously.

Spike flinched back, as if slapped. His eyes squinted and Xander saw them shining with moisture before he had turned his face half away.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” said Xander quickly. “I don’t know why I said that...” He hadn’t meant to spit it out like that. It seemed inappropriate really, given the circumstances.

Spike was breathing, long shaky inhalations, and quick puffs of air out. The hands that had been molding themselves to Xander’s shoulders, clenched and tightened there.

Xander felt suddenly it all falling away. A chasm of coldness gaping between them. He wrapped his arms up and around Spike and pulled him closer. “Don’t... please,” and now Xander felt tears in his own eyes. “Please,” he begged. “Don’t make me leave.”

Spike shook his head. He still breathed.

“Spike, please. I’m sorry... I just... God,” Xander squeezed tighter. “I missed you so much I’ve missed you I can’t...”
Spike’s mouth closed down over his. A wet teary kiss, full of saline and snot and need.

Now suddenly desperate, Xander clutched Spike to him, grinding his hips upwards, feeling the cold hard rod sliding firm and insistent into the soft place just beside his hip, he twisted and pushed back, needing more friction, thrusting against the hard body as if he could drive through Spike, his mouth wide open taking all of the vampire's tongue and the sharp fangs as they wildly now mashed against his lips, slipping and catching, pulling apart briefly so that Xander could breathe.

Moans escaped before mouths came back together and the silence was broken only by the tussle of heels and toes gaining purchase against the bed linens, and hips shoving and rocking and.

“Eh, ah,” Xander arched his head back, and his whole body was foam spraying out from a center. Above him, Spike ground and made helpless high-pitched noises. He felt something cool splat his chin. The friction between them became sticky. His fingers dug into a hard round ass with muscles that jerked and shuddered under them.

Spike dove down and glued their mouths together again. It wasn’t until the tempo of their movements had subsided that he brought his mouth away, still so close
that the air was wet and warm between them. He looked up from beneath damp eyelashes and the blue swam there. “Love you too, Xan, missed you too,” Spike’s voice squeaked and he grimaced with embarrassment.

“We can’t do this,” said Xander, suddenly knowing it to be true, he gazed up at the ceiling, feeling the tears trickling into his ears, and hugged Spike hard against him. “We can’t be apart, Spike. It’s just not... not right, you know?”

Spike nodded, mute.

They lay, chest-to-chest, groin-to-groin, forehead-to-forehead. Eyes closed, mouths open, tongues attempting to wet dry lips. Manly pride trying to get a grip.

“Man,” whispered Xander finally, “what a coupla girls.”

Spike’s shoulders shook silently as he laughed. “Speak fer yerself, whelp.”

Xander’s eyes snapped open. He glared. Spike smirked back.

“So... night before the battle sex, sounds delicious,” said Spike, neatly changing the subject.
Xander sighed regretfully and wriggled slightly to draw attention to the sticky goo between them. "’Fraid we already did that, pal."

“Nah,” said Spike, responding to the wriggle of Xander’s hips with a little rocking and grinding motion of his own. “That were just ‘pleased ta meetchya’ sex. Before the battle sex takes time.” His tongue poked between his teeth as he smiled. “Takes some thought.”

“Thought, huh?” said Xander. Spike nodded. “Well, I guess its up to me, then,” said Xander, rearing up and kissing Spike quickly before he could retort. He lay back, smiling. “You wanna know a secret?” And at Spike’s look. “Never told you this one blondie, prepare to be shocked.”

Spike raised one eyebrow just the right distance to indicate skepticism. Xander pulled the muscled shoulders closer and whispered to the air above Spike’s ear. “That night, the night you attacked the high school? Okay okay, I bet you don’t even remember that... but Angel. Angel pretended he was going to eat me and he offered to share...”

A rumbling growl vibrated against his chest.
“I always wondered...” Xander shifted under Spike for obvious reasons. “I always wondered what might have happened.”

“Mmrrrr, wondered, pet?”

Spike barely felt the light punch in his ribs.

“More like fantasized.”

Spike dipped down to mouth the skin of Xander’s chest and made an appreciative noise. “Fantasized about me eatin’ you, Xan? Hafta say, we’ve already kinda done that,” and he laved a long wet stroke across one erect nipple to demonstrate.

Xander arched slightly and shivered. “Y..yeah, but what if...” he ran his hand over Spike’s head, down his neck, rubbed a thumb across the small bump at the top of his spine. “What if you’d turned me?”

He noted Spike’s reaction, the slight stiffening, the stillness, but thought he’d hit the kink right, and so went on. “I’d be your childe, right? You’d be my...” Xander paused for effect, “Master...”

“No!” Spike spat the word as he shoved himself violently away from Xander’s body. Xander’s hands moved over the empty air where his lover had been for a second.
“Spike?” he said, bewildered. He reached out, felt the angry hard back that was turned towards him. “Spike, what’s wrong?”

Spike growled into the mattress.

“Spike?” Xander rolled and tentatively patted at the hard cold angry man that had suddenly materialized beside him. “Um, bad idea? I’m sorry? Come back?”

Spike stayed stiffly turned away, his voice muffled. “Not yer fault, Xan. Just not a good fantasy.”

“Oh.” Xander’s mind twirled around in his limited library of vampire Siring lore and tried to think of an explanation for his usually randy companion’s complete chill factor. “Bad memories?” he suggested. “Did you sire someone once who...”

“Never did,” said Spike.

“You never turned anyone?”

“Didn’t say that.” Spike rolled back over and faced Xander, his arms folded defensively across his chest, fingers tucked into his armpits. Xander felt the line drawn on the mattress between them. “Made plenty a’ minions, just never made a Childe.”
“Is there a difference?”

Spike rolled his eyes and Xander felt a certain relief as they fell into a familiar role of disgusted Spike explains things to the stupid human. “Course there’s a difference, Harris.”

“Okay,” said Xander dubiously. “So, why didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Make a Childe?”

“I don’t know,” snapped Spike. “Mebbe I just didn’t want some mewling brat followin’ me around crampin’ my style and generally fucking up…”

“Like you did with Angel?”

“Nothin’ like me ‘n Angel,” said Spike vehemently.

“Right,” said Xander, genuinely confused. “But you said he was your Sire.”

“Dru was me Sire,” corrected Spike, pouting to himself. “Technically.”

“You were sired by a girl?”

“Shut up, whelp. You are askin’ for a smackin’, you know that? Course Dru sired me. Ya think I’m gonna let some
lumberin’ Irish drunk near me in a dark alleyway? I was wet behind the ears, but not completely daft.” Spike twitched around in obvious discomfort.

“But you said…” Xander persisted, trying to untangle the web.

“Dru weren’t really capable, were she? Angelus, er Angel, took over the duties. He sired me, really. She’s just the one what turned me.”

“Duties?” said Xander, perking up a bit. And Spike so did not like the look in the boy’s eyes. “What duties?”

Spike eyed Xander uneasily. He had fallen into enough pits of Hell to recognize a dangerous chasm when he came upon one.

“Just general education,” he said slowly.

Xander wriggled his shoulders and hips until he had worked himself right up to Spike’s invisible line. His hand sliding down to fondle a growing erection. Blood heat pouring from him. An unholy light floating in the dark pools of those eyes. “Education in what?” asked Xander, huskily.

Spike had a soul but he wasn’t a saint. He grabbed two handfuls of hot dark skin, pushed the pliant body over
onto the mattress with a thud, shook himself into full game face and leant into the delighted face of his lover.

“Educatin’ young Childer on how ta behave with their elders, brat.”

Xander wiggled delightedly. “How to behave?”

“To speak when spoken to. Do as yer told.” Spike’s hands slid down Xander’s arms, loosely clasped his wrists and then so fast the boy didn’t register the act until it was completed, had him flipped over on the bed with his hands captured at the small of his back.

“To not come until they're allowed,” hissed Spike at Xander’s ear, holding Xander firmly with one hand.

Xander groaned and ground himself against the mattress.

“None of that, Childe,” said Spike, smacking the hard round globes of Xander’s ass smartly. “Behave,” he said. “Or you’ll be punished.”


Spike smacked his ass again hard enough to leave a red mark. “No swearin’ brat.”

“Christ,” breathed Xander. And received another smack. He giggled, a tad hysterically. “S...Sire?”
Vampires aren’t usually prone to chills, but goosebumps swept up Spike’s spine and the skin of his scrotum tightened and thrilled. “You may speak, Childe,” he said, forcing his voice to steadiness.

“What do I get if I’m good?” whispered Xander.

15

As he and Berynn entered the town hall, Giles leapt forward and held the door open. Berynn tipped him a curious look as he walked through the door and Giles felt, for the thousandth time in the past hour, like an enormous fool.

He had no idea what he was doing. Or rather, he had an idea, but he chose not to look too directly at his idea. Instead he sidled up to it, loving the feel of it, the silky, staticy magnetism of it. Afraid that if he studied it too closely it would turn into the grotesque and terribly wrong thing that it was. He hesitated in the doorway and Berynn turned to look back at him. Berynn’s eyes were concerned, intimate, warm, and they froze Giles where he stood.

In his life, Giles hadn’t had many close friends. He was naturally reticent and had been raised, as well, to hold his emotions back. And then, his occupation, like that of
a spy, didn’t allow for many close relationships. The members of the Council, with whom he could at least be open about his occupation, were a stiffly competitive and suspicious group of people. So he was unaccustomed to intimacy, to relaxing in another’s company and sharing himself.

There had been someone once. While Giles was still in school. Robert and he had been the closest of friends. Sharing everything between them, victories and sorrows alike. It had been a time that Giles remembered as idyllic because of that friendship. But they had grown up. And Giles’ father had been right. There was a proper time and place for every type of association. Schoolboy attachments, though indulgently understood while one was young, were unacceptable and possibly grotesque in a grown man making his way in the world.

So, after matriculation, he hadn’t returned Robert’s messages. The many notes and letters. He had tried not to hear the desperation, or the hurt accusations in those last missives.

The emptiness and sorrow and feeling of loss he attributed to leaving childhood. It was, he suspected, how most adults were meant to feel.
And he had blamed this weakness in himself, the bruised ache in his soul where his feelings for Robert had lived, for Ethan Rayne’s mysterious and immediate hold over him when they first had met.

Ethan had taught him the evil those feelings could lead to. Giles had thanked God repeatedly that he had managed to break their hold on him.

But he had thought of so many things during his long last illness. Childhood memories, distorted nightmares, all a jumble in his drug smoothed mind. He recalled Robert. The heartfelt letters, the phone calls. And then the silence. Until, finally, on his deathbed, Rupert Giles had recognized a love long lost and mourned.

He yearned for Berynn and he was terrified of him. How old was the boy? 15? 16? Obviously pure. Giles now understood why so few of Berynn’s compatriots actually touched him. They didn’t want the empath to know their innermost feelings. Giles, certainly, could not imagine the boy’s reaction if he knew the ideas that Giles was entertaining about him. Or, rather, desperately trying not to entertain. If he knew the way Berynn’s touch affected him, Berynn’s smile...

He was so caught up now in his thoughts, standing at the side of the hall as the resident patrollers gathered their
gear, that he didn’t notice Berynn until the young man had stepped up near him. The carbonation of feeling that flowed up his neck and down his spine from Berynn’s presence made Giles nervously step away.

Berynn sighed. He looked down and the dark lashes fanned a shadow across his cheeks. Like the wings of a raven, they swept and when he looked back up Giles was suddenly flown to the moors above a small private boys’ school in Northumberland. Mist and rain mixing and falling into the gravelly drive. The green of new spring growth on the trees bleeding into the colors of the air around him. A pale open face, light green eyes...

“You remind me so much of someone I knew,” said Giles impulsively.

Berynn studied him, as his mind slowly translated the English words. “*A friend*?”

“*Yes, a friend. Of course a friend,*” said Giles. Berynn nodded and smiled. And then, suddenly, as if it were so easy, so natural, he caught Giles’ hand. Turned it in his own smaller ones, raised it and simply placed a kiss into Giles’ open palm.

Giles gasped. Berynn lowered Giles’ hand and seemed to frown down at it. Giles could feel his own skin suddenly
damp with nervous sweat, his heart pounding at the inside of his ribcage. Berynn could feel what he was feeling of course. *Berynn could tell, Berynn knew,* Giles thought, in a panic.

“*You are my friend, also,*” said Berynn simply. “*Friend,*” he pronounced, carefully, in English. And he retained his hold on Giles hand.

“Berynn,” said Giles desperately. “*I’m sorry. I can’t help how I…*”

Berynn shrugged. He looked away. He kept holding Giles hand, playing gently with it, kneading and rocking it side to side before him. “*Men are men,*” he said. “*They feel things.*” He slid his long cool fingers between Giles and lowered their clasped hands between them. “*There is no shame in it,*” said Berynn simply. He looked up at Giles and suddenly before Giles was a small boy, unsure, simply asking. “*Is there?*”

“*No, of course not,*” said Giles impulsively. He tightened his grip on Berynn’s hand, as if to assure him.

And Berynn seemed to need the assurance. He stood studying Giles for another full minute. “*I have something to give you,*” he said finally. “*In my rooms*”
Berynn pulled Giles along behind him and Giles followed helplessly.

~*~*~*~*~

It was leather, in a world where leather was more precious than gold. Stitched with symbols that seemed ridiculously familiar, but that Giles could not place. Because Berynn knew that an unknown demonic language was, to Giles, more beautiful than any inlay of precious jewels. Giles held the sheath in shaking hands and wondered at what the gift meant. He had read about the giving of gifts in this culture. Something would be expected. He wished he knew what.

“*I thank you*” he whispered in the most formal phrasing he knew in the language. He looked at the boy, standing, turned slightly away from him, head bowed and frowning, and desperately knew he was doing something wrong.

“I...” Giles wracked his memory, a lifetime of research on demonic and alien cultures, helping him not at all as he tried to think of the words or the actions that would heal the wrong he had undoubtedly committed.
“*I’m sorry,*” he finally said baldly. “*I haven’t anything to give you in return*” And Berynn looked up at him, his eyes so full of tears that the black lashes clung to the skin, and the corners tightened as they tried to hold them back. Nevertheless, one dribble escaped and the Berynn twisted his face away quickly.

It broke Giles’ heart and he forgot propriety or the rules of social interaction. He forgot that he was a middle-aged man inappropriately attracted to a teenage boy. He forgot everything except the hurt of his friend.

“Come here,” he said gently, and opened his arms.

And Berynn rushed into them, thrusting his head against his chest, the smooth hair rubbing up against Giles’ clenching throat. His strong arms grabbing and pulling Giles to him. The lithe muscular body pressed so tightly against him that Giles could feel that Berynn, too, had ... feelings.

He dared to raise one hand to stroke the back of Berynn’s head. Berynn turned his face into him, and his warm, wet mouth pressed into the V of skin revealed by Giles’ shirt.

They were both breathing hard. Giles’ mind was filled with blindness and at the same time terribly aware.
“*What do we do now?*” said Berynn against his chest, his hands on Giles’ back, stroking, moving down. Giles felt the small, hard hips rock against him. The long, hard indication of Berynn’s arousal rubbing against his thigh.

“*I don’t know.*” Giles held the body against him. Giles’ hands caressed the smooth silk across Berynn’s back. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what to do.”

“I like how this feels,” said Berynn, rising and bumping his pelvis into Giles’ again. Giles wanted to cry, overwhelmed with desire and shame, but Berynn was staring up at him and Giles saw nothing in those eyes but surprised pleasure. Giles bent forward and his lips traveled, as if under a spell, across Berynn’s forehead, to the bridge of Berynn’s nose and he felt the boy tilt back his face to meet him.

“Yes,” hissed Giles, and pulled that mouth towards his own. Strong soft hands wrapped across the back of his neck and held him there. Berynn made small sounds into his mouth. His body quivered and Giles gathered the round, perfect globes of his ass in both hands and pulled him tight against him. They both moaned into the kiss.

And Berynn pushed away. Giles gaped and stumbled a bit, his mind already reaching for apologies. But Berynn backed towards the bed, pulling feverishly at the ties of
his shirt, then jerking it off over his head. He reached for the fastenings of his slacks and, watching Giles with wild eyes, let them fall to the floor.

Giles followed, his clothes coming off beneath his hands, either normally or torn he didn’t notice. He followed Berynn as the boy crawled back onto the bed, beckoning Giles. Berynn was shaking all over and breathing through his mouth and when Giles lay down next to him and boldly ran one hand over his chest and slowly down the expanse of white silky skin, Berynn arched against the touch and groaned.

And then it overcame him. Giles rolled so that he lay atop the boy, pushing apart the white muscled thighs, his hands fondling and kneading and stroking. Berynn’s chin raised, his mouth open as he gasped and said words in his own language. Little sounds, his hands found Giles face, his mouth. Giles took those fingers into his mouth and sucked them avidly. He lowered his pelvis over Berynn’s and bore down, rubbing and thrusting against the boy’s smooth skin. He lowered his mouth and kissed the white chest. Freckles arched in a lazy graffiti across one pectoral muscle and Giles followed them, eagerly, to a red nipple. He chewed and was rewarded when the boy cried out with surprise and buried his long fingers in Giles’ hair.
“Rupert,” said Berynn with his odd accent and he arched upwards again. His movements were frenetic and desperate as he arched up over and over, obviously seeking more friction. Giles suddenly knew what to do and slithered downwards, found the hard, white, uncut member of the boy and wrapped his fist around it. His hand looked so large and rough, he thought wildly, wrapped around the innocent untouched boy. A bubble of precum dribbled out from Berynn’s slit as he moaned again at the feel of Giles gripping his cock and Giles felt it was the most natural thing in the world to lean down and lap it up.

Berynn cried out again and twisted on the sheets. Feeling wise beyond any reason, Giles held the boy’s hips down and took more of his cock between his lips. He suckled and was rewarded with more cries. A hand grabbed wildly at his head. He tried to push his mouth further downwards, but soon found himself gagging against the intrusion, so instead sucked harder, lapping at the underside of the soft head, and rapidly stroking the lower half of Berynn’s cock with his fist as he suckled.

He was just beginning to think he had the hang of it when the boy froze, arched in space, a vibration moved over his belly and up his thighs and cool, salty liquid appeared in Giles’ mouth. His first instinct was to jerk
away, but Giles vaguely recalled the few blowjobs he had received and remembered what bliss it had been to stay inside the warm cavern until he was completed. So he remained, gently suckling, swallowing manfully. His one hand stroking the shaking inside of Berynn’s thigh, his other hand rising to find Berynn’s fingers and intertwine with them.

When Berynn was finished Giles withdrew, and looked up at him.

Berynn’s chest heaved up and down. His face still stared at the ceiling. He tightened his grip around Giles’ fingers and tugged. Giles obediently clambered up. Surprised and chagrined to find his own cock completely sated as he lifted it from the large wet puddle on the sheets.

But Berynn’s face was a wonder, Berynn’s eyes the eyes of a child beholding magic. Giles kissed the dark, soft mouth and whispered. “Hello, my boy.”

“Rupert,” whispered Berynn lyrically. His fingers came up to trace Giles’ face. Giles kissed their tips. One at a time. Tenderly.

“Thank you,” said Giles devoutly. To Berynn, to the gods, to his own broken, brave heart. “Thank you.” And Berynn smiled into his eyes.
“Oh, oh stop,” moaned Xander in a voice that begged the exact opposite. “I’ll be good…”

Spike’s hips jerked forward, drew back slowly, jerked forward again.

Xander hiccupped breath in with the force of every thrust. The capture of his hands had been transferred to a handy table leg, someone’s shirtsleeves used as a rope. His behind was now a nice rosey red and so were his upper thighs front and back. His skin had a lovely sheen of sweat on it and his cock swung heavy and dripping before him. Spike had his hips raised from the mattress and was holding the base of Xander’s cock in a tight grip. He pulled back slowly, slammed against Xander’s prostate.

“P...please,” Xander gasped. Spike drew back slowly, changed his angle slightly. Slammed in again.

Xander made a low mewing noise, half-laugh half-sob. “Please, Sire,” he panted. “Please let me cum…”

against the beautiful hot skin of Xander’s bottom. He was more overcome than his lover, really. Losing control in a manner that was an embarrassment to demons everywhere. His speed picked up and his tight fist began moving slightly up and down Xander’s cock.

“Gaaaaahd!” wailed Xander, hopelessly jerking against the restraints, trying to thrust his hips faster into Spike’s hand.

Grunts and animal growls and the slap of flesh on flesh. Spike forgot the game entirely and merely pumped into Xander, his hand now flying up and down the leaking, hard cock until Xander’s entire torso shuddered under him and they both came, jerking and yelling.

~*~*~*~*~

“Wow,” said Xander from the heights of whatever stratosphere he was drifting in.

Spike sighed his agreement. He licked the sweat from Xander’s back. Long circling loops.

“Is that how it would be?” Xander asked dreamily.
“How what would be, pet?” Spike was nibbling with his fangs at the round, still-pink globes of Xander’s ass when the boy’s released hand came around and swatted at him.

“Ow,” said Xander mildly. “You stuck me, Mr. Pointy tooth. Is that how it would be if you turned me?”

Spike became very still.

“Spike?” Xander tried to turn to see Spike’s face behind him.

“S not a game, Xan,” said Spike finally. He wriggled his arms around Xander’s lower torso, cradling him. “It’s death, kid. And death ain’t fun.”

“I know,” said Xander softly. “I died, remember?”

Spike lowered his forehead to the small of Xander’s back and squeezed him tightly.

“But is that how it would have been if... if that night...?”

“No,” said Spike. “No, maybe with Angelus but not with us, Xander. With us it would have been...” He lay his now fully human cheek on Xander’s back and gazed into the dark of the tent with a faraway look. “It would have been different.”
“Yeah?”

“Sure.” Spike crawled up Xander’s body so he lay across him, his head bent to whisper next to his ear. “I woulda kept you some place safe, Xan. Someplace warm and quiet until you rose. No buryin’ in the ground for you. And when you woke.” Spike’s mouth circled the rim of Xander’s ear, his tongue following with little butterfly licks. “When you woke I’d have a pretty young thing for your breakfast. Leather and silk for you to wear. Music. It would be beautiful.”

Xander smiled. “You’d take care of me.”

“Yer my Childe, course I’d take care of you.”

Xander was quiet. Chin rested on the mattress. One hand still reaching back to rest on Spike. “Sounds nice…”


“Why do you freak out whenever I mention that?”

“What? Freak Out?” said Spike, exaggerating Xander’s accent when he pronounced the words.
“Yeah,” said Xander, not distracted by the mockery. “You have a wiggins every time I mention turning.”

Spike made a great show of looking around for his shirt.

“What?” persisted Xander. “Is it some kind of vampire psychological trauma? Is it like a womb issue or something?”

Spike’s face expressed his opinion of Xander’s sanity.

“Well then, what is it? Is it just your issue... some,” Xander’s eyes widened, “some commitment thing, like you were saying? Some...” His voice stilled and that wounded puppy look appeared on his face.

Spike jumped up from the bed. “Where’s my boots anyway, Harris? You threw them someplace...”

“You don’t want to commit to me,” said Xander, his lower lip in full pout mode, his voice rising. “It’s like I’m talking about an engagement or something and you... you wig out because you don’t want...” Xander rolled over and planted his chin back on the mattress. “Forget it,” he said.

“Xander...”
“No no, I get it.” Xander’s voice had that light, brittle sound that Spike had learned to associate with the beginnings of a major argument. Like the first spits of smoke before the volcano erupted. “You did that claimey thing, but this is different. This is forever, it’s not like you really want me…”

“Course not, Xan” Spike said quickly. “I mean, course I do. Want you.”

“But you wouldn’t want to turn me,” said Xander. His voice odd as he spoke with his chin still on the mattress.

“Course I would,” Spike spat. “You think I wouldn’t want that? Be able to care for you, protect you.. You’d be mine and no one could take you... be able to keep you always safe always with me... “ he drifted off. Turned his head away.

He studied the wall of the tent and counted Xander’s inhaled and exhaled. One quick inhale a long enlightened sigh. Another long inhale.

“I’d like that,” said Xander. “I’d belong to you. You’d be... mine.”

“No,” said Spike harshly. “You’d be dead.”
“We could get Giles to do the soul thingie,” said Xander excitedly.

“What are you talking about?” yelled Spike. “Soul thingie? Are you daft?”

“The orb of whatsit. They must still have…”

“Xander Harris, have you gone completely off the bloomin’ track?” Spike threw up his hands, noted they shook somewhat, clenched his fists to gain control and whacked the mattress hard to establish that. “We aren’t discussin’ this.”

“What if I want to?”

“You do not want to!” yelled Spike. He jumped up, stomped across the tent. Put as many feet as possible between himself and the devil of temptation. “You …” he thrust a finger at Xander, “are not discussing this any more.”

Xander’s mouth closed, the lips pressed together. His whole face relaxed and he got that steady look in his eye that Harris got sometimes, when he knew he was right and he was going to speak his piece. Spike looked around the room quickly for an escape route.
“Listen, Spike,” Xander said carefully. He stood up, put one big hand on a slim muscled hip. Spike thought about how entirely unfair it was that Xander looked so appealing when he was about to give Spike hell.

“I have every right to discuss this. It involves me. It involves US.”

Spike fussed over the ties of the pants he had found. He made a big business of pulling them on and avoided looking at his angry lover. “Involves killing you,” he muttered.

“Maybe. But I still have a right to discuss it.”

Spike found a boot that had been flung across the room. He pulled it out and began trying to put it on without sitting down.

“Obviously it’s something you want.”

“Hey!” Spike waved his hand while jumping up and down with the boot in the other. “Hey, I never said that!”

“Sure you did,” said Xander cleverly. “Keep me safe, keep me yours,” he bowed his head, rubbed the back of his neck, drawing Spike’s eyes again to the slightly reddened claim mark. Xander shifted to the other foot. His skin was dark and sweaty and covered with spunk and a little
splatter of rust that was probably Spike’s blood. He had become half-erect again and Spike considered simply falling to his knees and applying a blow job to the situation. Distract Xander that way. The Devil only knew, Xander was distracting Spike, the way he stood there, hips cantilevered, muscled calves at right angles, his upper thighs still mottled from the spankings…

“I said how long have you been thinking about it?”

Spike gaped and dropped his boot. “What?”

“Geez, Mr. A.D.D., pay attention would you? How long have you been thinking of turning me?”

Spike’s mouth opened and closed like a drowning trout.

Distantly the alarm in the village went off. It was their own version of reveille. Xander got a look of total exasperation on his face and waved an open palm in the direction of the sound, as if somehow it proved some point he had been making about Spike. “Great,” he said.

He whirled, grabbed clothes, and began dressing even as he headed for the tent door. “This isn’t over, Spike,” he called back as he strode out. “After this war, we’re gonna have a nice long talk.”
Spike found he feared that talk more than a horde of demons.

~*~*~*~*~

Every available member of the village was there. At the top of a ridge, hidden in part by the trees and in part by the smoke and fog hanging in the air just off the cliff’s edge. They were strung out above the demon’s camp, preparing to attack.

There was frost on the ground and Xander found himself momentarily distracted by questions of seasons and how cold did it actually get in this place? He glanced up at Spike where he stood, some twenty paces off, at the top of a rise, having an intense conversation with Tybor.

Later, after the war. And after their ‘talk’, he’d get Spike to answer these more mundane questions.

A hand rested on his shoulder and he turned to see a very pale and serious looking Berynn standing next to him.

“Rupert,” Berynn pointed. “*Wants to speak to you.*”
Rupert, huh? Xander gave Berynn the once over. His friend was white as a ghost everywhere but his beard-burned cheeks. He visibly shook with exhaustion yet seemed almost ethereal with glowing, happy eyes. He indicated the direction in which Xander should walk to find Giles and Xander saw the shirt beneath the light chainmail vest gape to reveal three small bright red love bites.

He dutifully followed Berynn to Giles and noted the expression that pulsed over Giles’ face when he and Berynn’s eyes met.

Xander wondered if anyone had slept the day before.

“So, what’s up G-man?” he asked, smiling and looking around casually when Giles reacted to the old nickname.

“Ah, yes, Xander. I’d like you to do something in particular for me.”

“Yeah?”

Giles gave Berynn a look, apologetic but stern. Berynn dipped his head and turned, trotting off towards a more distant location. Giles sighed, watching him go. “It’s a personal favor, Xander, and you don’t have to do it.”
Xander grinned. “Anything you want, Giles,” he said, “except, no, you can’t borrow our lube. That stuff is not easy to get...” he watched the color slowly saturate Giles’ entire face, from the neck up, like a t-bag steeping in hot water.

Giles opened his mouth, had to close it again as nothing came out. He tried again and managed to croak out, “Uh, no. I wanted to ask something...oh lord, Xander what am I doing?” the last came out as a tiny wail.

“I know how you feel Giles,” said Xander. “Believe me. And then some.” He chuckled, “You know, I owe you a lot of ribbing, right?” He laughed at the defenseless look on Giles face. “Just relax and go with it,” he suggested kindly

“I don’t do that,” said Giles.

“Yeah, I know. But maybe it’s time to learn, Giles. Listen,” said Xander reasonably. “As long as you’re both happy. And no one is getting hurt...”

“How can I be sure of that?” Giles said.

Xander sighed. “Berynn looks... “ he searched for the word. “Blissful,” he said.

“He does?”
“Geez, Giles, the guy looks like he could float.” Or pass out, Xander thought wryly.

Giles raised a hand that held a noticeable tremor and carefully straightened his glasses. “Thank you, Xander,” he said.

“Right. So. What was the favor?”

Giles eyes sought out the small figure standing at the edge of the clearing, talking to some other patrollers. “Watch out for him?” he asked softly.

“I’ll watch out for all the guys,” said Xander cautiously.

“But Berynn isn’t suited to this, he’s …”

“Berynn’s great, Giles,” said Xander coolly. “I’ve been on patrol with the guy. Hell, I’ve been in battle with him.” He took a moment before he made his next statement. “It’s not fair to ask that, Giles. Everybody here has someone they care about. Everyone has someone to lose.”

Giles flamed red. “Of course,” he said. His voice crisp, embarrassed. “Of course how selfish of me. I shouldn’t have even said...”
“I understand,” said Xander gently. “Besides, I kinda get it with Berynn. He is different.”

“He is affected by things others are not. So sensitive. He’s...he’s special,” said Giles. “And that is not just the opinion of someone who...who...” he stopped. Closed his mouth and looked so pained, Xander thought for a minute that Giles was ill.

“Who knows him, huh, G-man?” said Xander softly. He remembered the last battle, how Berynn had collapsed when others were injured. And the incident when the village had been attacked. “Maybe you're right,” said Xander. “Maybe he shouldn’t be fighting, Giles.”

“He insists,” said Giles. He looked slightly aggravated. 

_Ooh. Lovers spat?_ Xander smiled and nodded. “Yeah, he would. Okay, listen I’ll try to stay close to him but Giles? You have to do a favor for me then.”

“Of course.”

“If I can’t be there to get his back, I want your word that Spike isn’t a sacrifice, okay? Whatever your battle plan, my boyfriend is not the expendable Monster of the Week, got it?”
Giles paused long enough that Xander was sure that sacrificing Spike had been one of Giles acceptable alternatives. “Got it,” said Giles with a sigh.

“Yes, Berynn, I believe we are through,” Giles added to the empty space over his shoulder.

Xander looked around, thinking the empath had come up behind him or something.

“Uh, who are you talking to?” he asked.

“Why...” Giles turned around, saw the small figure still standing at a distance. “Odd.” he said. He stood for a moment, his back to Xander.

“Er, Giles, I...” Xander stopped when Giles held up a quelling hand.

Across the field, Berynn’s head came up, and the white face could be seen turning to look at them. Then he came trotting across the field.

“I have another idea,” said Giles, his back still to Xander.

“Okay...”

Berynn jogged up to them and stopped. He and Giles stood looking at each other. It was so sappy Xander
found it a bit embarrassing. “Hey, guys,” he said uncomfortably.

A big smile spread across Berynn’s face. He nodded. Giles laughed. He turned to face Xander. “I have a slight revision to the plan, Xander. It involves a certain empath...”

~*~*~*~*~

Xander mounted the crest of the hill. Spike stood there, geared up for battle, discussing something with two of the patrollers that would be in his group.

“Hey Buddy, anybody ever tell you how hot you look all dressed up for carnage?” Xander called clearly, and Spike spun around to greet him. The men he had been speaking with stepped away, trotting back to the group that held Dahla. In it, Xander could see the small shining head of Hope occasionally peaking through.

Spike pushed back the heavy cloak and adjusted a belt that held so much metal, Xander thought it could have sunk a small boat. Only Spike could carry that much weight and still fight.
The cloak was thick and long and would be shed before battle. His legs were clad in a tight dark material that gave absolutely no purchase to would be attackers. The thin swine’s skin laces held knee high dark boots against his thighs. His hair had grown a bit, but not enough for the ponytail, so he had trimmed it again. In soft wheat colored spikes all over his head.

He grinned at Xander and Xander felt the swell of battle lust as if it were a new men’s perfume. *Eau’ de’violence,* he thought. Spike’s gameface rippled continuously below the surface, his fangs already glimpsing at the corners of his smile. Through the tight black slacks, his hard on was clearly evident. He bounced on his toes.

“Looking good yerself, Harris,” growled Spike, and his tongue played at one sharp tooth. “You come to get the best seats?”

“What?”

Spike gestured. They stood on the highest promontory above the demon camps. From this point one could see across the plain to the lower plateaus where the weird ‘fingers of god’ like heavenly spotlights scanned and crossed. Below, the demon camp was discernable from between the clouds of atmosphere.
All around were men in battle gear. Villagers carrying bizarre objects which were probably the ingredients for a huge arsenal of magic Dahla had created.

“You love this,” said Xander. “Don’t you?”

“Nah,” said Spike. He spun about on one heel, taking in the scene. He spread his arms wide and took a big breath. “Smells like fear and danger and ...” he glanced at Xander. His eyes slowly, very slowly, ran up his legs and contemplated Xander’s also obvious reaction to the pending battle.

“Nuh uh,” Xander waggled a finger. “I’ve already got my orders.” He stepped into Spike’s space and grabbed all that wiry hyperactive demonic energy around the waste. Pulled him in hard. “Can’t keep an eye on you, buddy. You gonna be alright on your own?”

Spike’s hip did a little dip and wriggle and his mouth hovered an inch from Xander’s own. “Keep that hot little body safe, you wanker,” he breathed.

“Same to you, bloodbreath.”

Their lips came together softly.
“Spike,” said Xander. And it came rushing over him, like the wings of some prehistoric monster, that sense of doom. “God, Spike, don’t do anything stupid...”

“Hey, I never do, Harris,” said Spike, grinning. He sobered a bit and grabbed Xander’s chin in an uncharacteristically gentle gesture, tilted it up. Kissed him again softly.

“I can’t do this without... god, Spike, I can’t do this place without...”

“Tut, pet,” said Spike. He frowned when he didn’t get the customary slap for that. “Harris, don’t go all soft on me, now. I gotta know you’re gonna be a warrior today, okay kid?”

“Yeah, Spike.” Xander shook off his weird premonitions and forced a smile. “Can’t wait to try out my new skills.” He patted the broadsword at his hip.

Spike got a very serious look on his face. “Hope your don’t get that close,” he said. “Use yer ax, Harris. You throw like some kinda demon.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, sure. Ever since..” Spike stopped. He had been going to tell Xander how much stronger the kid had become since the claim, but he was afraid of opening

“Bet I get more than you.”

“Not bloody likely!” said Spike with a touch of his old fire. He grabbed Xander and kissed him. This time hard, thorough, and full of hunger. “Love you, brat. Gonna show you just as soon as we’re done here.”

“Promise,” Xander demanded.

“Sure.” Said Spike, feeling uncomfortably superstitious all of a sudden. “I promise, Xan.” He pushed him away then, casually, playfully. “Off with you now.” Keeping that grin firmly in place until Xander had spun about and trotted safely out of sight.

“Humans,” said Spike. His eyes dark and full of fear. “Can’t live with ‘em. But sure as hell don’t wanna have an unlife without ‘em.”

He turned and strode towards Dahla’s troop.

~*~*~*~*~

It began quietly.
In all the movies about Wars that Xander had ever seen, there had been a moment when the troops had coming roaring down from the mountains, hillside, western plateau, making a hell of a lot of noise screaming their war cries.

Which was all very cool in the movies, sitting safely in one of those bucket seats in the theater. Tub of buttered popcorn and giant soda safely at his elbow. When it was his own heiney on the line, though, he somehow felt a little safer, sliding in and out of shadows. His half of the attack squad had been assigned the partially emptied camp itself and they creeped up on it by increments. As if the entire troop were a giant slithering snake. They wrapped themselves insidiously around it’s periphery and waited.

Puffs of fuchsia smoke appeared silently overhead like airborne flowers and that was the signal.

Patrollers around the periphery padded forward in that fast silent way of theirs and took out the sentries. Except a couple of the boys didn’t make it and Xander heard the alarm go off. Which meant that they’d already lost at least one of their friends. He looked worriedly over at Berynn, who stood next to him. The empath was pale, and his eyes had that hard bruised look, but he was
standing steady and Xander guessed that was good enough for now.

“Ready?” he whispered, pulling back some obstructive branches and rising to a crouch.

Berynn nodded.

And they ran forward, straight towards the main group of tents in the demon camp.

~*~*~*~*~

Tybor had a deadly eye with a crossbolt. Spike watched the third demon go down, as he himself took off one's head, and decided that the little flame haired patroller was definitely someone he wanted on his side in the next war.

His brother seemed more the run and stab sort. Making up for any lack of finesse with a fury to match a denizen of Hell.

Both had tempers to match their hair. Slightly larger than the other villagers, with mean as Satan eyes and skin that went bright red with a heady mixture of testosterone and adrenalin. They could strike fear in any demon. Even
unarmed and just coming at them with one of those unholy yells of theirs.

Spike leapt easily to the side as Tyren went screaming past him, his battle cry and a large sword splitting the head of another unfortunate demon.

Spike himself was just getting warmed up. Like a machine, his legs and arms worked easily through the thickest throng of bodies. Not even really noting the type or skills, as he mowed a row of carnage down the middle of the attack phalange.

Tybor, Tyren, and the other stongest fighters came in a wedge of flying steel behind him. Further back yet, Dahla and her apprentices (and wasn’t that the scariest lookin’ group of faeries Spike had ever seen?) came steadily forward. Chanting, with bright puffs of fuchsia and chartreuse, smoke flying forward in little cannonballs of debilitating magic.

Spike had a prickly fear of friendly fire that would not go away, even though Dahla had assured them that the magic was demon-specific. He felt too much of a demon to be comfortable with demon-annihilating magic.

Tybor screamed and Spike whirled around to find that only he and the patroller had managed to advance and
they were closed off, at least temporarily, surrounded by the enemy. The patrollers response was to attack with more zeal, a reaction Spike could fully appreciate, but reason told him that it was energy wasted and that they should circle around and... “Over here, Red 1,” he yelled over the crash of arms and the damp and spitting yells of demons. Tybor responded automatically, thrashing out with fury at a demon that pursued him. Spike snapped his hard heel across two fleshy faces and followed with a punch that broke right through another demon’s skull. Breaking a small hole in their demonic prison. He grabbed the patroller by a hard muscled fore arm and yanked... and was hit smack in the chest by a ball of puke green energy.

~*~*~*~*~

Hope sat in the middle of the circle of ridiculously weak men and sulked. She could feel the demons out there. The ones that had killed Angel. For weeks now no one had listened to her, no one had even tried to understand that she need revenge. She needed to kill them all. A tall silly boy with long flopping brown hair lent over to probably move her further away from the fighting.
Hope felt his hands closing over her upper arm and that pit of fire in her brain, the one that Angel had told her she must always contain, never release, exploded through her body.

There were only two men left in her wake, and she told herself comfortingly, that broken bones mend. Usually.

The demons literally didn’t see her coming. She was tiny and thin and really more of a bug to them than a force to notice. Until their numbers began falling around them.

Like a pit of fire in their midst, the tiny white heat of Hope began swallowing and devouring demons. Some of them ran, many of them stood and tried to fight. But she was nuclear in her strength and fury and melting through their ranks with ease. When a spray of green magic, like napalm, fell down around them all.

~*~*~*~*~

Giles and Dahla, from their higher vantage point, watched the battle freeze.

“*Is that yours?*” asked Giles watching the magic dust settle and still every warrior it contacted. The expression on Dahla usually placid face gave him a chill. She shook
her head, rapidly. “*No,*” she said, and her eyes darted around, as if something fearful might leap any moment from the forest around them.

Giles felt the chill move down his spine. He closed his eyes.

~*~*~*~*~

“Hey,” hissed Xander as he tripped over Berynn. He recovered without making much noise in the underbrush and gripped the other man’s shoulder. Put his mouth right next to the cool ear. “You okay?” he whispered tightly.

Berynn was staring off into the darkness to their right. Xander looked but saw nothing in that general direction. Nevertheless, he opened the holster that carried his ax. Off to their left the tents that were their objective glowed with internal light and billowed very slightly in the evening wind. Xander shook Berynn’s shoulder again. They were to creep around those tents, find out what they could and report back to Giles. Via special messenger.
But Berynn was immobile. Xander crouched down closer to him, concerned. The man finally focused back on the present, turned his head to look at Xander and raised his hand in one of the code gestures the patrollers had taught to him. One word. Wizard.

~*~*~*~*~

The battlefield was completely silent. The magics seemed to have even stilled the stiff hot wind that blew over the plateaus at this hour. Flags hung limp. Warrior slumped over, frozen in space. It looked like a charmed kingdom from some animated movie. About Princesses and Dragons and evil Sorcerers. Giles stepped warily from the bubble of protection in which he and Dahla had stood.

Around him, the wounded seemed frozen also. Their agony suspended. It seemed to Giles, though, that they were still alert. A thousand frozen eyes followed him as he picked his way across the field. He scanned the plain looking for something external and internal that would point him towards the source of this spell.

~*~*~*~*~
Berynn was a skinny black asp with a bubble butt, thought Xander as he tried to keep up with the patroller sliding across the ground before him. Xander’s frame just wasn’t suited to slithering, and Berynn was widening the distance between them rapidly. Heading straight for one of the tents. He had basically signed his intent to Xander and taken off without pause.

They reached the edge of the clearing, the tent directly in front of them made a taut flapping canvas sound as if in greeting. Berynn’s head came up and he stared for a minute, then the voice of wisdom in his head informed him of something, and he quickly veered to the left, working his way with such stealth around the periphery of the tent he looked to Xander like no more than an undulating black line.

There was the sound of canvas again, and Berynn was gone.

Xander lay panting in the dark, adrenalin pumping through his system so hard it made him want to vomit. His own breath so loud he felt sure it would give him away. All around him an eerie unnatural stillness seemed to have descended. He felt sure his own fear and confusion had engendered that.
But his job was to protect the empath, and he couldn’t do that if he couldn’t see him. Xander forced himself to wiggle forward, lay his head on the wet mud and peered through a quarter inch slit under the tent. He could see dark movement in there. Like swells before the lights. But he couldn’t tell if they were Berynn or some other.

Then a cool touch glided over his thumb where it held the tent material and he knew it was safe to wriggle under the flap as well.

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It was odd. But the scene ached with familiarity. More than deja vu. Giles could swear he had been here before.

“My dear,” said a voice that had never really completely deserted him, no matter how far he had run from it. “Whoever invited you to our party?”

Giles heard the pulse of his heart beat twice, hard, in his head before he turned very slowly to his right.

Slim, with an unearthly pallor, hair longish and hanging about his shoulders. The black long sleeved tunic and slacks, as he stood there in the shadows, only served to
frame the gaunt white face, the high cheekbones and mocking eyes.

“Really,” said Ethan Rayne, taking one precise step forward. “I was assured we had a very exclusive guest list.”

16

It was very warm in the tent. Humid. And the air had a damp, rotten smell, as if someone had forgotten to clean the fish tank. Xander could hear the hissing sibilance of demon voices just outside the tent. The tent was guarded, then, but there seemed to be no one inside. He rolled gracefully from his belly to a low crouch and peered through the gloom for Berynn.

A few feet away, the empath’s silhouette was delineated by the tent’s only light source: a low table covered with an array of jars and smoking pots. It looked like some Junior Mad Scientist’s version of a laboratory. Xander sidled up behind Berynn, glancing every half second back at the door of the tent. A billow of dense, mud-colored smoke bloomed from one of the jars and flowed around their heads. The odor in the tent went officially from unpleasant smell to stench. Xander clapped his hand over his nose and mouth and backed away.
Berynn seemed unaffected by the odor. He stood, swaying slightly, a sheen of perspiration on his arms. From his position by the tent wall, Xander could see the long slender fingers clenching and releasing almost rhythmically.

Berynn mumbled a number of words in his own language and reached for a jar on the table.

“Uh…” Xander rose slightly, hand raised in warning, “I wouldn’t…” he whispered. Too late, Berynn yanked his hand back with a hiss.

“Yeah, that’s sort of Scooby rule number two-three-eight,” muttered Xander to himself, edging towards the door of the tent. “If it smokes and glows in the dark, don’t touch it.” Outside the sounds of the guard’s voices had a note of urgency. Xander slipped his broadsword from its scabbard and crouched to the left of the tent flap. “Berynn,” he hissed urgently, “get down.”

Berynn appeared not to hear him. He mumbled some more words. Xander, the adrenalin and blood beginning to pound in his ears, again made out the word for ‘Wizard’. Outside, a wet hissing sibilance that was some demon’s voice and the definite sound of hands grasping canvas.
In Xander’s minds eye flashed the memory of the enormous thick skinned demons that he had last seen milling about this camp. He grasped the pommel of his sword in both hands. The tent flap lifted, a shadow poked through the opening.

Xander grunted, and swung his sword down hard. He felt the shock of the blow from his wrists to his shoulders. And then, amazingly, he felt the solidity he had struck give way. There was a muted thump and a messy hairy thing, like a worn out softball, rolled to his feet.

Xander stared down for a minute, sword still extended, blood pounding in his brain. The demon’s head stared back, bloody, glassy eyed and definitely dead. The body, from which the head had been severed, lay out beyond it. It was about three feet long. Feeling like he had manfully slaughtered a munchkin, Xander distastefully grabbed the corpse by the foot and dragged it quickly out of the way of the door. He glanced at the still immobile Berynn. The empath had found something like an oven mitt in the tent and was carefully lifting a small pink bowl from the ‘altar’. “Rupert,” Xander heard him say distinctly. “*What do I do now?*”

More voices outside. Then he heard something definitely calling to the creature he had just beheaded. *Maybe that*
had been a little hasty, he reflected, taking up his position by the doorway again. Well, if they were all as easy to kill, as had been this last one, he’d be fine. He raised his sword and braced himself.

Another murky shadow slid through the tent door and once again Xander brought down his sword. The shock radiated up his arms again. But this time, the downwards motion of his sword halted as if it had hit cement. He jerked back and felt the pommel wrested from his grip. He looked up into the face of a very tall, very angry demon with a short broadsword sticking out of its neck. The thing snarled. Saliva dripped from one long tooth.

Xander gave it his lopsided grin. “Oops,” he said. “I think my sword slipped.”

~*~*~*~*~

“I have to say I’m surprised to see you here, Rupert,” said Ethan. He stopped about six feet away from Giles, eyeing the crossbow in his hands. “That won’t work, you know.”

“Why not?” asked Giles. He raised the weapon and ostensibly drew a bead on Ethan.
“Because I’m not really here, of course,” said Ethan. That secretive bitter smile of his briefly lifted the corners of his lips. “The same as you.”

Giles lowered his crossbow a bit. “Of course I’m here.”

Ethan laughed. “Really, Rupert? You decided to take a bit of a stroll through the future?”

“The Powers that Be...” began Giles.

“Horseshit,” said Ethan. “There are no such entities. Honestly, Rupert, I can’t believe you lived an entire life seeing the things you have seen and continue to believe in some ‘Greater Good’.”

It was Giles turn to smile. “Where are we then, Ethan?”

“You,” Ethan pointed, “are delirious on drugs, still on your deathbed. Any moment now you will wake again in terrible pain and realize this was all just another delusion.”

Giles smile faded. “Nonsense,” he said.

I,” continued Ethan, indicating himself with a graceful gesture, “am in the catacombs buried beneath the destroyed Council libraries, conjuring a spell that will finally rid this world of the human race...”
“But the catacombs were a myth,” Giles objected.

“…and make myself a god,” Ethan finished, smugly. He smoothed the already silky smooth sleeve of his dark tunic, like a cat grooming itself.

“Berynn?” said Giles, as if to himself.

“Is just another delusion. A fabrication of your mind, drawn from memories of your youth and feelings of guilt. Typical, Rupert, of your…”

“Stop,” said Giles. He lowered his crossbow. “Stop it, Rayne. You can’t confuse me anymore. It… it doesn’t work any longer. I know…”

“What do you know, Rupert?” said Ethan in a bored voice. He waved an effete hand at the gray Sleeping Beauty landscape around them. “What does anyone know of reality? Is any of this plausible, Rupert? Come now, what proof do you have that anything you experience is more than a dream?”

“I feel it,” said Giles. “And that’s enough.”

“So your notion of reality is that which you perceive through your five senses? What you see,” Ethan barely moved a finger and yet his image wavered, seemed to smoke, snapped back into focus. Giles fought the instinct
to rub his eyes. “What you hear?” Giles could not help but jump when he heard a voice directly to his left whisper his name in Berynn’s soft voice. It warred with the intimate presence of Berynn in his mind and made him feel slightly off balance. “What you smell?” And the scent of roses, old English roses, sugary sweet and lemony, filled Giles nostrils.

“Stop it,” he demanded again.

“I hadn’t thought you were such a hedonist, Rupert,” said Ethan pensively. “If I had known perhaps I wouldn’t have...”

He took a step closer. The illusion of the long dark robe slipped away, revealing the naked young body Giles had loved and hated so many decades ago. “Perhaps I wouldn’t have let you go so easily,” said Ethan, taking a few more unashamed paces forward.

Giles took a quick step back and raised the crossbow again. “You didn’t let me go, I escaped. Put your v...virtual clothes back on, Ethan.”

Ethan smirked and was covered, once more, in immaculate black. “Escaped?” he purred. “As I recall, no one forced you to do anything, Rupert. You asked.” He smiled, eyes glinting. “Begged, on occasion.”
“I believe it is the pink one,” said Giles suddenly. “If memory serves.”

Ethan reached across the scant foot between them, and in a second had snatched away the crossbow, tossing it to the ground several yards away. He studied Giles with those intelligent eyes. “What are you up to, then, Rupert?”

Giles blinked. His focus switching rapidly between the dangerous figure before him and some internal vision. “Don’t let the liquid touch your hands,” he said suddenly.

Ethan stepped into Giles’ personal space, his head tilted to one side. Giles found himself unable to pull his mind away from that gaze. This close, Giles could see the utter torment, swimming below the mocking arrogance. “Rupert?” asked Ethan, and the vulnerability under that disdainful voice pulled Giles in like nothing else could. It was, perhaps, the only thing that Ethan could have done that would touch Giles. Allow him to see his pain.

Ethan raised his hand and almost touched Giles’ temple with long fingers. Giles ducked back too late to avoid the contact.

Ethan drew his hand back slowly, with a look of satisfaction. “My my my,” he said, appreciatively. “What
are we keeping in there?” he indicated Giles’ temples again. “More than your little catamite up your sleeve, hey Rupert?”

Giles gritted his teeth and backed away from Ethan.


~*~*~*~*~

The problem with an ax is you can’t use it at close quarters very effectively. Xander skittered backwards and almost ran into Berynn, still oblivious, holding the bowl before him and staring into space.

The demon, who was, happily, a lot dumber and slower than he was scary and intimidating, swayed in the doorway as if unsure what to do.

“Berynn!” Xander looked around the room for a weapon. All around him were jars of liquid and dry ingredients. Old scrolls, books even. Nothing even remotely sharp and pointy. But beneath one of the smoking jars there was a
low bank of coals, like a primitive Bunsen burner. Xander used his ax like a huge bronze serving knife and slid it carefully under the pot of heat. He shoveled it in an easy arc through the air and into the befuddled demon.

The demon screamed and a scorched smell joined the other stinks in the tent. It flailed and screeched and batted at his furry hide as one of the hot stones caught its hair on fire.

*Well, so much for the sneaky and quiet,* thought Xander. *It was time for the running like Hell.* “Berynn!” he yelled, heading for their entrance point. Berynn stood firm. He was muttering words over the bowl in his hands.

“Fuck, Berynn!” Voices and the thumping of many large feet could be heard outside. Getting louder. “Let’s go!”

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“Relax, Rupert,” said Ethan silkily. “Hallucinations can’t feel pain. The boy won’t suffer.”

Giles wasn’t surprised to find that Ethan could still hone in on his most vulnerable spot with accuracy and speed. What surprised him was that it could still affect him so
easily. Still reduce him rapidly to a ball of fear and pleading.

“Don’t hurt him,” he begged.

Ethan seemed to be amused.

“Just close your eyes, Rupert,” he said in a syrupy, soothing voice “and go back to sleep. This will all go away, just another bad dream...” and the voice was so reasonable, so easy to follow, Giles found his eyes closing, his mind drifting off...

And suddenly there was a cool smooth presence standing in his mind. Steady and full of love, Berynn’s thoughts pressed against him with trust and assurance. “NO!” Giles said. And he reached with mental fingers to touch the clean wholesome being. “He’s ... you can’t harm him you can’t...”

Ethan stilled. “Don’t challenge me, Rupert. You know how I love a challenge.”

Giles eyes fluttered closed. He fought the fear. And Berynn’s faith, like sweet mental kisses, peppered his mind. He took a breath. “Luzux tempor extaemptis...” said Giles as steadily as he could.

Ethan’s mouth froze on the way to a smile.
“Temptis oro lizt...”

“Now, Rupert,” said Ethan, suddenly friendly and boisterous. “Let’s not behave irrationally.”

“Liaxum ovola crux...” Giles recited, the strength of his voice increasing.

“You wouldn’t,” gasped Ethan becoming, if possible, even more white. “It’s murder, Rupert. You know you can’t...

” “I release you,” said Giles, calmly. “Go back from whence you came.”

And just like that. No earth tremble, no puff of smoke, not even the fading cry as the evil thing melted. Ethan Rayne simply ceased to exist.

And Rupert found himself standing unarmed in the midst of the revived battle.

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“Holy Slushie,” said Xander.

He and Berynn were backed up against the canvas at one side of the tent. The laboratory table and the only chair
had been overturned. Several demon bodies lay around them. There was pink foaming goop everywhere.

“It’s like someone blew up the Icee machine. What’d you do?” asked Xander. He nudged Berynn happily with his elbow. “*What was that stuff?*”

Berynn shrugged, and shook his head, equally amazed. He was literally hanging on to Xander. After he had shouted the odd words and hurled the bowl of pink goop, he had collapsed into Xander’s arms. Xander had barely had time to drop his ax and catch him. Watching in amazement as the pink Napalm like substance melted every demonic entity it touched.

Berynn felt incredibly light. His body was trembling all over and he was clammy and cold. Xander slid his arm more firmly around Berynn’s waist and kept him standing. “You wanna get out of here now?”

Berynn nodded. He turned and pressed his forehead into Xander’s arm.

“You gonna be okay?”

Another nod. Then a slow headshake. The trembling in Berynn’s body increased. He started to gag.
“Hey, no puking on the magic stuff,” said Xander gently, “That’s another Scooby Rule. Puke and magic stuff are definitely non-mixy. Besides,” he laughed shortly and hefted Berynn’s weight easily, “real men don’t puke until they’re back in their apartment, err... village.” He eased Berynn down and lifted the canvas carefully. “C’mon buddy, drop and roll.”

~*~*~*~*~

Giles ducked. He had a scant second of self-congratulatory feeling over successfully evading the flying sword and then was hit in the back by a flying object, or rather flying body.

Then he was on the ground, gasping for breath and struggling valiantly to release himself.

“Gah, Watcher, git yer elbow outta my eye.”

“Spike?” Giles managed to turn his head and glimpsed savagely bright blue eyes glimmering humorously in a demonic face. “Ow, or rather, get off of me!”

Sinew and hard muscle punched once into his torso and then Spike was jerking him aloft by one arm. Giles stumbled as he was catapulted back to one foot, that
steely grip on his arm keeping him from pitching forward from the momentum. As he attempted to acclimate himself, Spike spun, still gripping his arm, and kicked a monster solidly in the throat.

Demon puke spurted straight at Giles. He jerked back.

“Fucking Yes!” roared Spike, and dragged Giles along, brandishing a sword with the other arm as he went. An unidentified body part, gushing rich yellow liquid, flew over Giles’ head missing him by inches.

Feeling simultaneously indignant by the ‘damsel in distress’ treatment from Spike, and gratitude for that treatment, Giles struggled to remain on his feet as Spike speedily fought and hewed his way through the dense throng of struggling monsters.

Giles had been in his share of battles. He liked to think that for a man essentially cerebral, he had certain athletic skills. He could hold his own, so to speak. And given a weapon and reasonable odds, he felt confident of victory. But he didn’t enjoy battle. It was dangerous, horrible, desperate and to be avoided at all costs.

Held close to Spike, up against the vampire’s weapon encrusted chest, he had the opportunity for the first time
in his life to witness battle from the point of view of one made to wage it.

Spike’s entire body seemed to surge towards the violence. The great flashing sword in his hand merely an extension of the musculature and skeletal structure that thrust, parried and flew into the fray with joy and assurance of victory. The faces turned towards them, at the last, were almost spiritual in their acceptance of defeat.

And this was not just survival. Spike carved his destiny from the midst of the demonic bodies. He determined the direction, intensity and results of every clash between himself and the enemy. He drew his bloody line down the field.

It was exhilarating, wonderful, incredible. If Giles hadn’t been held so tightly he could hardly breathe, desperately ducking body parts, he would have wanted it to never end.

After an interminable time, Giles found himself hurled from the thickest of the fray.

He fell against a tree, hard. Righting himself with bruised and scraped hands, turning to stare at a gore covered, muddy, bloody Spike who pointed a commanding finger
at him. “You get back to yer bubble, Watcher,” said Spike. “And let us heroes do our jobs.”

~*~*~*~*~

Just because you are strong doesn’t mean you should do violence, Angel had taught her. The Powers that Be give you strength to protect the weak, he had explained. One doesn’t kill because it is pleasant, because it makes one feel deliriously wonderfully alive. Because it’s the only time when one feels completely and wholly oneself. One doesn’t kill because it feels good.

That would be wrong.

Hope felt herself spinning higher than she had ever been. The demons that fell before her were fuel to her increasing sense of peace and joy. Not since Angel’s death had she felt so happy, so well, so full.

And even when the battle was obviously won, she still didn’t stop. All around her the field seemed to be falling away, peace everywhere but her own little vortex of power and blood. She chased the remaining demons down, annihilating the species and more.

She barely felt it when they fell.
Dahla, Giles and Berynn sprinted across the battlefield as quickly as they could, but Spike passed them. They were all too late, though. Hope, in her self-made tornado of demonic slaying, had pitched off the edge of the cliff. Spike stopped at the cliff's edge, with a cry of anger, and stared down onto the plateau fifty yards below with an empty, shocked expression on his face.

Xander ran up, panting, followed by Giles and Berynn.

Spike turned to him, his face blind with grief, and Xander automatically wrapped his arms around him.

“I lost her, Xan. Angel would ... I let him down, pet.”

Xander hugged him, peering over Spike’s shoulder, tensing at the expectation of the horror he would see below. “Uh, Spike,” he said after a minute. “Where are they?”

Spike seemed to shudder. Then he pulled away and looked where Xander was looking. “What? Hey.”

Giles stood looking over the cliff’s edge as well. Below, no bodies, demonic or otherwise. What at first appeared
to be only a brightly colored stone, swelled and began spreading.

Dahla said something to Giles in her own language.

“Convergence?” said Giles. Xander was wishing for the thousandth time that everyone would just speak American when the stone below began to vibrate violently before bursting apart.

Color flooded the plateau and spread, like the heat of a nuclear bomb, to the horizon.

Across the plain, the narrow bright fingers of God seemed to simultaneously cease in their arching paths. They held still, shimmering, for an instant. Then broadened. Each band of light spread until it touched its neighbor.

Across the area below them, clouds opened and sunlight fell, like heavenly gold, across the earth.

Behind them a great shout as the villagers responded to the sight.

“Dear Lord,” said Giles.

“Bloody Hell,” said Spike, a little more vehemently. He backed out of Xander’s arms, instinctively away from the
sunlight, glancing worriedly around the open area in which they stood. He shook free of his lover and strode in the direction of the dubious shade under the nearby trees. But Xander followed and stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Look,” he pointed. “It’s stopping at that … that thing.”

A mass of land, arching and shaped like an earthen bridge, spanned the space between their location and the sun drenched field beyond. Moss hanging from its curved edges sprang into flower where the sunbeams hit it, remaining darkly olive colored where the shadows still rested.

“ Weird,” said Xander. He looked around the muddy field. “Wait!” Goosebumps rushed up the back of his neck. “Where’re all the demons?”

Giles turned from gaping at the sunlit field below them to gape at the empty battleground behind them. Villagers, bedraggled, injured and exhausted, spotted the terrain. The ground was torn and gouged and drenched with a variety of liquids, but no demonic bodies or body parts could be seen.

appears…” said Giles cautiously. “Hope seems to have absorbed them.”

“Cor,” breathed Spike in a heartfelt way. “Poor little tyke.” He set the tip of his sword against the ground and seemed to lean upon it. Xander instinctively stepped in and wrapped his arms around his shaken partner.

“I think she wanted it, Spike,” he said.

Spike’s shocky gaze came around to meet his. “Yeah, you think?”

“The Prophecy was very vague,” said Giles. “But there was mention of a ‘union’.”

“Someday,” said Xander. “You’ll tell me a Prophecy was very specific and I’ll pass out with shock.”

“We seem to have triggered an event,” Giles said.

“Great.” Xander watched the awestruck villagers as they approached the cliff’s edge. The fear on their faces was transporting slowly to joy. “Good or bad, G-man?”

“Yeah, Watcher.” said Spike, dropping his weapons belt to the ground so he could get a better grip on Xander. He nuzzled against the warm neck, kissed the marks. “What prophecy we bollucks into this time?”
Giles shook his head. He folded closer around Berynn. It struck Xander suddenly that he had grown accustomed in less than a day, to the sight of Giles and Berynn with their arms around each other. *As if they had always been that way,* he thought.

Spike’s mouth found his marks again and the little curlicue of desire began spiraling down his spine. He forgot about prophecies or apocalypses or anything else for that matter. “Home,” he said into the eager lips closing over his own.

~*~*~*~*~

Although it was very late in the evening, the sounds of traffic from the 405 could still be heard like distant surf, as Patricia opened the screen door. “He’s in the kitchen,” she said in a low voice.

Tara glanced worriedly down the hallway. “Did you tell him that I’m coming?”

Patricia bit her lip and shook her head.

“Honey...” Tara gave her a gently reproving look.
“I was afraid that if he knew, he’d leave. Or ... or lock himself in the bathroom again.”

“Has it been that bad?”

Now, with her friend here to help her, Patricia allowed herself to feel a little. To let go of some of the strength she had been maintaining. “I ... I don’t know if it’s bad...” her voice belied the tears she fought.

Tara wrapped her arms around her. “We’ll help him, honey,” she said.

Patricia clung to the support. “He keeps talking about vampires...” she said into Tara’s shoulder. “Like ... like they’re real ...”

Tara hugged her friend. She gazed down the dim hallway to the light at the end where she knew the kitchen was. She seemed to be wrestling with a decision. “Patty,” she whispered finally. “Did Mr. Harris ever tell you what happened between my mom and him?” And when Patricia shook her head, Tara drew back and grasped her shoulders gently.

“Before we can help James,” she said carefully. “There are some things I need to explain to you.”
The best thing about being a hero is the bit afterwards, thought Spike, spreading himself out on the clean fresh sheets of the bed. He heard Xander’s voice in the hallway, felt his presence all through his body as a delicious tingle of anticipation. The best part was the reward from grateful humans.

Xander pushed through the door, carrying something. He had changed out of his battle togs, and bathed apparently. Wearing loose rayon slacks and nothing else, the longish, dark hair dripping down his neck. Rivulets encircled the claim marks and followed the dips of collarbones and muscle to run down Xander’s chest into the soft dark hair below his navel.

Spike licked his lips and inhaled the rich aroma of his mate.

Except the aroma was anything but aromatic. “What’s this, then?” asked Spike, nostrils flaring with the stench. He gazed askance at the bowl of dark liquid Xander held triumphantly before him.

“Swine’s blood,” said Xander happily.
Spike felt his glottal muscle rebel. “You are joking,” he managed.

Xander smiled knowingly. “Oh come on now, Spike. I know you’ve been feeling that pesky soul nudging you all these years. All that guilt you’ve suffered over having to bite people.” Xander lifted the bowl slightly, a big grin on his face. “See? Now you don’t have to eat human.” The awful stuff sloshed in the bowl a little.

“Fucking Hell,” said Spike miserably. He took the bowl from Xander, meeting his merry gaze. “Don’t ever let anyone tell you ain’t evil, Xan,” he said, tipping the foul liquid to his lips.

“And what would you say if I told you I’ve been thinking? From now on, the only human you’ll be drinking from... is me.”

The swine’s blood spat up onto Spike’s face when he sputtered into it.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Xander and Spike could have sworn his dead heart started thumping in his chest with fear. No, maybe it was indigestion from this vile pig’s blood... He frowned at the bowl. Xander advanced on him, waving his hands.

“Up there, on the field. You and Hope were the only ones that had any skills.”
“Could’na done it on our own,” said Spike graciously. “You humans helped a lot.”

Xander chose not to point out that the humans had essentially saved the day. “If I were stronger...” he said.

“You are stronger, Xan,” said Spike. He bit his lips belatedly. Ah, well, may as well point out the obvious. “Since we, err, since that night you’ve been gettin’ a lot stronger.”

“Not super-strong.” Xander sat down at the edge of the mattress and took the empty bowl from Spike’s hands. Set it on the bedside table. “Not like a vampire.”

“Well, course not,” said Spike, that sensation of hammering blood in his ears again. Could pig’s blood go bad?

“If I were a vampire...” began Xander in that reasonable voice that Spike felt sure all madmen could emulate.

“Which you aren’t,” said Spike. “And never will be,” he added clenching his jaw and glaring hard at the whelp before he could argue.

But the expression on Xander’s face was agreeable and charming. He nodded, an eyebrow raised, a calm considering look. He eased himself off the mattress and
took a slow pace across the room. “Right,” he said. “You would never turn me.”

“Course not,” said Spike immediately.


“Oi, what do you mean, ‘wrong’, Harris?”

“Well, you know, evil demon.”

“Sure,” said Spike proudly.

“And turning me would make me evil, too.” Said Xander sadly. “I wouldn’t be pure and good anymore.”

“Oh, right, like you are the soul of innocence now,” said Spike without thinking.

“But I AM Spike,” said Xander. “I’m good and pure and wholesome…”

Spike made a rude noise. Then he laughed. “Short memory, Harris,” he said.

Xander played with the ties of his shirtsleeve. “And then there’s the free will factor.”

“Bloody Hell, kid, what are you getting at?”
“Well, you don’t have a free will, do you?”

“I’ve got me soul, don’t I? Same thing.”

“Is it?”

“Well, sure. I choose all the time. Choose not ta kill, not ta drain humans. Choose to fight the bad guys…”

“Man, some evil demon you are,” said Xander derisively.

“Plenty evil, Harris, just choose not to act it out.”

“You sound more like a human than a vampire to me,” Xander observed, his tone teasing.

“Oi, watch yer lip, boy!”

“If I were a vampire,” said Xander, his voice suddenly lusty. “I’d mow a path of destruction that would…”

Spike lay back on the pillows as he laughed. “Whoa, Oh my, Christ!” He caught his breath. “Harris, you’d be a pathetic vampire! You’d’ be all…”

“All what?” said Xander, eyes flaring.

“Dunno,” said Spike, still chuckling. He imagined Harris as a vampire for a minute. Pale soft skin glowing under long dark hair, those eyes flashing gold and black, that crooked smile with a touch of fang… Spike adjusted
uncomfortably on the bed and was glad Xander didn’t have a demonic sense of smell. “You’d be soft,” he said weakly.

“Would not,” said Xander immediately.

“Oh, I think so.” Said Spike.

“You think wrong, Blondie,” Xander volleyed back quickly.

Spike made his standard derisive snort. “You’d never cut it,” he said.

“Bet you I would.” Xander sat on the mattress and crossed his arms, his face all challenge. “Bet I’d kick your ass, too.”

“Bloody unlikely,” cried Spike, offended.

“That’s what it is, isn’t it, Spike,” said Xander hotly. “You’re afraid I’d be bigger and badder than you, aren’t you?”

“Oh fer...” Spike was turning awfully red for a demon with no circulation. He sat up into Xander’s face and growled. “You’d be dust in a fortnight,” he spat. “Not. A. Chance, Harris.”
“I’d be bigger and stronger and faster...” Xander listed on his fingers, happily.

Spike batted at those taunting hands. “Takes years to learn the skills, pathetic minion you’d be...”

“Not if I were your Childe,” pointed out Xander smoothly. “Except you’re afraid,” he teased.

“Bollucks!”

“Bet you,” sneered Xander.

“Yer on, whelp.”

“Well then.” Xander leaned forward, both hands on either side of Spike’s hips, his face next to Spike’s ear, his musky sweaty neck with the soft pink claim marks suddenly inches from Spike’s mouth. “Let’s see.”

Spike backed hard into the pillow, but unless he forcibly shoved Xander away, he had nowhere to go. Pheromones and testosterone flooded the air. Xander’s scent, still ripe from the battle, the warm meaty smell of his lover. A vampiric raspberry truffle rubbing up against him.
“Arrrgh!” Spike roared and shoved hard. Xander fell back onto the mattress. A mysteriously satisfied smirk on his face.

“You see,” he said. “With that soul you’re less evil than I am.”

Spike rubbed his hand across his mouth. He felt dizzy and confused. The boy sitting across from him had an expression that Spike had only seen once or twice. While playing cards. And the kid had had a full house.

“What are you on about, Xan?” he said.

“I want you to turn me, Spike.” said Xander, as if discussing the weather.

“No.”

“There is no reason not to.”

“Course there is...” Spike drifted off, Xander’s expression telling him that that argument had been done, delivered, defeated.

“It’s what I want.”

“Yer daft.”

“As your claimant I have the right...”
“What? What kinda prattle is that? Claimant? Right?”

“Giles told me about it. As your claimant. It’s like a marriage contract. It gives me certain rights.”

“What?” Spike’s memory ran as fast as it could down a dark alleyway and grabbed hold of a retreating Drusilla. Spun her about and shook her hard. “WHAT THE EFFIN HELL ARE YOU TALKIN’ ABOUT?”

“When you bit me and marked me and said those words,” and Xander’s voice had gone soft. A smile picked at the corner of his lips. “You made me yours. You put a claim on me. I’m part of the whole demon thing.” He laid a happy little kiss on Spike’s mouth. “And you, Mr. Badass, belong to me.”

This whole conversation was moving at a speed even a demon couldn’t track. Spike thought quickly, trying to get control of it. “Sounds like a feckin’ dog peein’ on a feckin’ tree, Xan. Can’t see as how you’d want that,” he said harshly.

“It gives me certain rights,” said Xander, pouting.

“Yer watcher’d stake me,” growled Spike.

“No, I think Giles might be more sympathetic lately.”
“And you’d never...” Spike pointed at Xander excitedly. “You’d never get to Heaven, brat. I’m pretty sure those rules are still kinda strict.”

Something flicked over Xander’s gaze, like the blink of a snake's invisible eyelid. “Fuck Heaven,” he said. “I’d rather be with you.”

Spike was struck breathless. Well, truthfully, he was breathless anyway, but if he had breathed, this would have stopped him and he almost wished he did breath so he could feel the full impact of his lungs halting, chest frozen in mid swell.

Xander slid off the mattress and got to his knees by the bed. He grabbed Spike’s limp with shock hand in his own.

“I love you Spike,” he said smoothly. “And I want to spend eternity with you.”

Spike had a wondrous moment in which he saw the future. A dark, mildly evil Xander Harris standing beside him in battle. Gore and destruction all around them. The flick of those mischievous eyes. Soft, perfect, eternally youthful skin brushing his cheek in a quick kiss before they dove back into the bloody fray.

“Hold on a mo’,” he said. “There’s somethin’ wrong here.”
Spike blinked hard and gave his head an exaggerated shake. “I’m havin’ one of those dreams again,” he said doggedly. “Like the ones where Angelus is smaller than me and beggin’ for mercy. Any minute now I’m gonna wake up tied to a chair.”

Xander raised Spike’s hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Things like this don’t happen,” said Spike.

Xander rose and climbed back onto the bed. He crawled over Spike’s legs so that he was hanging slightly over him and bent down to kiss him on the mouth.

“Somethin’ is bound to go bollucks up here...” said Spike before his mouth was sealed again by Xander’s.

“You don’t...” Spike was stopped once more by a kiss.

“Really...” kiss

“Want...” Spike slid down into the bed as the assault became more insistent and was followed by Xander’s hands.

“Oh, Pet...” moaned Spike.

“Ow,” he added.
In Orange County, California, the price of real estate was influenced directly by the supposed quality of the public schools and the proximity of the community to the beach. James and Patricia had opted for location over size, when figuring how much home they could afford. The house was a minuscule nine hundred square feet with two bedrooms and one inadequate bath.

But its market value had already risen thirty thousand dollars in the past three years, and they were planning improvements. This house was all about the future. theirs and their sons. Somewhere in the file cabinet handily stored under the tiny home office, was the ten-year plan James and Patricia had drawn up. His job at the studio paid well but was as reliable as the wind. Her job was steady, and had long term potential, but it would be quite some time before she brought in an income even closely equitable to James’s.

Taking time off, although legally supported, was risky. Despite his distraction, James knew the chances he was taking in remaining absent, allowing his office to lay empty and exposed to marauding hordes of ambitious studio assistants. So he struggled at home to keep his hand in. Sending script synopsis and proposals for show ideas in at least twice a week.
When Tara and a slightly pale Patricia found him, he was just hitting ‘send’ on the email of his latest idea.

“There, you vultures,” he said to the monitor wearily. “Tear that to bits for a while.”

He looked up and saw Tara. “Oh,” he said. His hands came down off the keyboard and fell into his lap.

“Hi, James.”

James sighed and shook his head. “I’m ... I’m sorry I didn’t speak to you at the... the,” he said, frowning at the small Formica desktop. Tara made him uncomfortable. Through no fault of her own, of course. It was just that her mother and then she, had not been welcome in their house for so many years. James always felt a bit guilty around her, as if he were somehow betraying his mother’s memory. But Patricia and she had become close friends over the years, and the thought warmed him somewhat. ‘I was preoccupied,” he said lamely.

“I understand,” said Tara. And she did. It had been hard for her, also, all those years ago, when she had first met the son of her mother’s former best friend. She had been raised with her mother’s heartache over Xander, as James had been raised with his mother’s jealousy and anger. It was a hard chasm to reach over. In the end they
had, if only for the friendship between Patricia and Tara. An odd bond, two outsiders, in a way, trying to find a connection that had been allowed to die.

James seemed disinclined to encourage conversation, still looking down at his hands, and Tara looked around helplessly until Patricia leapt forward to drag one of the kitchen chairs across the room so that Tara and James could sit side by side. She went off for drinks and left them there, uncomfortably avoiding each other’s eyes.

“So,” said Tara finally. “Patricia said you’ve been interested in your father’s vampire stories lately.”

Jame’s face remained closed. He toyed with some of the objects on his desk. Tara noted the jars of Xanex and Valium and felt a little thrill of alarm. She had been raised in a Wiccan home with an herbalist as a mother. She always thought pharmaceuticals were evil.

“Dad’s stories...” James said vaguely. “Your mom told ‘em too, right?”

Tara regarded the cautious man sitting before her. She made a decision. “They weren’t stories, James.”

James laughed once.
“And my mother was not just a Wiccan by religious choice. Her magic was real.”

The glance James gave her was cynical and tired, but, she suspected, also a little hopeful. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No. Its all real, James. Every word of it.”

James suddenly looked truly terrified. “Patricia?” and his wife was at his side immediately.

James laughed oddly. His eyes rolled to find his wife’s. “She says its all true.”

“I know sweetie. She told me too.”

“No wonder...” said James. And the fear in his eyes hardened into something like anger. “No wonder mom wouldn’t let her in the house.”

“James!” Patricia said, mortified at his rudeness at guests more than anything.

Tara just sat and waited. Willow had often said how strange it was that her daughter, whose DNA was a mixture of Rosenberg and a gay man named Wallace, should sometimes so resemble her namesake. But maybe it was the magic. That look of impossible wisdom in the
young eyes. That made Tara so resemble the young woman her mother had loved.

Patricia kept her hands on her husband’s shoulders and James hands rose to clasp them. He stared at Tara, his eyes a little like a suspicious wild animals. “He said once,” he said suddenly, the statement more like a question, “Dad said there was a vampire with a soul who wasn’t evil.”

“There were two, actually,” said Tara. Still patient.

“He said it took a spell.”

Tara nodded. Waiting for it.

The wild fear in James eyes was settling, the hope showing through now. “Do you know how to do it?”

“It isn’t just a spell,” said Tara calmly.

“An orb,” said James. He released Patricia’s hands and seemed to lean a little towards Tara. “He had one.”

Tara nodded. “Yes, my mother said. They found them and each of them kept one. An orb of Thesula.”

Patricia was pleased that there was a chair under her when she suddenly had to sit. “The snow globe?”
“He has it.” James swallowed hard. “I left it with him.”

Tara nodded thoughtfully. “That was probably a good idea. I don’t think I need proximity to do the spell.”

“When?” said James. And Patricia was not quite prepared for his eagerness, his quick agreement to this... craziness.

“We should do it tonight. I don’t know when he will rise.” Tara said.

“Whoa. Whoa now. Wait. A. Minute,” said Patricia suddenly. She made herself stand again. It was one thing to invite Tara over here to talk to James about old times and their parents. The fantastic stories with which they had grown up. It was one thing for Tara to listen and be sympathetic and supportive. It was a whole other thing for Tara to encourage James in his delusion. To tell her that the stories were valid. Were plausible. Because they weren’t. The whole thing was crazy.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” she said to Tara angrily.

James turned towards her, stung. “But we don’t know when he’ll rise...”

“James your father is not a vampire!”
James looked as if she had slapped him. “But the marks...”

Patricia was a patient woman. She seldom lost her temper. So instead of flying off the handle she merely shot Tara a venomous look and stepped close enough to her husband to slip one gentle arm around his waste.

“The doctor said that was just normal bruising, sweetie. Remember? Nothing hurt him. Nothing bit him,” she said, shooting Tara another dark look.

James was shaking his head like a confused old bear. “Didn’t look like bruises.”

“It can’t hurt to try,” said Tara in a chipper voice.

Patricia glared at her soon-to-be-former-friend. “Of course it can hurt.” She jerked her eyes meaningfully at her husband, and glared some more. “You can’t do this.”

“Please,” said James, behind her.

“Tara needs to leave now, James,” said Patricia. “She’s late for something.”

“But ... but she said she knows...”
“I do have to leave,” said Tara quickly. She stood up and reached down for her bag. “I ... I can do it from anywhere,” she said nodding at James, smiling helpfully.

He nodded eagerly. “Right.”

Patricia didn’t even walk her to the door. She was so angry. When she heard the gentle click of the front door latch, she turned to her husband. James looked relaxed for the first time in weeks.

“I’m glad you called her,” he said.

Patricia thought maybe that had been the biggest mistake of her life. “Do you want to go to bed now, James?” she asked, keeping her face neutral, not letting her husband see her fear.

“Yeah, I think I can sleep now.”

If James could sleep without the pills, then maybe it hadn’t been such a huge error in judgment, thought Patricia.

~*~*~*~*~

The sun had barely set. It’s pink glow still lighting the sky and creating a soft backdrop for the still silhouette posed
at the edge of the cliff. Xander stopped as he reached the crest of the hill and just watched Spike looking out over the fertile plain beyond.

“Thanks for letting me sleep, pet,” said Spike without turning, his voice carrying back on the cool light breeze rising from the valley floor below.

Xander trotted up. He lay a hand on Spike’s arm and looked out over the valley with him. In the distance, the small temporary shelters were dark brown lumps following the natural curve of a river.

“They all moved, then?”

“Yeah,” said Xander. “Man, you don’t know how much junk people have until they move, do you?” He squeezed Spike’s bicep a little. “Coulda used the superstrength guy, you know.”

Spike seemed still absorbed in his study of the distant village.

“Course nobody expected you to...with the sunlight and all,” said Xander. “I mean, no one thought you were shirking. Or...” Xander babbled on, wondering at Spike’s stillness. “Wow,” he said, looking around, “I think this is the first time since I’ve been here that there weren’t people on the ridge at this hour.”
“First time in centuries,” said Spike, low.

“Centuries?” Xander gazed up at the crack crazed greenhouse windows. “How soon they forget, huh?”

“Dahla was here.”

The breeze coming up over the cliffs edge was definitely nippy. Xander wrapped his arms around himself and shivered. “Yeah?”

“She came to say...” Spike looked down at his boots. Xander waited but Spike didn’t seem about to finish his sentence.

“The guys asked about you,” Xander volunteered, nervously trying to read his lover’s expression in its silhouette. “Told me to say ‘hi’. And Berynn and Giles invited us down after sunset,” he added eagerly. “Berynn has some ideas about a new ritual...”

Spike shrugged. Xander shivered hard. The breeze coming from the valley was definitely nippy now, and slick hoar frost slid crunched under his feet where he stood. Spike pulled himself from his own reverie and spared a glance at Xander.

“You’re cold,” he observed. “You must be tired.”
“Man, I’m wrecked,” agreed Xander, yawning hugely and stretching his arms above his aching shoulders. “Starved, too.”

“I’ll make your dinner,” said Spike, whirling and moving towards the tent at speed.

The slow slide and click of the lock in the mechanism sounded in Xander’s weary brain. “Hey!” He trotted behind Spike, followed him into the tent. “Hey, what’s up with you?”

Spike gave him a studiously blank stare. “Nothing.”

“You’re thinking about something again,” declared Xander.

Spike shook his head with a kind of superior disgust. He began preparing food.

Xander sighed and came up to him, wrapped his arms around him and leant his chin on his shoulder. “Talk to me, lover,” he said in a husky voice. He planted a kiss on Spike’s cool neck.

Spike stopped moving. He carefully placed the tortilla in his hand down on the counter and covered Xander’s hands with his own.
Xander let his lips press a line down Spike’s neck and nuzzle beneath the fabric of his collar. He slid his tongue out and played with the little goosebumps that formed there. “You know,” he said, rocking Spike back and forth, “they say communication is the key to a good relationship.”

Spike chuckled. “You callin’ yer excessive babble communication, Xander?”

Xander smiled and nipped at a bit of skin. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothin’” sighed Spike again. “Everything is right as rain. Laughin’ teacakes. The bad guys are beaten. The humans got their planet back. Or at least half of it.”

“And the vampire with a soul?” whispered Xander, rubbing his nose at that little place behind Spike’s ear.

Spike shivered again. “He’s okay,” he said slowly. “Maybe thinkin’ about moving himself, too. Someplace darker, I’m thinkin’. Now that he’s not needed.”

Xander lifted his head from Spike’s neck. “Not needed?”

“Well, you know, it’s done. Demons are defeated.”
“I’m sure there are more demons out there, Spike. The human race seems to come equipped with them.”

Spike nodded and Xander felt the stiffening in his back, the impatient little twitches as Spike sought to deal with some uncomfortable thought.

“Thinkin’ maybe I’ll just go find them then.”

Xander let go of Spike and stepped back from him. “You want to leave?”

Spike just stood with his arms hanging by his sides, back to Xander.

“Yeah. Thinking that might be best.”

“But...” Xander felt a little angry. “But, what if I don’t want to leave? This isn’t a decision you can make on your own, Spike!”

“Doesn’t concern you really, does it?”

“Fuck you, Spike!” That brought Spike’s head around at least. He studied Xander from beneath lowered brows, eyes narrowed and defensive. “Fuck you, it doesn’t. What, are we back to square one, here? Do I have to fight my way through this every week?”
Spike dipped his head. “You belong with them,” he shrugged towards the general direction of the village.

“I belong with you.”


“I belong with you.”

“You’re a human.”

“Not for long.”

Spike gaped. He grit his teeth. He stomped and circled and waved his hands. “Damn idiot.”

“We agreed, Spike. We just need to speak with Giles.”

“We did NOT agree, whelp. I did NOT agree. I was... distracted.” Spike ran a hand through his hair.

“You’re just coming up with another reason why we should do it. If you have to fight demons on your own...”

“Damn it, Xander...”
“I want it, Spike,” said Xander quietly. “More than anything.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know,” Xander rubbed at one arm, thoughtfully. “It feels like unfinished business, you know. Like something that might have happened but didn’t. Not that I wanted it to. But somehow … somehow now it’s what I need. An empty space in the puzzle, you know?”

Spike shook his head.

“I love you,” said Xander.

Spike pushed both his hands into his hair and tugged.

“I need you,” said Xander.

Spike squeezed his eyes closed. Xander came up to him. Wrapped the helplessly responsive torso in his arms and leant in to Spike’s lips. He rocked his pelvis into Spike’s gently, so that his boyfriend could feel the length hardening against his thigh. “I need you,” whispered Xander against his jaw.

Spike growled and twisted quickly to capture Xander’s mouth.
“Mmmmm,” hummed Xander happily kneading and massaging, his tongue plunging into Spike’s mouth.

But Spike pulled back. Hard. Pushed Xander away. “No.” he said. “You aren’t gonna do that again, kid. I’m ... I’m not gonna fall for it.”

Xander gave him The Look.

Spike’s eyes widened. “You have no shame,” he accused.

Xander grinned.

“Evil bastard,” commented Spike roughly. He pushed a hand through his thoroughly mussed hair. “Listen, let’s talk to yer watcher. See what he says. Then we’ll see.”

Xander bounced, Spike could have sworn, like a kid promised a party.

“Okay, we’ll see them tonight. Giles and Berynn’s hut is close to the bridge. We’ll have plenty of time and still make it back here by morning.”

“God. Morning,” said the disgusted creature of the night.

~*~*~*~*~
To Xander’s eyes, the village at night seemed just as it always had, though in a different location. They had moved every building, lamppost, fence and sign as if Xeroxed onto the sunny grass-filled plain. At night, the solar lights still flared on. The windowless buildings still issued their thin streams of coal-powered smoke.

To Spike, however, everything seemed changed. The buildings themselves glowed with the heat of the sun that had warmed them all day. The dampish mossy texture of everything was gone. The fence railing he ran his hand over still warm, and dry and silky smooth like baked wood. Underfoot, hard packed ground. No mud puddles, no slime.

He wondered how long until they began to dig wells, run irrigation pipes and ditches to make water retrieval more convenient. How long until they cut windows into the solid walls that faced the streets.

He looked up and could not count the stars that sprayed across the sky. There seemed more than he remembered.

Xander’s fingers wrapped around his own and tugged. Spike brought his gaze down from the infinite heavens to the twin stars dancing in Xander’s dark eyes.
“Hey, where’d you go?” asked Xander, smiling. He tugged Spike closer and they slid together in that liquid way that old lovers do. He pressed his mouth to Spike’s and whispered against his lips. “Berynn’s going to show you the new ritual building.”

Spike glanced around Xander’s head as his mouth was kissed again, and saw Berynn standing apart, waiting.

“Don’t need any ritual...” Spike began the old protest.

“I’m going to talk to Giles,” said Xander. “Alone, Spike. Okay?”

Spike blinked. “Okay.” He felt so out of kilter here. So without a place or purpose. He followed Berynn.

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“Its been coming to this, Giles,” said Xander calmly. “You said so yourself.”

They sat in what passed as a front room in Giles temporary shelter. Xander had noted that this was the same building Berynn had emerged from. He saw the smaller sized shoes by the door, two sets of vests slung over a chair back. He made a mental note.
Giles poured a white liquid into his tea and frowned. He was actually mildly surprised that Xander’s request hadn’t disturbed him more. Perhaps the events of the past week had altered his point of view somewhat. “Are you certain you feel quite well, Xander? Do you feel that you are yourself, I mean?” Giles eyes, that could seem so vague, were piercing now, studying him intensely.

“Not in thrall. Not in some kind of trance. Believe me,” Xander chuckled. “I remember that. Not easy to forget. This isn’t the same. I’m just in love.”

“To the point where you wish to die?”

“C’mon, Giles. We’re just two old guys here. Dying really isn’t the bogey man they make it out to be, is it?”

“It’s a huge irrevocable decision, Xander. I somehow find it difficult to even contemplate.”

“Lots of things are huge, Giles. Marriage, having kids, deciding which flavor to pick at the Baskin Robbins...”

“You know very well there is more to it than that,” said Giles feelingly. “You are choosing to become evil, Xander!”

“Maybe,” said Xander nodding as they came to the next point. “You remember how to do that soul thing?”
“I have never done ‘that soul thing’ as you call it, Xander. My interest was slaying demons, not twaddling about with their destinies.”

Giles sounded a bit testy, thought Xander. He had expected that, of course. He figured he could work past it. He always had.

“So, it’s not in one of the books?”

“No! Well,” Giles pursed his lips and got that distracted expression. His eyes wandered thoughtfully to the stacks of scrolls in the corner. “There was that reference I came across in those latter day chronicles of…”

“See, I know you can figure it out, Giles,” said Xander cheerfully.

Giles gave him a very distrustful look. “Your confidence is heartening, Xander.”

“You’re the man, Giles,” said Xander, sipping his tea.

“If Spike turned you you would not be yourself Xander.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that, but Spike remembers being turned. He remembers what came before. So did Angel.” Xander looked momentarily angry. “Guess you Watcher’s didn’t have that ‘this is not your friend, this is the
creature that killed him’ thing one hundred percent right, did you?”

“Xander, it would be a mistake to romanticize this.”

Xander sighed with frustration and looked around the room. Giles had managed, somehow, to amass a small arsenal of scrolls and books. Xander wondered where those had come from. In the tiny temporary hut, Giles and Berynn’s clothes were folded in shining stacks in a standing open wardrobe. Berynn’s patrol equipment, the broadsword, crossbow and impact resistant chest-protecting vest, all hung neatly against a wall.

“Looks like you guys are living together,” Xander observed.

Giles nodded, gazing around the room, his expression somewhat stunned. “It would appear so.”

Xander chuckled. Time for the big guns. “So,” he said, leaning forward and stirring his tea. “How old is Berynn?”

Giles blushed. “Xander. Berynn’s people don’t understand the concept of aging.”

“He looks about fifteen,” muttered Xander. “But, hey, I’m no one to talk.”
Giles frowned uncomfortably.

“What do his parents think?”

“You know, of course, that Berynn’s parents have both passed on.”

“Huh. So there’s no one to stop you. No one to take him aside and lecture him about how foolish he’s being.”

“I love him, Xander,” said Giles. “I would never hurt him.”

“He loves you, too.” Said Xander. “I can see that. And,” he sighed, “If its what you both want. If it makes you both happy…” he shrugged.

“This is not even close to the same issue, Xander.”

“Okay, G-man.”

They sipped their tea.

“Spike wants to leave,” said Xander in an off-handed way. “Wants me to stay.”

Giles set down his teacup. “Oh,” he said.

“Thinks I belong in the sunlight.”

Giles nodded.
“Well, I don’t,” said Xander firmly. “I belong with him.” When Giles opened his mouth to speak, Xander held up his hand, palm out. “I KNOW this Giles. It’s why I’m here. I just know it. I can’t...” for just a second, Xander allowed himself to think what would happen if this little mission failed. If Giles wouldn’t let him do this. If Spike left. “I can’t do this place without him, Giles.”

“But, Xander...” Giles sighed. How many times would he give this trite speech? “Don’t you want a normal life?”

“I HAD a normal life, Giles, don’t you get that? And it was great. The best. I don’t want to do all that again. It just wouldn’t be the same the second time. It’d be all same ol’ same ol’...”

Giles nodded. “Yes, well you might find immortality becomes a bit humdrum as well, Xander.”

“Somehow,” and a fond smile tugged at one corner of Xander’s mouth. “I don’t think life with Spike could ever be ‘humdrum’.”

Giles laughed. “No, I don’t suppose it would.”

“So you’ll do it?”

“Xander, I did not say that. Besides, I can’t. I don’t know how.”
“You could figure it out.”

“I’m not so sure that I could. I’m not so sure that I’d want to.”

“Please Giles.”

“Xander…” Giles pinched the bridge of his nose and prayed for patience. He felt Berynn pressing close to his awareness just then, that sense of being loved as soothing and comforting as a hand on his back. It centered him. And yes, there was quite a bit worth giving up to have this, he realized. Quite a bit worth sacrificing to feel this intimacy, this safety and warmth.

“I can’t promise anything,” said Giles with a sigh.

Xander bounced to his feet. “Thanks Giles.”

~*~*~*~*~

It was hot. Really really hot. Xander sprawled across the huge baked clay bench, his arms and legs turned out to expose their softest parts to the sunlight and felt like a plucked rotisserie chicken just broiling away. He could swear he heard his own body fat sizzling.
“Your skin is turning red.” Berynn’s voice was amused. Xander slit one eye open and turned his head enough so that he could see his friend regarding him from beneath the huge square umbrella he carried. The villagers had fashioned the awkward plastic pipe and polyester objects to protect themselves from sunburn.

Xander laughed and sat up to peel the sleeveless tank from his upper body. “I’m trying to get a tan.”

“Tan?” asked Berynn, tilting his head.

“Get my skin nice and brown.”

“Why?”

“’Cuz it looks sexy,” said Xander facetiously.

Berynn didn’t answer, but Xander heard and felt him sitting on the bench beside him.

“Rupert says,” said Berynn, beginning his sentence as he did half his sentences these days, “*that the sun will prematurely age your skin and can even cause growths that carry sickness.*”

Xander didn’t understand the entire sentence, but he got the gist of it. He snorted. “Giles is just jealous because all he does is burn.”
“He burns?” asked Berynn, obviously startled by this information.

Xander chuckled and sat up, opening his eyes. “No, no, not like Spike burns. Giles just turns red and his skin blisters and peels.” There was a look of absolute horror on Berynn’s face.

“Never mind,” said Xander, leaning back again.

They sat in silence like that for a few moments, while Berynn, Xander imagined, got past the horrible mental image of Giles with blistered peeling skin, and Xander’s skin baked.

“Spike watches you,” said Berynn suddenly, in hushed tones.

“I know.” Xander raised his eyelids a fraction and saw the shadows moving rhythmically beneath the distant grove of trees. One shadow did not move.

“He can not come to you here,” said Berynn, his tone slightly disapproving.

“We aren’t bound at the hip,” said Xander. He twitched uncomfortably. “Not exactly,” he amended. “I wanted to lay out in the sun. Think about stuff...”
“Oh,” said Berynn wisely. Xander heard the soft scuff of his sandaled feet move in the dust. The sigh of cloth as the young man rose. “I’ll leave you, then. To think.” Xander heard him move off.

He lay there and tried to think.

Xander had had to convince Spike and Giles and even Berynn, really, that becoming a vampire was a natural and desirable progression for him. He had had to behave in a confident and easy manner about the whole issue, just to bring his friends in line.

He hadn’t let anyone see his doubts. Regrets. Fears.

“Oh, God, Willow,” he said so softly that even the vampire hovering in the distant trees could not guess what words he spoke.

If Xander regretted anything in his long life, he regretted Willow. If things had been only a little bit different, Xander suspected that he and Willow would have probably married eventually. He could see that in retrospect. Could see his wife’s natural fear and suspicion of their relationship. It had done no good to point out Willow’s gender preferences. Jennifer had seen the love and had drawn her own conclusions. And she had been right, thought Xander. He sat up and pulled his
shirt on again. The whitest skin on his chest was going to be damaged if he didn’t cover up soon.

Jennifer had been right to suspect love. Gender had nothing to do with anything. Xander’s eyes sought and easily found the still black shadow that waited behind a distant oak tree. Case in point.

Maybe if Xander had acknowledged Jennifer’s suspicions, they could have talked their way past all that. Maybe if Xander had been able to acknowledge his own bisexuality he would have been able to accept his friend’s. He would have been able to be honest with Jenn and perhaps that would have alleviated her suspicions. Maybe then she wouldn’t have been so upset about Willow and he could have kept his wife and his best friend.

*Denial is an evil thing,* thought Xander sadly.

So, what would Willow have said? Xander reached for the small bottle of oil that Giles had given him. A sort of UV protection in the vitamin e rich lotion, he’d been told. He rubbed it into his cheeks and tried to imagine the advice Willow would have given him.

“How do you feel, Xander?” He could see her eyes, concerned, full of warmth, studying him as he thought
how to answer her. Her mind, always quicker than his, already leaping ahead to the answers he had yet to discover.

“When I’m with him? Well, besides the natural irritation and … err, you know, horniness?” he smiled when he imagined Willow’s blush. “I feel calm. Like … well, like no matter what happens we can handle it.”

Willow was nodding, watching and listening.

“I feel.” He shook his head, laughing, and imagined Willow taking his hands in hers. Giving them that little supportive squeeze. “I feel like … like I’ve found something at the bottom of a box in the attic. Something I packed away and forgot and I’ve been missing it all my life….”

Willow laughed. “I felt that way when I came out, Xander.”

“Yeah? But this isn’t about sex, Willow.”

She inclined her head. “Identity.”

“Okay, that makes sense. Who I am.” Xander mulled over that for a minute. “Uh, somehow, I don’t think I’ve been the male consort of a vampire all my life, Wills…”
“No, but you haven’t been an average guy, either,” said Willow.

“Sure I have. I’m Mr. Average,” said Xander immediately. He blinked at Willow, she smiled back gently. “Or... not.”

The phantom of Willow watched him, the heat curled over his skin, the distant shadow of Spike fretted beneath the trees.

“Okay, then,” said Xander. “Guess I get it.”

“Xander!” Xander sat up, startled to be addressed by a live person, and not a phantom.

“Giles?” The Watcher was approaching across the village square, one of those square lopsided umbrellas completely shielding his body from the sun. He wore the long light colored cotton and rayon robes that the villagers had adapted for the heat and looked, to Xander, like something from an old movie he had once seen. “Lawrence of Arabia,” he thought it had been called.

“Xander,” said Giles, looking somehow excited and troubled simultaneously. “I believe I’ve found a solution.”

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“So, as long as there is an orb out there somewhere, the effects could be the same?”

“Well, not just any orb…” Giles calloused finger ran down the edge of the fragile scroll, reading the bizarre glyphs again. “An orb that specifically belongs to the person, err.. the uh, creature.”

“Creature,” said Xander woodenly.

“Yes, err, vampire I suppose.” Giles sighed and his hands stilled atop the scroll. The doubt that kept rising between them appeared again, practically visible in its shimmering terror.

“Great,” Xander swept his hand through the air. Imagined the doubt dissipating at his motion. “I had one in my home.”

“This is still supposition Xander.”

“It’ll work, Giles. I know it.” Xander rose to his feet, leaning on the table.

Giles gazed up at him. There was something about Xander. The way he stood there, so very real and very sure. He looked … momentous. And Giles quite suddenly
believed it as well. Believed they could make this thing work. He nodded.

“I’ll go tell Spike,” said Xander.

~*~*~*~*~

“What is it like?”

Xander and Spike were sitting outside the tents, on one of the benches, watching the sunset over the new village. It was Spike’s latest fascination. Watching the distant goings on and pattern of light over his humans, like they were caught in a tiny terrarium.

Spike appeared to not hear Xander’s question. Which, of course, was impossible. And he knew Xander knew it, so with an uncomfortable little roll of his shoulders, as if he could somehow slide out from under the question, he tried instead to bat it aside.

“What are you talkin’ about, Xan?”

“What’s it like? Not breathing, not feeling a heartbeat...”

“It’s not the lack of somethin’ it’s the presence of somethin’ else,” Spike heard how snappish his voice was, but he couldn’t help it.
“Bloodlust?” Xander grinned. “Because, you know? I really get that.” He slid the hand that rested on the back of the bench just behind Spike’s head, lightly touching the back of Spike’s neck and ran his thumb up and down, an inch away from the latest marks.

Spike shivered and leaned into the touch despite himself “No. It’s not hungering for blood, Xander. It’s the demon. I’m a demon. I’m not the man I was.”

“Neither am I,” said Xander.

Spike sighed in exasperation and looked away from his beautiful, luscious warm human out over the plain below. “Not what I meant,” he said after a pause.

“Yeah it is, Spike. I know I won’t be the same, but hey! Dead guy here. And gay. I’ve changed a lot already.”

Spike shrugged.

“So what’s the problem?” Xander cautiously moved a little closer to Spike on the bench. His partner had been touchy and edgy and difficult for the past few days. Avoiding closeness, avoiding this conversation.

“When are we going to set the date?” Xander asked.

“Set the date?”
“We could do it tomorrow, except, you know, I kind of want to make it special. Maybe invite friends to a party afterwards...”

Spike whacked the bench seat once with the palm of his hand and jumped to his feet. “Need a walk,” he said, and strode off.

And that is how this conversation generally went, thought Xander, frustrated. After awhile, Spike would come back from wherever he had gone off too. He would be affectionate and needy and the sex would be fantastic, but they wouldn’t discuss it. Wouldn’t come up with a definitive plan.

But the sex would be fantastic and Xander would let it go.

Well, not this time. He marked the direction Spike had gone and only dove for a moment into their tent to grab his vest before following.

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“Set the date, he says, like this is a feckin’ betrothment!” Spike absently stroked the fiberglass dome of Angel’s gravemarker and frowned at the grey dampish wood that
stood around them. Already, the mildewy, steamy smell and texture was drying out. Affected by the nearby sun. The woods felt older now, less real, like they were sliding into memory.

“Remember how it was?” Spike asked Angel’s grave marker worriedly. “I hated you, you bastard,” he whispered. “Wanted you and hated you and …”

He poked at the ground with his thumb, yanked on the grass that grew now amongst the mosses. “What if he doesn’t feel...?” He whispered just to Angel, because Angel wouldn’t tell anyone Spike’s deepest fears. “What if the demon doesn’t care the way the boy did? What if the soul doesn’t?” What if a vampire Xander didn’t love him?

If he stayed, though, he knew the turning was inevitable. Every time they made love, every time Xander touched him even, the claim would pull at him. He wanted to crawl inside the boy on every level. Take him completely. And Xander wanted it too. He could see it in his eyes, feel it in his body, the way he responded to Spike. The way he cried his name during climax.

He heard the boy’s feet padding over the new grass, before he even felt the prodding inquiry of the claim in his mind. Xander’s step was sure, stealthy. He walked
more like a hunter than he ever had, and Spike allowed himself a little fantasy of a fully turned Xander and just how powerful a predator he would be.

“Can hear you on the next bloody continent,” he shouted into the brush.

Xander emerged from a darkened copse. Ducking his head in embarrassment. “I thought I was being so quiet.”

Spike snorted.

“You’ll have to train me,” said Xander, huskily, a suggestive dip and sway in his walk as he approached Spike. “Teach me discipline.”

Spike grinned to himself and waited for the kid to pounce.

“Oh,” said Xander. And he halted. Spike saw Xander looking around, noticing where they were. His eyes came to Angel’s marker and stopped. “Oh,” he said. “I’ll leave you two alone,” he said coolly, spinning and striding away.

Bugger. “Wait, Xan!” Spike leapt to his feet and was at Xander’s side in two long bounds. He grabbed his arm. “Wait.”
Xander turned. Chin down, eyes squinted as if to deflect painful truths.

“It helps me think,” said Spike. “That’s all.”

“Sure,” said Xander. “Cuz you can talk to him. Tell him what you’re thinking. Not like me, who you can only fuck”

“Hell, Xan, you know it isn’t like that!”

“You guys had a bond,” said Xander.

“Sure we did.”

“I want... don’t you see, Spike? That’s what I want with you?”

Oh. Well. That made sense, didn’t it? Spike felt as if a gushing well of emotion suddenly erupted from some unknown source deep inside him. “Okay,” he managed to choke out over the wave.

“Can we talk about it now?”

“Yeah,” said Spike hoarsely. “Yeah. I guess we should do that.”

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“I wish there were lilies,” said Xander suddenly. “I remember a painting I saw once. A girl in a bed, reaching for an Angel. There were lilies,” he said softly.

They were inside one of the huts where the villagers had ritualistically offered blood. Preparing it for the ‘ceremony’ as Spike kept referring to it.

“Ain’t no angel,” Spike chastised gently, his hand rising to catch and twist a silky dark lock of hair at Xander’s temple. “But I’ll find you lilies if you want them.”

Xander knew that Spike wanted the ritual to assure himself so that it wouldn’t seem like what it truly was. The massacre of the man Spike cared for. To assure himself that he wasn’t just a ravenous animal that would kill indiscriminately. Xander let him think it was for him. Let him fuss over the robes, the flowers, the words of the ceremony.

Spike drew the long velvety maroon robe from the box and held it up to Xander’s bronzed skin. Xander extended his arms and together they slid the heavy garment over his head. He tugged the voluminous black satin lined hood up and turned to Spike with his arms out and his face wanting a critique.
Spike was very glad he didn’t have to breathe. “Gorgeous,” he said reverently.

Xander grinned and dipped his head and the impression of a Master in ceremonial robes was immediately shattered. “Try on yours, Spike,” he urged.

“Nope, not till the ceremony,” said Spike. “’S bad luck innit?”

Xander laughed. “That’s for the bride.” He held his arm out and turned his wrist carefully, watching the thin leather wrist bands fall away. “I wonder how long I’ll keep my tan,” he said wistfully.

Spike set down the linen cloth he had been handling. “Xander...” he said.

“No, don’t start that again, Spike.” Xander came up behind him quickly and wrapped himself around Spike’s body. “This is going to be great. And I want it.”

“Don’t know what you want, I’m thinkin’” said Spike.

“I want to be with you,” Xander whispered against Spike’s hair, his lips finding an ear and nibbling.
“Nobody’s sayin’ we can’t be together, Xan. For a while. Just… this is more than that. You’ll be a demon. Not yerself anymore. Can’t you see that?”

“It’s my choice,” said Xander. “You said it was my choice…”

“Not sure I kin do it, whelp.”

“Spike!” Xander held Spike away from him. Struck to the core. “You don’t want to … you don’t want…”

“Love you, Xan. Don’t wanna kill you.”

“I won’t be dead, Spike. Just transformed.”

“You so sure the Watcher can pull this off then?”

Xander came up again and enclosed Spike once more in velvet and warmth. His musky breath caressed Spike’s chin and then his neck as his mouth descended and he whispered. “I’ve got a lot of faith, Spike.”

“In Rupert?” gasped Spike, closing his eyes as sparks spiraled from the bite into his brain.

“Nah, Giles will do his best, but I’ve got faith in the Powers that brought me here.” Said Xander confidently. “And in love, Spike. I’ve got a lot of faith in love.”
James was sitting on the tiny front porch of their two bedroom bungalow. The traffic on the 405 like a distant surf. The sky with its perpetual twilight still showing some stars. The old Walnut in the front yard occasionally fluttered its leaves in the light oceanic breeze.

“I love you, Dad,” James said to the shadows of the night. The shadows shifted slightly but did not respond. The screen door behind him creaked open.

“Honey?”

“Stay inside, Pat,” said James without turning. He lay his hand on the small pile of objects lying beside his left thigh. “No matter what I tell you, stay inside and keep Joshua in there with you.”

“James,” said Patricia after a very long silence. “I’m going to call Dr. Paulson.”

“Okay,” said James. He turned and looked up at his wife. Gave her a peaceful smile. “But wait until morning, okay?”

“She has an exchange.”
James shook his head. He didn’t like his therapist, but he didn’t want to be responsible for any harm that might come to her either. “Just wait until morning. Please.”

“I love you, James,” said Patricia tearfully.

James nodded. “I know. That’s why I can do this.”

~*~*~*~*~

“You don’t have to do this, Xander.”

Giles and Xander were standing outside the ritual tents. Xander, arms buried in his robe, lost in thought. Giles wondered if he was having doubts.

Xander smiled to himself remembering the day James had married. How frightened his son had looked, how young and vulnerable. And Xander had said the same words to him that Giles had just uttered.

“I can go in there now and break it up,” Xander had said to James in as jovial a manner as possible. “Mention the open bar, have a getaway car here at the front…”

James laughed and leant in to hug his father hard. “Thanks dad, I can always count on you. But this is it for me,” he squared his shoulders.
Xander thought about how this was it for him, too. Until dust does us part, he thought, and it really didn’t seem that amusing anymore. Because the only thing he was afraid of now was losing Spike.

“I remember the first time I saw this,” said Xander. “I punched Spike in the jaw.” He shook his head, wonderingly. “Maybe I knew even then.”

Giles shivered involuntarily and almost immediately Berynn was there, slim fingers wrapped around his arm.

“Xander?” asked Giles, leaning against Berynn and clutching his magical tools. “Are you sure about this?” Xander thought how young Giles looked suddenly, clutching his little bag like a stuffed animal. And he thought how Giles had been almost forced to leave his childhood behind. Forced and then at the last allowed this little bit to make up for it.

And he thought about what he had denied himself in his life.

“I’m sure, Giles,” said Xander. “I... I don’t know how to explain this, but I feel like this was meant to be a long time ago. I want this. Go,” he said then, making it light, his hands shooing them off. “Go do your mojo.” He
turned and faced the tent. “And Giles?” he called over his shoulder. “In case this doesn’t work? I love you.”

He squared off and stared at the door of the tent. At this threshold. And barely heard Giles and Berynn echoing his declaration behind him.

18

Spike sat in a meditative posture he had learned from Angel; his robes fanned out around him, and tried to be optimistic. Tried to convince himself that this was going to go well.

For a few surreal moments he was able to maintain it. He did the ritual chanting, focused on some point of light inside the blackness of his head. That lasted a few moments. Then he gave up.

Oh bugger all to Hell, whom was he kidding? Nothing he planned ever went well. He hadn’t rested at all since he and Xander had finally decided on this. Hadn’t even tried to sleep. Xander had attempted to calm him in the best possible ways. But every touch, every warm breathy word against his skin, only made him feel what he might be about to lose, what he was about to destroy.

They’d planned the whole thing so carefully. And how awful had that been? Discussing it all with the Watcher.
Giles' eyes on him, so steady and unreadable. The details of turning Xander, the timing of the spell, as if it were a battle plan, or a complex recipe for dinner, even, not what it really was. Murder. How Spike would kill this man they both cared for.

The last human he had drained had been his Sire. His only friend. Now he was going to kill his lover. Spike pressed his forehead to his hands and thought that perhaps the punishment for all the wrongs he had done was finally coming to roost.

He heard Xander and Giles speaking outside the tent. Heard the Watcher’s uneven footsteps walking away. He didn’t look up when Xander’s heavy robes and the swish of the tent flap announced his entrance. Spike stood slowly; feeling large and beastly, hands hanging by his sides, gaze cast to the floor.

He heard Xander kneel at the threshold. Heard as Xander spoke the ritualistic words, his voice breathy and shaking. Spike could hear his heart pounding from across the room. Smell his apprehension.

Spike searched the suddenly empty cavern of his mind for the correct ritualistic response. Nothing. He dared look up at Xander.
“Spike?” Xander’s hands moved slightly, as if flailing for purchase. “Am I... am I doing it right?”

To Hell with the ritual. Spike leapt across the room and just sank to his knees in front of Xander, grasped his hands and squeezed them. Xander took in deep breaths. Exhaled.

Spike raised Xander’s hands and pressed his lips to the knuckles. Waited for his lover to get control again. “You sure?” he asked, finally.

Xander shook his head, then nodded. He laughed and tightened his fingers in Spike’s hands. “Are you?”

Spike shook his head. “Just know I love you, Xander.”

Xander nodded. “Yep. That’s why we’re here.”

“Is it?” Spike thought they were here because Xander was insane and he, Spike, was a selfish, evil bastard.

“We’ve been working towards this,” said Xander, still a tad breathless. His eyes seemed to throb, Spike swore he could see his heart beat in the swell and recession of his pupil. Xander wet his lips. “Want you,” he said. “All the way this time.”
There seemed to be a braided rope wrapped around Spike’s heart. He felt it tighten. He cleared the sudden clog in his throat. “Okay, then.” He stood slowly, raising Xander with him. Noted that they were both a bit wobbly. “We should lie down on the bed... get comfortable.”

Xander followed him to the linen covered bed. The narrow cot that the villagers had lain upon for their offerings had been replaced by a wide low palette, but Spike had wanted the white sheets. They made him feel the ritual still. Made him feel in control. Not that he needed control, this time. This time, he wouldn’t have to stop himself.

Need and hunger clutched at his belly at the thought and he stumbled to a stop.

“Spike?” Xander’s voice was reedy and uneven. He sat on the bed, eyes huge, legs drawn up to his chest, his arms, in the heavy sleeves, wrapped around his knees, long feet smooth and dark against the white cloth, the maroon velvet pooling to his toes. He held out his hand.

Spike clambered next to him and gathered Xander up in his arms, feeling the heat and fear and excitement trembling all through the boy.
“Spike, d...do we have to use those?”

Spike looked where Xander gestured, at the coiled silken ropes they had laid out at the head of the bed. He raised Xander’s hand and kissed a knuckle. Turned the calloused palm over and nuzzled into it. Felt the strong wrist flex and turn in his hand.

“You’re strong, Xander. And healthy. Your body will fight back in the end, despite everything. I told you that.”

“No, I won’t fight it, Spike. I want this.”

“Don’t want to hurt you, Xan. Couldn’t bear it.”

“I won’t fight back, Spike.” said Xander with assurance.

Those strong hands slid up Spike’s jaw, into his hair, the fingertips moving over his head, soothing, reassuring, down his neck. Spike let the touch take over, felt Xander’s thumbs under his chin, Xander’s mouth against his, wet and hungry. His tongue plunged into Spike’s mouth and someone gasped as their bodies tumbled together onto the mattress.

Hot soft velvet moved beneath Spike’s hands, Xander’s muscles bunching and sliding smoothly under the robes, like the skin of a jaguar. Heat seemed to emerge in patches and Spike could smell the sweat.
“Take this off, luv,” he panted when Xander released his mouth for a second. Spike tugged at the loose fabric around Xander’s hips and ground up into him.

“Mmmm, not yet,” breathed Xander against his lips. His tongue laved across Spike’s mouth, “Wanna feel you fucking me in them.”

And Xander’s words threw a spark towards that stack of kindling inside him. That dangerously dry and ready kindling of demon hunger and lust.

Spike groaned and pulled desperately at the heavy fabric, trying to draw it upwards. Xander eating his mouth, all teeth and demanding tongue and not quite human sounds in his throat. He seemed to have grown an extra set of hands, rubbing Spike’s chest through the robes, his thighs sliding against Spike’s through the heavy fabric.

For the past week, their lovemaking had been restrained, both of them holding back. Somehow knowing that the moment they let go would lead to this. The claim taking over and driving Spike to finally take Xander.

Or maybe, all along, it had been Xander taking Spike. Because the human was in charge now, Spike merely helplessly responding. Xander rolled them on the narrow palette, their robes tangling between their legs, binding
them to each other, so tightly Spike couldn’t even draw
back, could only grind desperately at Xander, trying to
find friction in the slippery fabric and heat.

Xander pulled frantically at the cowl of his robe, exposing
the claim marks. He made a demanding and primitive
noise and Spike instinctively bent to them, mouth
opened over them, tongue tasting as he felt the itch of
his fangs descend. Xander’s skin was hot, the marks
pulsing against Spike’s tongue. He grabbed at Spike’s
neck with both hands, pulling rubbing himself against
Spike’s mouth, his hips rhythmically thrusting upwards.

Spike scrabbled with his hands until he had the hem of
the robes above their hips and could feel Xander’s length
drooling against his belly. Xander moaned at the freedom
and spread his legs wide, arching against him, his hips
rotating in a demanding grind that set every nerve in
Spike’s pelvis on fire. Then Xander rolled his hips,
brought his knees up and Spike felt his pucker, gaping
and throbbing and wanting him as much as the claim
marks.

“Lube,” he hissed against Xander’s skin.

Xander shuddered all over his fingers scrabbling and
pulling Spike’s mouth as he twisted his neck to rub the
marks. “Already ready, baby,”
“Oh, Xan…” Spike reared back just enough to line himself up and felt the head of his cock slide easily into the tight opening. Xander seemed to buck against him and his hole just opened and swallowed Spike down. The claim marks beneath Spike’s tongue flared and his fangs slid in.

Xander gasped, his whole torso stiffened beneath Spike and then Spike felt the tremor, like a full body wave, travel from Xander’s ass all the way to his neck and back again. The hard length pressed into his belly twitched and precum was a steady cool stream between them.

“Fuck oh god yeah oh god fuck me Spike yeah oh my god baby fuck me now.”

The words strung together in Xander’s husky voice.

And the demon rose.

Unfurling its heavy leathern wings within him like some ancient and long buried god, the demon spread through his body and hissed its approval. Spike didn’t even fight it, and that would trouble him later. For centuries to come, it would worry him how the demon had said ‘yes’ and flexed itself in his mind, unshackled and confident. Like it had been waiting for this. Lying in wait for Xander.

Spike had always been a little disdainful when Angel pled demon possession. He knew how vague and flexible the
boundary was between his souled self and his demon self. If there were really any boundary at all. But now, Xander writhing beneath and around him, the damp hot breath panting against his skin, muscles giving eagerly beneath his, he felt some wicked satisfaction, some triumphant cheer, deep within him in a consciousness he felt had been hidden even from himself. Almost unwilling, he wrapped his fingers around Xander’s wrists and held him down against the mattress, shoved himself deeper into his lover’s willing body. Xander’s eyes widened, recognizing the power.

“Harder,” Xander’s voice was thick with passion. Lust. “Oh, God, I need it harder.”

Spike stared. Xander’s eyes were black and sensuous and filled with an amused pleasure. He licked his lips, and arched and groaned.

Spike kissed him hard. Let his mouth travel again down to the swollen claim marks. Xander squirming and keening beneath him. Spike pulled his hips back and shoved in harder. Did it again. The demon screamed triumphantly and Spike held Xander still, fucking him with his body and his mouth, arching back and slamming forward into the slippery heat as hard as he could again and again, the
warm flesh beneath his lips rippling and his fangs just slid further, felt the warm syrup of blood. He swallowed.

Xander made a catchy noise, like he couldn’t breath, his torso jerked.

Spike sucked harder. Deep dragging pulls. He took Xander’s blood in a way he never had before, not to taste but to drain. He felt the fingers tangled in his hair start to tug.

His hips slid faster and faster against the hot hole, Xander’s length hardening, and his balls drawing up. It would be soon. Beneath him his lover gasped and yanked at his hair.

Something was wrong. Eyes practically rolling back in his head, hips still grinding as he tried to slow them, Spike drew back his bloodied mouth. “Xander?” he rasped, “You still want this?”

Xander’s face was white and covered with a sheen of sweat. His mouth opened, lips a little parched. The hand he cupped Spike’s jaw with shook, but his eyes were warm, happy. “Want to taste you, Spike. Want you.”

“Luv…” Spike flailed at the little table next to their palette, to find the dagger they had lying there.
Xander’s fingers closed over his on the hilt. “Let me?”

Spike nodded, arched back his neck. Rocking slowly and gently still into Xander, he felt the sharp cold point just above his sternum, the white shot of pain before the hot dribble of blood down his chest. Then Xander’s mouth, warm and a little dry, suckling at him. Spike let his hips roll and slide in and out. Like pending thunder the orgasm gathered in his lower back in his butt and balls.

“Gonna come soon, Xan. Want to be with you.”

Xander’s mouth drew back; he pulled Spike down to his neck. “I love you, Spike,” he whispered as Spike’s fangs found the mark and dipped deep.

He thrust against him, hard and fast, a choking noise and at last Spike felt the resistance, felt the jerk and frantic scrabbling as Xander’s body fought for life, then amazingly, he sensed Xander taking control, as his spirit and body acquiesced, gave in, embraced him, embraced his own death.

Not thinking about it anymore, pounding into Xander even as he knew the boy died, Spike screamed and cried out agony and loss and joy and triumph, coming deep inside his lover, pulling Xander’s lax head forward and sealing the soft lips against the blood that streamed from
his chest. Xander’s lips pulling blood from his veins even as his spasming hole pulled semen from his cock.

Spike kept him there as long as Xander still strove for life. Suddenly the body rose against him harshly, an orgasm jerking and spitting between their bodies as Xander’s body came in its death throes.

“Xander?” He rubbed his cheek against his lovers skin, knowing there would be no response, but having to check for it. To be sure. “Xan?” Gore covered lips fluttered, the chest rose one more time, desperately seeking life, then a rattling sigh, like a bellows deflating, and Xander’s entire body collapsed completely beneath Spike.

And for the second time that year, Xander Harris died.

~*~*~*~*~

Berynn watched as the smoking cauldron seemed to swell with light then send its power out into the night.

His fingers sought and intertwined with Giles’, and Giles opened his eyes, the furrow of concentration between his brows relaxed.
“It’s done, then,” said Giles quietly. Berynn squeezed his fingers again. Both men trying hard not to think about what it all meant. That the spell had only activated because there was a soulless vampire to be ensouled.

“Now all we can do is pray,” Giles told Berynn.

Berynn nodded. His lips moved automatically in the ritual invocation to the Light.

~*~*~*~*~

There was a ritual to be performed. Spike and Xander had planned it all out ahead of time. Well, Spike had planned it and Xander had agreed, smiling, his eyes following his lover’s hands as Spike explained. Eyes warm and full of love.

Spike drew the palm of his hand softly over those eyes, so that the lids covered their sightlessness. There was no warmth in them now.

Spike was supposed to clean the blood from Xander, relight the candles, remake the bed. In his plan, Xander would wake to a warm and clean room, ritualistically cleared of the past. But Spike found that he couldn’t move. He lay where he was, spread across Xander’s
cooling corpse, unable to acknowledge or release him, unable to know what he had just done. Paralyzed with fear and only able to keep himself in that white space between one action and the next. As if even his thoughts could jinx this.

What if the spell didn’t work? Spike could not even picture in his own mind the sword and the stake that lay ready across the room on the altar. He couldn’t do it. The thought entered his heart and he knew it to be true. Suddenly understood that all along he had known. If Xander’s soul were not restored, Spike would not stake him as he had promised. He wouldn’t be able to. Perhaps he’d be able to restrain the demon, keep him from damaging the village, but if an eternity of evil and mayhem was what it meant to keep Xander, then that’s what it would be.

He wasn’t like Angel. He couldn’t hurt his loved ones for the greater good. He felt his soul as a tiny weak thing, no moral muscle in it. His tenuous connection to whatever humans identified as holiness to be so thin and frayed it counted for nothing when the test came. They were all too distant, moral imperatives and rules and gods with their judgments. All Spike knew was the living and the undead. If there were a difference, a choice, between holiness and love, for Spike, the choice would always be
love. He lay across Xander and knew he would give his own soul. Damn himself again, if it meant keeping something of Xander with him.

So he lay across his lover and didn’t pray.

~*~*~*~*~

Another wave of sound as the traffic on the 405 swelled in the last rush from the city. The tree over the front lawn dipped and swayed, a swelling of shadows from the privacy hedge they had planted the previous winter. The shadow did not recede with the wind and James felt a prickle of the hairs up his arm as his hand moved to hover over the objects laying on the porch boards beside his leg.

“Hello, dad,” he said.

The man who stepped into the dim glow of the porch light was younger than James in appearance. Slender. Muscular shoulders and arms and neck flexing beneath a weird iridescent polyester tunic that lay open at the neck exposing the bite marks and bruises against white as death skin.
“James,” said Xander. He looked surprised. Delighted even. James had never seen his father with both eyes. He thought perhaps that is what seemed different as his hand still hovered over his collection of home made stakes, watching for clues to difference, hints of danger.

Xander stepped forward, half a step, and James stiffened.

Xander laughed. The sound sent chills up James spine. “You remembered what I taught you,” said Xander. That smile, even old and wrinkled, and dentured, Xander had never lost his smile and if James had doubted that this teenaged boy was indeed his risen father, those doubts left him now. “Never trust a vampire,” said Xander, not trying to come any closer. He folded his arms in front of him and let his weight rest on one leg.

James blinked. “I miss you,” he said, surprised at the words. It wasn’t what he had meant to say.

Xander looked surprised then looked quickly away. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ve missed you too.”

“Even before you...” James shrugged and tried to think how one spoke of their death with the dead. “I missed you then, too, you know?”

Xander nodded. He dipped his head. “I knew, James. You did the right thing.”
James felt some enormous tension shoot up his spine and just fly away. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Xander’s eyes were dark in the half light, but they seemed to darken more. “Are you?” he took a step closer. His eyes flicked to the stake that James had wrapped his fingers around. “Are you going to use that?”

“Do I need to?” asked James softly.

His father’s eyes were solemn and black and James thought he had never seen his father look so serious, so deadly calm. “Maybe,” said Xander. “I think some people would think you should. I wasn’t sure what it would be like, you know?” James barely noticed as Xander took another step towards him. “I guess I thought I’d be myself but undead. But I’m not. It’s more like I’m outside myself. Xander Harris is over there,” he gestured and seemed to squint briefly towards some shadowy corner of the yard. “A memory. And he’s fading. And then there’s me.”

“Are you...?”

“Evil?” and Xander’s grin answered the question.

James hand slowly lifted the stake. Xander regarded it, raised a speculative eyebrow. “I really don’t think you could use that, James,” he said.
“I think I could, dad,” said James, not caring that his voice shook. “To protect my son.”

“Yeah, okay, I get that.” Xander took another step towards him. “Where is Brendan? I’d like to see him.”

James rose unsteadily. Standing on the porch step, rolling the stake in his hand. “Don’t come any closer dad.”

“The spell took, James,” said Xander, his eyes blank in the shadows.

James just watched him.

“I have my soul.” Xander looked down for a second and when he looked back up the flash of humor across his face was startling. “Of course, that really doesn’t matter, does it?”

“What...what are you going to do?”

“Just talk. I just want to talk, James.” Xander took another step, saw his son’s arm rise, sighed and stopped. “I don’t know why they’ve let me come back here, but I wanted to talk.”

James nodded. “Okay. I ... I was hoping you know?”

Xander nodded, studying him. “Maybe that’s why I’m here. You put the orb in the casket with me?”
James nodded.

“Thanks.”

“Patricia thinks I’m crazy.”

Xander laughed. “Your mother thought I was crazy.”

“She thought you were going to go to hell.”

Xander was silent, a thoughtful look on his face. “I wonder...”

“Did you, dad?” asked James sadly.

“No,” said Xander with assurance. “No, I woke up somewhere ... different is all.”

“Heaven?”

Xander laughed and shook his head. “I really don’t think so.”

“Is mom there?” asked James wistfully.

“No,” said Xander gently. “No, I haven’t seen your mother, James. But maybe she doesn’t need me. Maybe she has everything she wants already.”
James contemplated this. He moved to the edge of the steps and perched on the porch rail there. “I don’t understand.”

“Valhalla maybe,” said Xander, thoughtfully.

“Viking heaven?”

Xander laughed. “I always wanted to be a Viking.”

“You deserved the best, dad,” said James fervently.

Xander looked surprised again. “Thanks, son. So do you.”

James looked at the stake in his hand. “I’m sorry about this ... I wasn’t sure.” He bent as if to put it down.

“Don’t,” said Xander quickly. “Never trust a demon, James.”

James hesitated, the stake still gripped in his hand. “Dad, I know its you. I know I’m safe.”

“No you don’t. Never. Never trust a demon. Okay?”

James nodded, straightening, watching his father with those eyes Xander would remember forever. Dark as his own and solemn with belief and trust. “Okay, dad.”

“Now, I want you to go inside and hold my grandson up by the window so I can wave goodbye.”
“Dad...”

“I love you James,” said Xander. He looked quickly around the yard, up at the sky, took a deep breath and seemed to almost scent the wind. “Smog,” he said. And laughed. “God, who knew I’d miss that smell. Go on, James,” he said. “I’d kiss you goodbye, but I don’t want you to come that close.”

“I love you, Dad,” whispered James, feeling the tears he hadn’t shed finally pressing against his eyes.

“I know,” said Xander. “And now you have to let me go.” He turned and took a few paces back towards the shadows. “Let me say goodbye to my grandson.”

James ran into the house, jerked open the drapes and urged his surprised wife over as she cradled his sleepy son against her shoulder. “Out there Patricia, in the yard?”

“Who?” Patricia stared at the oddly dressed teenaged boy who stood in the halflight of the city night, looking up at their living room windows.

“Dad,” said James. He lifted Brandon’s hand. “Bye bye grandpa,” he managed to say, as tears rose in his throat.
Patricia waved automatically. The slender dark boy in the yard waved back, then turned and seemed to be absorbed by the shadows. Her husband collapsed onto the sofa, buried his face in his hands and finally let himself cry. Thank God. Patricia sank down next to him. Let James take his son and rub his damp face against him, ran her hands over his hair and made soothing noises while he cried.

~*~*~*~*~

The body was cold, but not stiff. Spike had never thought about it. But the rigor didn’t happen to someone turned. They merely lay, cold and still, until they woke. He had been able to extract himself from Xander’s embrace. The smell of the blood and the cum and sweat almost too much for him. He had bathed the body finally. And wrapped the velvet again around him. Now he lay beside him, a space between them, watching the unmoving eyelids, his fingers loosely lying in the cool hand.

Something happened. Xander’s eyelids twitched and the hand within his jerked. His chest didn’t rise, his mouth didn’t open to take breath. Not like Xander waking in the morning, not a sight that Spike had watched a hundred
times in the past month. Just eyelids snapping open. He turned his head and stared directly at Spike.

“They let me say goodbye to my son,” Xander said.

~*~*~*~*~

“Are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine, Spike, I told you.” Xander moved from one side of the tent to the other. He paused at the door. “How long until sunset?”

“It’s dark enough now, Xander. You can leave…”

“Feels itchy. Feels weird. I don’t want to go out there.” Xander took another few paces across the tent, turned and paced back.

“Xander... what can I do...?” Spike tried to catch the dervish that was his childe at Xander’s next pass, but as usual, his touch was avoided. Not wanted. Xander skittered like a wild colt and ducked his head as he stepped up to the door of the tent and peered out.

“Are you hungry, love?” asked Spike, unlacing the ties of his shirt, preparing to bare his neck for Xander.
Xander rolled his eyes, startled, his gaze ripped over Spike’s neck then jerked away. “N...no thank you,” he said.

He had fed once, right after waking. A hungry savage thing like a starving wolf. Finally pulling away from Spike, eyes wide and startled. Mouth gaping, as if for breath he no longer needed.

“It’s different, isn’t it?” he had stated, staring at Spike as if he didn’t know him. And Spike’s heart had frozen and cracked all at once.

“Xander,” said Spike through gritted teeth. “You have to feed.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call it that,” said Xander, not looking at him.

“Eat, then. You have to eat.”

“I’ll wait for the pigs blood,” said Xander. He seemed to twitch in place. All edges and nerves. He flicked at the tent door again. “How long now until sunset?”

Spike had no idea what he should do. He’d never had to control another demon before. At least not one he cared for. He’d never been responsible for another demon
before. Not like this. “Xander, pet, the ceremony starts at sunset, but we can go down before that.”

“Don’t call me that, Spike.”

Spike felt almost dizzy with relief at hearing something familiar from his lover. “Sorry, Xan.”

“Though, I guess you have a right, now, don’t you?” Xander gave him a look full of something Spike could not read. “Now that you’re my sire?”

Spike didn’t know how to answer this and so was speechless.

Xander had begun his nervous pacing again. “I have to thank Giles,” he said, looking surprised at himself. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Course, luv,” said Spike.

“I ... I’m pretty sure that’s right,” said Xander to himself. “It’s funny how hard...” He rubbed at his neck again and Spike couldn’t help but see the bluish marks standing out against the too pale skin.

“Xander, luv,” he was pleading now. “You have to eat. You can’t go amongst humans ... your friends... this hungry.”
Xander turned his head slowly, as if it were heavy. He stared at Spike. “Why is that?”

Spike wanted to beg for forgiveness. To throw himself at Xander’s feet and apologize for what he’d done and maybe change it back. But that’s not what Xander needed right now. So Spike set his jaw and held Xander’s gaze. “You know why.”

Xander looked away. Spike saw his throat constrict as he swallowed hard. “Oh,” he said finally. “Okay, I guess I should.”

He shuffled sideways, kind of coming at Spike with an uncomfortable movement and a frown on his face. “Uh, okay then...” he looked at Spike’s neck and his tongue came out as if of its own volition and swiped his lower lip.

Spike approached him cautiously. A hungry powerful, newly risen vampire could be very dangerous, even to his Sire. “It’s okay, Xan,” he said, raising an arm in invitation and also as a possible defense. “Just let it come. I’m here for you.” Xander seemed to just rush into his arms. Awkward and bumpy and all elbows, like an adolescent boy, his face barely transformed, fangs descended from gaping mouth he fastened to Spike’s throat with a choking cry and Spike had barely registered the strength
of Xander’s arms, the hardness of him, belly and thigh pressed against Spike’s belly and thigh, when the fangs ripped inexactly through his throat and the pain and desire shot into Spike’s brain.

He clung to his Childe and let him take as much as he thought he should before he gently began pushing him away. Xander hung on to him, terrifically strong and obviously hungry. His feeding loud and messy, blood dribbling over Spike’s chest, staining his shirt. Obviously aroused as well, he ground into Spike, his body seeming as ravenous as his mouth. One strong thigh wrapped around Spike’s ass and pulling him against him. Spike felt on fire, sensation buzzing through him. He felt about to come over and over only controlling himself because of his responsibility to control Xander.

“Xander,” said Spike, his voice strained. Then, “Xander, childe, stop now.” In his most commanding voice.

Xander pushed away almost violently. Head down, a meek but rebellious expression on his face. ‘Can’t help it,” he growled. “I’m so ... so hungry. And ...” he looked away, brows lowering with a kind of ferocity, hips shifting uncomfortably. “and ... other stuff.”
Spike smiled with affection. Who knew the demonic ridges could look so sweet and disarming, so endearing. “Xan, pet, you’ll have to learn some manners.”

“Sorry,” said Xander, sounding anything but. He wiped at his mouth with his sleeve, blinking hard and jerking his shoulders as he attempted to resume his human visage. “Still hungry,” he muttered a bit testily.

“I know, luv.” Spike “You will be for a time. But then you’ll get used to it.”

“You didn’t tell me,” said Xander. “About the hunger.”

Spike felt struck. “I’m sorry, Xan. I thought ... Well, I guess I’m so used to it, and I thought you knew.”

Xander had turned away. Finding a cloth and dabbing at his face and neck with it. “didn’t know,” he said, surly. “Guess there’s nothing to do about it now.”

“I’m sorry, Xander.” Spike didn’t know if he wanted to weep or scream. He was so hard he could have come if he only opened his pants and touched himself. Had been since the boy had first inadvertently slipped into gameface. But the distrust and horror and intermittent fear that kept skating across Xander’s face. The way he stared at Spike as if suddenly embarrassed by his presence. His heart was breaking, a slow painful tearing
across the middle. How could he love Xander more just as the boy was learning to hate him? How could that happen?

“Don’t be.” Xander shrugged. “Here,” he said, shoving the damp cloth roughly into Spike’s hands. “I made a mess, I guess. Sorry about your shirt.”

“I don’t care about the shirt. I only care about you.”

Xander’s shoulders moved uncomfortably and he didn’t turn to face Spike. “That’s nice,” he said.

“Xander, please, I … tell me what you want luv. Do you want … do want some space in the other tent? You don’t have to…”

“No, that’s okay, Spike. I know, you’re my sire. I’m supposed to aren’t I?” He waved his fingers vaguely towards their bed. “With you?”

“Not if we don’t want it that way.”

“Is that normal?” Now Xander did turn to look at him. He looked small and worried. “Is it normal for us to not want that? Isn’t it, like, a compulsion, no matter how we feel?”

His chin raised, that stubborn firmness that made Spike’s heart ache at the familiarity. He was watching Spike with a mixture of defensiveness and fear. And a bulb lit in
Spike’s brain. The soul. Of course. Xander had risen with the soul intact. The demon and its instincts instantly at battle with the conscience. Xander’s instincts, for good or ill, were all over the map. He simply did not know what to do.

Spike walked up to him, took his hands. He saw Xander flinch a bit as if to pull away, but he held on firmly. “We aren’t normal, either one of us Xander. We’ll make our own rules.”

“But do you want it?”

“Course I do.”

“Do you want it now?” and Xander’s eyes traveled down Spike’s torso to his obvious bulge.

Spike swallowed hard to restore his voice. “Only if you do.”

Xander nodded solemnly. “Okay.” And without further ceremony he reached up and jerked off his shirt. Began unlacing his pants.

“Xander...”
Xander’s hands stopped their work. He looked at Spike, as if unsure. “You did mean... on the bed, right? I thought...”

“Luv, I just want...” Spike wanted to weep again. Xander looked so lost and uncertain. His white chest glowing and hard in the lamplight. His eyes black. “Yes, the bed.”

Xander nodded and dropped his pants to the floor. Spike was infinitely relieved to see that Xander, too, was erect. The boy just trotted over to the bed and dropped down. He spread out there and looked up at Spike expectantly. Spike removed his clothing in a kind of trance. He wanted Xander more than anything but the act seemed almost like rape. As if he were taking the man while he had been drinking too much or was on drugs. Xander seemed so much not himself. Too malleable, too easy to command.

He stood, naked, above his lover and asked one more time. “Do you want this, Xander?”

Xander nodded, one hand wandering down to grip his erection and pull lazily at it. “Your blood always makes me horny, Spike.”

Spike knelt on the bed, caressed Xander’s cold chest, his thighs. Ran his hand up into the smooth cool hair at the
nape of his neck. “Xan,” he said, tearfully. “Are you sure you aren’t cold?”

“Am I too cold now?” said Xander softly. “is that why you keep looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

Xander’s eyes were shining and wet and the obvious struggle to keep that emotion at bay, to hide the humiliation of it, made his lip tremble his jaw clench. “Like you’re sorry you did it. Like you don’t want me now.”


“You pushed me away when I woke. You... you cried. You said you were sorry.” Xander’s chest was heaving up and down as if breathing hard with emotion. It was a habit a new fledge might fall into when under duress.

“I AM sorry, Xan. Look what I’ve done to you.”

“I’m cold now, I ... you don’t want me.”

“Xander, I want you more than ever!”

Xander shook his head. “You pushed me away.”
“Xan, luv,” Spike attempted to gather the over-strong overwrought vampire against him. “Xander you’ll drink too much at first. I have to control you, do you understand? God! You have no idea how much I want you.”

“I’m ugly now,” said Xander against his chest. Spike chuckled, let the growl enter into it. “Not to me, pet.”

Xander’s head raised. He looked at him. “No?” He let the gameface ripple up, brows crooked and hard, ridges bringing out the gold in the slightly slanted eyes. His fangs were very white and tiny. Sharp. “You don’t think this is ugly?”

“Far from it,’ said Spike sincerely, and brought his mouth down, rippling into gameface as he went so that their fangs clashed and fought, bringing blood to their lips and tongue. He felt Xander shuddering under him at the sensation and the taste and reveled in the feeling of sharing this with someone he loved.

“Oh!” Xander pushed him back, stared at him. He raised his fingers and the talons at the ends gave Spike a delicious tingle as they traced the ridges beside his eyes. “I ... I kind of liked that.”

“The pain, luv?”
“Yeah.” Xander grinned and Spike had to kiss that mouth. That wonderful Xander grin, that looked so perfect now, with fangs and a little demonic snark. Xander nipped at him, playfully, catching his lips then rolled his tongue, plunging deep into Spike’s mouth and purposely sharing his own blood with him. The magic blood tingled and burned between them and Xander arched against him, his strong hands gripping Spike’s biceps and suddenly they were flipped over, Spike’s ass in the air and Xander, full game face, was lapping at his hole.

“Aack!” was about all Spike could manage as the cool super strong tongue snaked its way past his muscle and wriggled inside him.

“Want to nibble,” Xander spoke against his pucker and Spike almost came. A tiny pinch of pain at his ass hole and Spike was clawing the sheets, the air, electricity jerking through him as he felt his cum splattering onto his face.

Then his ass was back on the sheets and all of Xander’s weight was flung on top of him, his face human and inches from his nose, an unholy gleam in those black eyes. “So what’s up with the demonic endurance thing?” said Xander. “Is it true? Cuz, I so want to try that out.”
They were a little late for their party.

Xander was nervous and shy of going into the building at the last.

“What if its different?” he asked Spike worriedly. His hand came out for the hundredth time since they had set out, seeking reassurance.

Spike wasn’t sure how to handle his lover’s obvious dependency and need for guidance. He decided to just go with the waves of protective feelings he was experiencing. He grasped Xander’s hand and squeezed.

“It is different, Xan,” he said. “You’re different. You might not feel the same about anything.”

“I feel the same about you,” said Xander, looking at him with wide open honest eyes.

*Fucking Hell what had he done to deserve this?* “Me, too, luv,” Spike answered hoarsely.

Xander grinned, that white lightening flashing over the darkened face. “So, should I walk in in gameface?”
Spike laughed out loud. “Don’t think they’re ready for that, Xan. Old Rupert’d have a heart attack, wouldn’t he?”

“Giles.” Said Xander. He looked worried again. “Oh, God, Spike. Listen, why don’t you go in ahead of me, check it out...” he was backing away from the door.

“Oh no you don’t,” Spike captured Xander’s wrist and gave it a firm tug.

They pushed through the door together. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that all conversation ceased at their entrance. That you could have heard a pin drop. The patrollers, Dahla Giles and half the village, were lined up against the wall. Every eye on Xander.

Xander got no further than the door and froze, staring at his friends. His mouth opened, reflexively to take a breath, and the panic, when his lungs didn’t respond. But then Spike’s arm was around him, Spike’s rumbling voice vibrating against his ribs.

“Mmmm smorgasbord!” said Spike with relish and he smacked his lips.

Tybor’s surprised face relaxed into a wide grin. His brother laughed out loud and slapped another patroller on the back. There was a general shuffle and faces
looked around, exchanged smiles. Xander felt the focus off him somewhat and relaxed.

“C’mon, Xan,” Spike purposely did not refer to Xander as ‘Childe’ in front of his friends. “Let’s open our prezzies.”

And there was a small stack of gifts at one end of the banquet table. Xander, still a little shocky and skittish, was gradually induced to stand near the packages, at the head of what appeared to be an informal receiving line. Well-wishers congratulating, shaking his hand.

“Th ... thanks,” he said raspily over and over. Then a worn, dry, older hand slid into his grasp and Xander stood looking down at Giles’ hand.

“Congratulations, Xander,” said Giles in an unreadable voice. He squeezed once and released. Xander forced himself to raise his chin, to look Giles in the face.

Giles looked as nervous and unsure as he felt. “Hey, G-man,” said Xander, and he smiled.

Tears instantaneously flooded Giles eyes. And just as quickly, Berynn was there. The shining dark head pressed into Giles shoulder, green eyes dancing up at Xander.

“*Congratulations*” he said solemnly. “Way to go, dude,” he pronounced carefully.
Spike, busily fetching pig’s blood for his Childe, heard Xander’s happy laughter from across the room. He looked up in time to see Xander embracing Berynn, then after a moment’s hesitation, embracing Giles.

~*~*~*~*~

The frost crunched under their feet, and distantly Spike swore he heard the sound of frogs, but he thought he might be imagining that.

“Berynn offered his blood,” said Xander, speaking for the first time since they had left the party.

Spike rode through the stab of jealousy. “What’d you say?”

Xander fingers wrapped around his, bringing them closer together on the path. Spike noted how their strides matched, how easily they fit together like this, side by side. “I told him I’d think about it.”

Spike growled something under his breath about ‘feckin fairies’. “Maybe you should ask yer Sire first,” he said.

Xander slowed, loosing Spike’s fingers. “What?”
“Fer permission, whelp. Before you go about biting all and sundry.”

“Permission?”

Spike looked back at his hesitating partner. *Oh oh.*

“Uh, Spike, I’m a vampire, not a baby.”

“Sure, Xan, but yer inexperienced. It's my job to…”

“Tell me what to do?” Xander’s eyes narrowed. Spike thought he had never quite seen the potential for violence in the man before. He asserted his authority nevertheless.

“I’m yer Sire.”

“You know, Spike,” said Xander slowly. “The way you keep saying that? It’s really annoying.”

“Oh,” said Spike, “I like that. Here you are just an hour ago all clinging and needy and now yer all ‘I’m a grown vampire, Sire. You can’t tell me what ta do, Sire.’”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Spike.”

“‘S for your own good, pet.”

The slug in his arm was neither soft nor friendly. “Don’t call me that.”
Spike rubbed the abused bicep and reconsidered his position. But, no, he was right. “You don’t know what’s what yet, Xander. You need me to tell you…”

“I think not, Spike,” said Xander. And he crossed his arms across his chest. Spike almost expected him to stomp his foot. “You didn’t let Angel boss you around,” said Xander.

“Angel was a wanker. And not trying to boss you. Just keep you outta mischief.”

“Mischief? Keep me out of… this from William the Bloody?”

“Oh, fer…” Spike rolled his head in an irritated gesture. If Xander didn’t look so bloody adorable, standing there in a snit, half in gameface, starlight in his eyes and the wind tossing his long hair about, Spike would… hang on, what had they been talking about?

“If I want to bite my friend I will,” Xander stated. “If they’re willing and I feel like it, I’ll bite every guy we patrolled with.”

“Oh, listen to the big demon,” said Spike presenting Xander to the empty night air. “’If they’re willing’. Pathetic!” he said in Xander’s face, teeth snapping.
“You’re just jealous because nobody offered to you!” Xander shouted back.

“Nobody but you, pet,” Spike sneered. “Oh, excuse me. You didn’t offer. You begged.”

“I never begged,” Xander protested, outraged.

“Oh, I definitely remember begging” Spike smiled despite himself.

“You begged a lot too,” said Xander. “Between the screaming.” And a smile played on his lips as well.

“Right. The screaming. Don’t wanna forget the screamin’” said Spike, taking a curving little step that brought him into Xander’s personal space.

“Spike,” said Xander, and he ran his fingers down the lapel of Spike’s dress shirt. “I think I might have forgotten some of the screaming.”

“Hell, that’ll never do,” said Spike, low, pulling Xander towards him so he could nuzzle at his neck, maybe nip at his ear. “Need ta remind you, I expect,” he whispered.

Xander’s let his hands find Spike’s ass. He squeezed and grinned when Spike gasped and bumped against him.

“Mine,” said Xander, happily.
Spike growled in what he hoped was an impressively frightening manner, but which he suspected sounded more like a whimper. Xander’s hands tightened again on his butt. His head lowered and the cool silk of his hair rubbed Spike’s face as his sharp teeth wrote a line of heat down his neck.

“Need ta teach you yer place, Childe,” Spike squeeked. “I claimed YOU remember?”

“Well,” murmured Xander, kneading and nuzzling and still urging Spike backwards up the path towards their home. “I claim you now, Spike.” he straightened suddenly, and grabbing Spike’s hand, yanked as he almost skipped forward. “C’mon, lets do the bitey thing and have a party of our own.”

“Wha…?” Spike protested, following helplessly. “Bitey thing?”

The face that Xander turned back to him was wicked and cheerful and full of love.

“Xander Harris,” breathed Spike. “You slay me.”

~*~*~*~*~
It wasn’t the first afternoon that Spike had rolled and woken from a deep sleep to find Xander missing. The new fledge was hyperactive and his sleep patterns were erratic.

Spike trotted down to the ritualistic cave. It was where he found Xander the most often these days. Beneath a moss covered natural hillside, just to the other side of the bridge between the dark and the light.

A mineral spring emerged from the high face of the rocky front of the cave and trickled down to a small basin made by the villagers. The traditional pottery jars of offerings were lined up at its lip. In addition to something that resembled a wineskin. Spike bravely raised the vessel to his lips and tasted.

_Oh yeah, baby I missed you._ The tangy and wholly welcome bitter bite of alcohol spread over his tongue and down his throat. Increased sunlight meant energy left over for the growth of grapes and the fermentation of those fruits of the vine.

Voices and footsteps and a slight figure emerged from the caves entrance.
Berynn was almost past him when Spike’s hand shot out and caught him by the forearm. He twisted the young man's arm over and nodded at the fresh red bites there.

“Nice,” he said. He looked up in time to see Xander emerging from the cave. “Gettin’ ta be a habit, is it?”

“No, Spike,” said Xander rolling his eyes. “Berynn was chosen fair and square in the lottery.”

“Ah,” said Spike, releasing the boys arm. Berynn trotted off, looking a little paler than usual. Spike followed Berynn’s exit with unreadable eyes.

Halfway across the bridge, Giles appeared, walking to the crest. He met Berynn there and they embraced.

“Spike,” said Xander, watching his friends as they kissed. “There are seasons here, yeah?”

“Guess you could call it that, Xan. Gets really cold. Gets hot.”

“So you must have had some sense of time?”

“Guess. Don’t pay much attention.”

“I don’t see a lot of kids around,” Xander said in an apparent non-sequitar.
Spike frowned. Xander kept thinking of things he had never considered. It made him feel a little dopey. "’Spect the fairies don’t breed often."

“Why not?”

Spike snorted in frustration and slapped the wineskin down. “I don’t know, Xander. Didn’t really concern me, did it?”

“I just wonder... Spike, how old is Berynn?”

“What? Berynn?” Spike swiveled and regarded the slender dark man who now was folded in Giles’ arms. “Hmmm, ancient, really. Over a hundred I expect.”

Xander gaped. “Are you serious?” he squeaked.

Spike looked puzzled. “Sure. All these fairies are older ‘n time. Mebbee it’s the lack of sun, they just don’t age.”

Xander was laughing. Sitting hard on a fence railing and slapping his knee.

“You okay, pet?” asked Spike dubiously.

Xander reached over and whacked his arm routinely. “Don’t call me that,” before collapsing again into giggles. When he had finally recovered from his fit, he said, “Do me a favor, Spike?”
“Anythin’, Xander,” said Spike without thought.

“Don’t ever tell Giles what you just told me.”

Spike’s eyebrows raised. He looked at Xander, then twisted his head again to look at the old Watcher and his ‘young’ man. He grinned.

Berynn trotted towards the village and Giles could be seen coming towards them. He crossed the line into darkness, smiling. “Xander!” he called. “Berynn said you’ve worked out some sort of message system.”

Xander shrugged. “We’ve set up a room in the caves.”

Giles stood before him, those blue eyes so peaceful and rested, thought Xander. He realized that Giles had always been worried, always been tense. “A kind of chapel,” Giles suggested.


“No, Spike,” said Xander patiently. “It’s just a convenient way for the villagers to donate swine’s blood, and to request intervention if they have any danger threatening.”

“Berynn said the donation rituals will continue.”
Xander shuffled uncomfortably. He had trouble meeting his friend’s eye. “They requested it, Giles.”

“That’s right,” Spike said. “Be a bit of strain, you know, drinkin’ human when we’ve been so spoilt on swine.” He and Xander exchanged a look that Giles could only describe as ‘wicked’.

A butterfly, white and yellow and dancing crazily as it crossed into the shadows, circled Xander’s head then made its crooked way back into the light.

“Giles,” Xander watched the butterfly, his voice casual. “Do you remember Heaven?”

Giles looked surprised at this question and then... embarrassed. “I’m rather pleased that I don’t remember my afterlife,” he said, a faint blush staining his cheeks. “I can’t imagine that it was very pleasant.”

“You think you went to Hell, Watcher?” asked Spike grinning. “Cheek, that! What makes you think you were evil enough?”

Giles cast his eyes down.

Spike made an appreciative noise. “Wanna hear that story some day,” he said.
“I don’t remember anything either,” said Xander slowly. He looked up at Spike.

“Don’t ask me, Harris,” said Spike. “I woke undead, remember? Though I have been to Hell...” he said, his brows lowering, and then, disturbingly, he smiled.

“I don’t want to know,” said Xander immediately. “And I can safely say, I never will. But, Spike, what happened the last day of the world?”


Giles shuddered slightly.

“Did you and Angel see it happen?” persisted Xander.

Spike looked puzzled. “What ... what do you mean?”

“Where were you? Were you far away? You SAW it blow up?”

Spike rubbed at the back of his neck. “Yeah...” he looked vague.

“What do you actually remember?”
“What are you getting at, Harris?”

“Yes, Xander, what ARE you getting at?”

“It just all seems kind of weird.”

Spike snorted. “Yer just comprehendid’ that now?”

“No, I mean,” Xander waved to include the Bridge, the light, the frigging meadow with the butterflies. “The whole happy ending. It doesn’t seem right somehow.”

“Speak for yerself, Harris. Drinkin’ pigs blood for an eternity don’t seem like no happy ending to this vampire.”

Xander grinned up at him with that new evil smile of his. The one that made Spike’s short and curlies curl just a little bit tighter. “Except the occasional willing virgin sacrifice,” he reminded Spike.

Spike smiled back despite himself. He didn’t know which seemed better. Human’s blood, or the thought of watching his Childe drinking human’s blood. “Yeah, there’s that.”

“And Childes blood,” said Xander arching his neck just that little bit it took to make Spike’s eyes and libido go straight to the scars.
Giles cleared his throat.

“Really,” he said uncomfortably. “I don’t know how we managed to go from discussions of Heaven to discussions of blood drinking so quickly.”

“Yer hangin’ with the tough crowd, now, Rupert,” said Spike, his eyes still tasting Xander appreciatively.

Xander let just the tip of his tongue come out. And in a trick disturbingly like his sire, he bit at it and grinned. Spike made a noise and shifted his weight.

“Yes, well,” said Giles, feeling suddenly completely invisible. He rose. “I’ll be off, then.”

He had made it halfway across the bridge, when he heard Xander calling him back.

“Sorry,” said Xander, as Giles approached. He was leaned against the tree that verged just to the edge of the light. Spike was nowhere in sight. Light shifted and shuffled on the ground less than a yard from Xander’s booted feet, but he shifted his weight easily, apparently unafraid.

“We’re still kind of Newlyweds,” he explained, shrugging.

“I understand,” said Giles. Surprised to realize that he really did.
A breeze moved the branches of the tree and light shunted back and forth across its trunk. Xander looked up, white and gray shadow highlighting his smile, the shining hair, the eyes that were still Xander’s but also now no longer of this world. Giles thought how much like an immortal Xander looked already. How ready to become a legend, a tale of a young male God.

“Will you come visit us?” asked Xander hopefully.

“Of course,” said Giles though he suspected this was a lie. “And someday,” he paused, wondering if this were the occasion to mention this or if it should wait for another day, another time.

But one couldn’t always count on another time. “They don’t know what causes cancer,” said Giles.

Xander’s eyes went solemn and sad.

“It could be genetic, or environmental,” Giles went on carefully. “Perhaps someday...”

Xander was looking back over his shoulder. Back towards Spike.

“I’ll come visit you, Xander,” Giles promised sincerely.

~*~*~*~*~
“So you an’ the Watcher have a nice chat?” Spike was waiting at the turn at the top of the first rise. Leaning against one of the oak trees that seemed to have grown practically overnight. He looked casual enough. Studying the stitching in the pouch Berynn had given him. But Xander knew that look. There was another lecture coming.

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” he said. “I know the way home.”

“Yeah? Not gonna detour to bite anymore humans?”

“Boy, Spike, you are so obvious its embarrassing.”

“Sure I am, kid. It’s my trademark. But whatta are you talkin’ about?”

“You’re jealous.”

“Am not!” Spike’s eyes flared indignantly. “I’m worried about you is all.”

Xander decided to change the subject immediately. He grinned and licked his lips. “So what do you want to do tonight? Berynn said they found slaughtered swine at the north face the other day. There might be something over there worth killing.”
“All full of energy now, are you?” said Spike, falling in beside Xander as they strode up the path.

“Oh, yeah.”

Spike lay a hand companionably on Xander’s arm. “Warm, too. Little fairie musta let you drink deep.”

“I had to push him away,” said Xander, a lusty tone in his voice, his eyes deepening at the memory.

Spike tisked. “Xan, you’ve got to stop this.”

“What?” the look of innocence was something Xander just couldn’t pull off anymore. He enjoyed it all too much.

“I dunno if yer losing control of the bloodlust or if yer just defying me...”

“Defying...?”

“Rebelling.”

“Oh brother,” said Xander with a weary shake of his shaggy head towards the heavens. “Are we back to that Sire stuff?”

“Back to it? We never left it, brat.”
“You know, I SAW the way you and Angel got along. How obedient you were...”

“Angel was a wanker. Needed a good kick in the arse now and then.” He glanced sideways at Xander who was regarding him with a raised eyebrow, lower lip caught in the sharp fangs.

Spike grinned. “Bet you think you know what my arse needs?”

“A good ‘kicking’?” rumbled Xander, low. They bumped together as they walked, their arms arching across each other’s backs.

~*~*~*~*~

James had been back in the office for an hour before he dared to brave the red message light on his phone. He opened the calendar on the computer, saw the pages and pages of unopened emails, and, groaning, opted for the lesser of the two evils.

He hit the delete button repeatedly as he sorted through studio announcements, expressions of sympathy (who leaves something like that on an answering machine?) and suspiciously hopeful questions about rumors that he
was not coming back. Then he sat up straight and fumbled for a pen and pad of paper.

He pressed the repeat button on the phone, a sweat popping out all over his body under the crisp cotton. “Yes,” said the voice. “This message is for James Harris. Mr. Harris, I’ve seen your recent story synopsis and I think you have an interesting idea there.”

Shit. Shit shit shit. Which story synopsis had he sent to this man’s office? James rubbed his forehead, trying to remember in the morass of mourning and insanity which wild idea he had sent to the offices of Joss Whedon.

“This story about a teenaged girl vampire slayer?” said the message, “I think we should talk.”

The End