

Pairing: Spike/Xander

Rating: *NC17, some language, implied slash*

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Summary: *Two friends meet again after a long time separated.*

Beta: *The lovely LadyMerlin*

Photo Manip: *Me*

Distribution: *Ask, I'll probably say yes.*



Manip by the author

Auld Acquaintance

by
WmGeorge

Xander sat at the bar, a beautifully carved walking stick propped next to him. He sipped a lukewarm beer and wondered how his life had gotten so far out of kilter. After the fall of Sunnydale, he'd drifted. First in Africa, searching for slayers. Later, to no real purpose. He'd become used to living on the road, and couldn't seem to settle down. *Not like I was the poster boy for normalcy before, but this is ridiculous. Ever since I found out...* He cut off that line of thought and lifted the glass to his lips.

The bartender wandered over, leaned against the polished surface, and lifted an eyebrow at Xander. "You okay, buddy? Look a little down."

"Seen better days. Seen worse, too. Guess it balances out, but right now – you couldn't prove it by me." He shrugged. "As they say, this too shall pass."

A spotlight lit the stage at the back of the bar and a man's voice boomed through the speaker system. "Good evening. I know why you're here, and so do you. And I won't make you wait. Folks, get those tips ready for Rex." Music started and a young man, dressed as a Roman gladiator, strutted onto the stage.

Xander chuckled. "Oh, wow, this brings back memories."

The bartender grinned. "You used to work the stage, huh? What was your name? Maybe I heard of you."

"Doubt it. It was in Oxnard, California – and it was many moons ago, my friend. When I was younger, more desperate, and way better-looking than I am now."

An older man, silver showing in his dark hair, sat next to Xander. "You're not exactly hard on the eyes." He held out his hand, and Xander automatically shook it. "Name's Arthur Gentry. This is my place. You wouldn't be looking for work, would you? Could always use another dancer."

Xander frowned. "Wouldn't think there'd be a huge market for one-eyed, older, scarred strippers. Your humor – if that's what it is – isn't appreciated, Mr. Gentry."

The older man smiled. “The name of this place is Warrior’s, and if you stick around for the full show, you’ll see it’s appropriate. My clientele isn’t solely interested in perfection. We value the male form in all its glory – and if that glory includes battle scars, we don’t complain.” He placed a thick binder on the bar. “Take a look – we get retired military, former cops, ex-cons – if they have a good body, dance well, and can stay out of trouble, they’ve probably been up on that stage.”

Xander shot him a quick glance and opened the binder. He flipped rapidly through the pages, eye widening at some of the pictures. He closed the book and returned his gaze to Gentry. “You do realize that not all of your dancers are, uh... That is...”

“They aren’t all human. Yes, I’m aware of that. They are, however, all non-violent. Just looking to make their way in this world. I’m surprised you noticed that, however. Most of them pass quite well. Where are you from?”

“Lately, all over. Originally, Sunnydale.”

Gentry nodded. “That would explain it. Please, no violence here. My dancers and customers mean no

harm.”

Xander flapped a hand at him. “Not looking to start anything. Not looking to work, either. Just passing through. Stopped in because... Well, today’s an anniversary, sort of. Wanted to have a beer in memory of a friend.”

“In that case, let me buy you one. No warrior should fall without a tribute.”

Xander nodded. “Thanks.”

Gentry returned the nod and rose from his stool, walking through the bar. He chatted with customers, checked to make sure everyone was happy, and in general acted like what he was – a man who wanted to keep his business humming happily along, and knew just how to do that.

The bartender turned back to Xander. “If you tell me your friend’s name, we’ll ring the bell for him next break.”

“Ring the bell?”

The bartender nodded. “It’s something we do for fallen

warriors. We ring the bell, say their name, and the whole house toasts them.”

Xander thought it through and then smiled. “He’d like that. Always did enjoy being the center of attention, the egotistical bastard.” He slipped his fingers under the patch’s band and rubbed at the red indentation left by the elastic. “He was possibly the most irritating, arrogant, and deadly son of a bitch I’ve ever met. He was ... my best friend, my lover, my everything. And oh my god, it’s true – people will say anything to a bartender. Shit, sorry to dump that on you.” He took a deep breath. “His name was Spike. So, yeah – ring the damn bell, and let’s drink to him.”

Two hours later, and well after sunset, Xander exited the bar, walking stick firmly in hand. He’d had only two beers – these days he couldn’t afford to get drunk – although they’d rung the bell for Spike four times. Once for each death, and once for him as Xander’s lost love. He sighed as he made his way down the sidewalk, intent on getting to his room and falling into bed. Maybe tonight he’d actually sleep.

He stopped at the corner, waiting for the light to change, and felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. He shifted

his stick into a two-handed grip, looked around, and gasped. Across the street, under a light, was a motorcycle. Leaning against it was a dead man.

Xander crossed the street in a daze, stopping in the pool of light. It couldn't be, but it was. Spike. No one else had that cocky, sexy look. No one else had cheekbones sharp enough to wound. No one else had those incredibly blue eyes. "*Spike?* How... When... Why?"

"Hallo, pet."

"Are you ... real?"

"Real as you, luv. Was drifting along, then I heard a voice saying a warrior needed me. Popped up in the conference room at the Watcher's Council. Set them all atwitter, trying to sort themselves out."

Xander's brain latched onto one word. "Warrior? Who?"

"Didn't actually give a shite about that. Asked Rupes where you were. Told me you'd done a runner after a bad fight. Git. You've never run – wouldn't know how. So I had Red locate you and transport me here. Along with my ride, o'course." A scarred eyebrow rose. "Been a lot

of years, Xan – you don't look much older. Got a story there, yeah?"

"You could say that. Um ... the bad fight was really bad. I died. And then I was alive. Turns out, I'm an Immortal. Can only die if someone chops off my head. So I travel around, hunting demons. The ones most hunters don't want to take on."

Spike smiled – the warm, sunny smile only few ever saw. "Well then, looks like you're my Warrior. And we've got forever, yeah?"

Xander uttered a shaky laugh. "Looks like." He leaned closer and pressed his lips to Spike's.

Spike hauled him in, wrapping strong arms around him. When their lips parted, he smiled again. "Let's get to your place, pet. Time to start on that forever."

The End

A Cup of Kindness

Rating: NC17

Pairing: Spike/Xander

Warnings: Language, m/m sex, some violence and the sometimes unwilling growth of a character. Some angst and some friendships that flounder a bit – your basic slice of life. Proceed at your own risk.

Disclaimer: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the characters therein don't belong to me. They remain the property of Joss Whedon, Mutant Enemy, and anyone else who has a stake in them. I own nothing of Highlander: The Series, either, which is the property of Gregory Widen, Davis-Panzer Productions, and a host of others. I'm making no money, just doing this for kicks and kudos.

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Special Thanks: *There isn't enough space to thank every person who encouraged, cajoled, and nudged me into getting on with the job of writing this sequel. So, a general 'thank you' to all of you who read the first story and asked for a sequel. This is for you.*

Spoilers: *This is so completely au that I don't see how there can be any spoilers for anything, unless you've never heard of Buffy or Highlander. In which case, I don't really think it will matter.*

Archive: *Spander Files, naturally. Anyone else, just ask. I'll probably say yes.*

Concrit: *Certainly, either in comments or by email.*

Author's note: *This story is a sequel to, and takes place immediately after, [Auld Acquaintance](#). It presupposes a previous long-term relationship between Xander and Spike. It isn't strictly necessary to read [Auld Acquaintance](#) first, but it couldn't hurt. The choice is, as always, yours.*

Summary: *Spike and Xander have been reunited. Now they must try to find their way in life together and figure out just what it is the Powers That Be have in store for them. All while dealing with the occasional demon or immortal that crosses their path, making new friends, and reuniting with old friends to prevent the reopening of the Sunnydale Hellmouth. But at least they aren't bored.*

So, [here's the tattoo](#), in a much larger size. My very talented son drew this for me in something like twenty minutes. He has a definite knack. :)



Part One

Spike woke to a comfortable mattress, soft blankets, and the warmth of Xander against his side. In just one night, he'd once again become addicted to waking with the sweet weight of his human curled next to him.

He leaned up on an elbow to look down at Xander. The immortal's dark hair was longer than he'd ever seen it, the shaggy mass well beyond Xander's shoulders. *Dru's dark kitten, indeed. Looks like a lion, he does.* Xander was leaner than Spike remembered, but strong. His body was sculpted and defined – he had the look of a distance runner combined with a fighter's upper body development. His body also bore more scars – injuries that must have occurred prior to Xander's first death. Spike was surprised at the bare chest – he recalled Xander having a light covering of silky chest hair. *There's*

a story behind that. Wonder if he'll tell me. Spike viewed the eye patch sadly. Xander had refused to remove it last night, wearing it even in sleep. *Wasn't fast enough, was I? One of my many failures.* Xander's other eye was closed, but a gentle smile graced his lips. A smile Spike fancied only he had ever seen. He reached out and began to trace light, abstract patterns on Xander's chest.

Xander stirred, yawned, and blinked up at him. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself, pet. Sleep well?"

"Like a rock. Although, rocks don't really sleep, so why do we say that? Or even worse, why would someone want to sleep like a baby? Babies wake up all night long."

"Dunno, just phrases folks use. Seldom make sense." Spike bent down and pressed a gentle kiss to Xander's crooked grin. "Remember what you promised me last night?"

"Um, that I was yours? Or, oh! That I'd do that thing with my tongue—"

"Pet. Not joking, am I?"

Xander huffed out an annoyed breath. “Yeah, yeah – I promised to answer some serious questions. Didn’t think you meant the second I woke up.”

“Ah, but I know you too well. If I let you get up and start movin’ about, you’d find all sorts of ways to avoid this. This way, you’re stuck until I’m satisfied, yeah?”

“Fine, but you gotta let me up for five minutes first. Human here, remember? Need the bathroom.”

“Right – but no muckin’ about. Straight in and right back here.”

Xander slid out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom.

“Bossy, pig-headed vampire,” he muttered. He returned moments later, however, and slipped back under the covers.

Spike moved slightly and pulled Xander flush against his side. “Now that I have your attention, luv – tell me why you left the group after you found out you were immortal. Someone give you a rough time about it?”

Xander sighed and shook his head. “It was a disaster from the start, y’know? Willow wanted to ‘fix’ me, Buffy

thought I was possessed at first, Giles nearly spluttered and 'oh, dear lorded' himself to death, and ... it was a mess. No one was happy. They were all worried about me, or about what my being immortal could bring down on them, or ... whatever. Didn't seem fair, somehow, to put them through that."

Spike frowned. "Those are all good reasons, and I'm sure they're true, but there's more, yeah? What else, Xan?"

Xander curled further into Spike's chest and tucked his head under Spike's chin. "They were up to their old tricks. Putting me out as bait, using me to draw in the baddies. Not often, but ... they kinda took my immortality for granted, and they were getting ... a little sloppy. I couldn't help but wonder what if some demon or hell god or whatever got lucky and took my head?" He sighed again. "I know I'm not the smartest, or the best at fighting, but I'm not totally stupid, either. And I'm not a coward, but I don't wanna get hurt just because someone thinks I make a good lure and can't be killed anyway, so what's the harm?" He rubbed his face against Spike's chest. "I know they would've come around eventually, but ... injuries still hurt like hell, and Buffy'd just tell me to suck it up, that I'd heal. And then Giles started worrying that I'd draw other immortals, and

they'd cause problems. The worst was when I'd die. They just ... stuck me in my room and left me there. No one ... no one waited with me until I came back, unless Dawn was visiting. I was having flashbacks to the way things were after you got the chip, y'know? I can't ... I don't want to be treated like ... like..."

"Like an expendable item. Got it, luv." There was still more to it – Xan was beyond loyal to those he considered friends – but Spike knew if he pushed, Xander would stop talking. *Or babble for hours without givin' away a thing. Best wait, if I can.* "And ya don't deserve that – you've never been a tool to use and discard. Were always more, even if they couldn't see it most of the time. You're a bloody good fighter, Xan, and smart enough to plan more than a few campaigns for them. More's the pity if they can't see that. And you're the bravest man I know. Don't sell yourself short."

"Brave? Spike, I'm quaking in my boots every time I go into a fight."

"The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it." Spike kissed the dark hair beneath his chin. "Thucydides said that, about

2400 years ago. Still holds true.”

Xander lifted his head and gazed up at Spike, brown eye wide and wondering. “Is that really how you see me?”

“Oh, luv – you’re all that and more. Can see why you left the group and struck out on your own. But you’re not alone now, yeah? Got me by your side and to guard your back.” *And to maybe talk some sense into your so-called friends. Bloody idiots, the lot of them.* “Now, what’s say we pack up your stuff, load the bike, and find us a place to set up a base? Could do with a proper home again. Seems ages since I had one.”

“I’d like that, but ... are you sure you want to stick around? I mean, I used to be mortal. You could see an end – a time when you’d be free to move on. And I don’t want you to think you have to—”

“Have to what, pet? Have to stay? Have to be near you? Have to love you?” Spike raised an eyebrow. “Don’t do anything cuz I have to, pillock. You know that. Do all those things cuz I want to. Cuz I can’t imagine my unlife without you in it.”

Xander nuzzled at Spike’s neck, his words muffled. “Yeah,

but ... that was before.”

Spike snorted. “Daft bugger. Yeah, was before. But back then, I was trying to find a way to keep ya with me always. Didn’t want to turn ya, even if I could’ve found a way to tack your soul on good and proper. Love your warmth, love the way you are after bein’ in the sun – all sweat and heat and flushed skin. Was gonna claim ya, cuz that would slow your aging down, and give me more time to figure somethin’ out. Then ... well, that battle happened, and I dusted. Never wanted to leave you, Xan. You gotta believe that.”

At those words, Xander came undone. Spike held the mortal close – *immortal, now, thank whatever god watches over souled vamps, never gonna lose him* – soothing and calming with gentle touches and soft words. He pulled Xander’s eye patch off and ran his fingers through the dark, heavy hair, tucking Xander more securely under his chin. “Hush, luv, I’ve got you. You’re mine, pet, and I take care of what’s mine. Never be alone again, Xan – I promise. I’d storm the gates of hell to come back to ya. I’d leave heaven behind to be with you, cuz without you it’d mean nothin’ to me.”

Xander took a deep, shuddering breath and sighed it out.

“No one’s ever ... wanted me the way you do. I missed you so damn much.” Another deep breath, this one steadier. “I love you, Spike.” He wiped his eye, sniffed, and tipped one corner of his mouth up in a shaky smile. “Don’t ... don’t get too mushy, okay? I hate crying. Makes the socket ache.”

Spike lifted Xander’s chin and met his eye. “Been meanin’ ta ask about that. Why haven’t ya gotten it fixed?”

“What do you ... fixed? Huh?”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Xan, you’re an immortal. Wounds heal, yeah? So ya find a doc and a donor, drop a new eye in, and that’s that. Don’t tell me ya didn’t think of that – I know you’re smarter than you let on.”

“Oh, sure – and when the pretty blue sparks start dancing over my face, the doctor will just write that off as normal.” Xander snorted. “Like I don’t have enough trouble already. I’m not gonna let some surgeon in on this. It’d be like you and the Initiative, you know it would.”

Spike gently tweaked Xander’s nose. “A demon doctor, pet. They know about immortals.”

Xander sighed. “Yeah, but – I don’t have such a great rep with the demon crowd. They tend to think I’m there to kill them.”

Spike chuckled. “You just haven’t met the right ones. Healers won’t fuss about that – least, not when I’m the one introducing you. Gotta get you acquainted with the peaceful groups. You know they’re out there.”

Xander nodded. “I know. I just – I’ve never been able to connect with them. They normally hide from people associated – however remotely – with the slayer.”

“Understandable. I have some connections – well, *had* some connections. Even if they’re not around anymore, shouldn’t be too hard to find what we need. Plenty of demons and dimension jumpers are good people to know, and not just for this. They can give you a place to hide, to rest – but they also keep their ears to the ground, yeah? Good source of information. Might want to think on finding a settled group, and buying a house there. They usually have some bloody strong wards on their enclaves. We’ll get this sorted, trust me.”

Xander stretched up and kissed Spike. “Always, baby.

And speaking of trust ... you haven't eaten since you got here, and I don't have a clue where to get blood for you." He tilted his head back, angling it to expose his throat. "You know you can drink from me without hurting me."

Spike sucked in a sharp breath. "Are you sure? You're not ... food, y'know." He couldn't stop his tongue from slipping out to wet his lips. "It's not somethin' ya have to do. The owner of the bar likely has some resources I could tap. I don't want..."

Xander blinked. "If you don't want to drink from me, you don't have to. But ... I wouldn't mind. I always enjoyed your bite, even if it didn't happen often or last very long. And now..." He blushed and gazed at Spike through his eyelashes, his eye dark with arousal.

Spike groaned and lowered his mouth to Xander's neck. "Now it can go on and on. Could make you come just from the bite." He shivered. "Want you to understand this, luv. Won't be like anything else. Blood freely given is special, richer. An immortal's blood offered up will be ... well, don't know, exactly. Just that it'll be more. And the more goes both ways, yeah?"

Xander gave him a puzzled look. "You've never tasted the

blood of an immortal before?”

“Nah, they’re right chary of vamps.” He shrugged.

“Understandable, innit? Grab one, chain ’im up, and you got the good stuff on tap forever.” Spike brushed Xander’s hair away from his face and stroked his cheek.

“That’s why I said ya didn’t have to, pet. Never want you to think you’re just a meal to me.”

Xander curved his hand over the back of Spike’s head and pulled him closer. “I know that, baby. I want this. I love you.”

Spike ran his tongue along the juncture of Xander’s neck and shoulder, feeling the warm skin quiver. “Love you so much, Xan.” He let his true face come forward and slid his fangs in. *Gods above and demons below, my boy tastes good. Better than good. Bloody fuckin’ marvelous.* He lifted his mouth and rolled the taste on his tongue like a fine wine. “Xander, your taste, it’s...”

“What, baby? Am I ... do I taste weird?” Xander’s voice was rough and soaked with want.

“Taste heavenly, pet – ’s just not what ... half expected you ta taste like chocolate and sunshine. Ya don’t. Taste

like the rain during a thunderstorm, ya do. All ozone and crackle. And under that, ya taste like ... like Africa. Dry savannah and dark earth. There's an animal taste in there, all tied up with power. Can taste light, too ... not sunlight, more like the moon." He felt himself shift to his true face again, and gazed down into a dark brown eye. "Bloody hell, pet – your blood tells me stories I never dreamed I'd hear." He lowered his head and slid his fangs into warm flesh again, sucking slowly and drawing out the pleasure.

Xander gasped and thrust his hips into Spike's, brushing their erections together. "No talk. Talking bad. Loving good." He skimmed his lips over Spike's throat. "Love me? Please?"

Spike began to thrust against him, enjoying the slide of his cock over sweat-dampened skin. He changed the angle until their erections rubbed against each other, reveling in the varying textures – smooth skin, lush pubic hair, and the velvet steel of Xander's dick against his own hardness.

Xander groaned and matched Spike's rhythm, burying his face in the junction between Spike's neck and shoulder. His teeth worried at a fold of skin, and Spike gasped,

lifting his head and staring into a wide, brown eye flecked with green. *She's back – wonder when that happened. Wonder what it means.* Xander had told him about the hyena, how the others thought she'd been exorcised, but in reality had only been relegated to a cage in his mind.

“S-spike – love you. Need you. Mine?”

“Yours, Xander. Always.”

The green grew brighter, and Xander's voice shifted to a deeper range, carrying a hint of a growl. “Mate?”

“Yes, luv – mate.”

He'd no sooner said the words than Xander struck, his human teeth sharper than normal. Spike howled, Xander keened, they both came – and promptly passed out.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike woke to warmth all along his back, a strong arm wrapped around his waist, and an annoying noise. “Xan – you awake?”

“Mm, nuh-uh.”

“I’m tired, too, luv – but can we turn off the bloody fluorescent light? ’S annoying.”

“Light? ’Kay – I can...” Xander snuffled into Spike’s neck.

“C’mon pet – lemme up, I’ll take care of it.” Spike opened his eyes and blinked. “Uh, Xander? The light’s not on.”

“M’kay. Good.”

Spike rolled over and poked Xander on the shoulder. “Oi, wake up. There’s a ruddy noise to track down and shut off. Can’t sleep with that buzzin’ going on, can I?”

Xander yawned and opened his eye, gazing blearily at Spike. “I don’t hear anything. Where’s it coming from?”

Spike cocked his head. “Uh, right. ’Pears to be in my head.” He chuckled. “Guess your blood gave me a buzz, yeah?”

Xander groaned. “God, that was bad.” He snuggled into the pillow, looking ready to go back to sleep. Suddenly

his eye opened wide. “A buzzing in your head? Is it steady? I mean the volume?”

“Yeah – why?”

Xander scrambled up, threw on a pair of sweatpants, and trotted to the door. “Pay attention, Blondie. I’m gonna step outside and walk to the far end of the parking lot. Then I’ll come back. Tell me if the sound changes.” He opened the door and walked swiftly into the early evening shadows, returning after just a few minutes.

“Well?”

Spike tipped his head to the side. “The farther away you got, the quieter the buzzing. When you came back, it got louder.” He narrowed his eyes. “You know what it is.”

Xander shut the door and slumped on the edge of the bed. “Yeah, but you shouldn’t ... I mean, I’ve never heard of anyone except...” He took a deep breath and blew it out. “It’s an early-warning system. It’s how I sense other immortals. But I’ve never heard of anyone else having it.” He lifted his head and gazed at Spike. “You suppose it’s a vampire thing? Y’know, cuz you had some of my blood?”

Spike nibbled on a thumbnail. “Never heard the like

before. Knew a vamp that drank from an immortal one time – the guy got away right quick, after – but, the vamp didn't say anything 'bout a buzzing sound. Just that the blood was ... powerful." He shrugged and leered. "Could be his immortal didn't bite back, yeah?"

Xander paled. "Oh, shit." He chewed on his lower lip and looked down at the floor. "Um, I think I ... well, claimed you. As ... as a mate. You, uh, you think that might be why?"

Spike sat down beside Xander and pulled him close. "Could be, pet. And yes, you claimed me. Claimed you right back, didn't I?"

Xander didn't look up. "You ... you don't mind?"

Spike reached out and tilted his human's face up, meeting his eye calmly. "If I'd minded, luv, I woulda stopped you. Told ya I'd been thinkin' on doin' that very thing. Know we didn't talk about it before, and yeah, we probably should have. Doesn't mean I didn't want it. Doesn't mean I regret it. I did want it, I don't regret it, and I love you." He huffed out a breath. "Could do without the soddin' mosquito chorus in my head, but I'll adjust."

Xander relaxed into Spike's hold. "Yeah, you will. I've spent time with a few immortals who aren't interested in fighting. After an hour or so, the noise fades into the background." He jabbed his elbow into Spike's side. "So not fair. I never could sneak up on you – you don't need any extra help."

Part Two

They were in Elko, Nevada when Xander was challenged by another immortal. They were tracking a Darzil demon, one that had been feeding on infants – and finally cornered it in a nearby cemetery. Xander used his battle ax well, slicing the hamstrings of the eight foot monster and bringing it to its knees. Spike moved in and wrenched at the vaguely reptilian head, breaking its neck. They were walking through the cemetery gate when Spike felt the constant buzzing in his head grow louder. Xander stopped and looked around.

“Might as well come out – I know you’re there.”

A muscular man, bald and tattooed, stepped from behind a tall head stone. “Is your friend going to be a problem?” the bald man queried.

Xander shook his head. “No, he’ll stay out of it.” Spike growled, and Xander held up a hand, speaking in a whisper. “It’s one on one, baby. Those are the rules. Won’t be here – no fighting on holy ground. Don’t know what happens if the single combat rule is broken, but ... it could be bad. Promise me you won’t interfere.”

“Not part of this game, Xan. Not gonna make a promise I can’t keep.”

“Look, the records mentioned a fight on holy ground. It happened once. The blast leveled the church they were in. So someone stepping in could be really bad. I have to do this alone.”

Spike snarled in frustration. “Made your point. But I’m coming with you. Just cuz you’re an honest man don’t mean he is.”

Xander kissed him, nodded, and looked at the bald man.

“I take it you won’t just walk away.”

“Not likely. I want the prize, and I intend to get it.”

Xander snorted. “Dude, that’s such a load of shit. I’ve been reading prophecies half my life, and they’re so twisted no one really understands them. I’ve messed up a few all by my lonesome. And prizes? Hell, you’ll find better ones at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box.” The other man just stared at him, and Xander shrugged. “Your choice, man. Where do you wanna do this? Can’t be here, and this town doesn’t have a deserted warehouse district.”

“The woods outside town ... on the east side, by the park. In one hour. Or I come hunting you ... and your friend.”

Xander’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll be there. Leave my friend outta this.”

Spike bristled. “Can stand up for m’self, pet. Will, if this pillock makes a wrong move.”

The other immortal sneered at Spike. “You don’t look so tough. But you’re safe enough if your buddy shows up. He knows the Game, and the rules. There can be only

one.”

Xander rolled his eye. “Yeah, yeah. Heard it before. Still not impressed. Like I said ... prophecies often aren’t worth the hide they’re written on. But I’ll be there. One hour.”

The other immortal stepped into the shadows and walked away.

Xander rubbed his face and looked at Spike. “I don’t have a choice, Blondie. He’s one of the ones who’ll make good on his threat, and I don’t wanna be looking over my shoulder for the next however long. Just ... if he wins...”

Spike growled again. “No. Don’t you dare fuckin’ die. Just found you ... won’t lose you.”

Xander grinned. “Not planning on it. Come on ... let’s check out the area.”

So now Spike watched and waited as the two immortals fought. But he didn’t like it. Xander had already fought hard that night, and was tired. Still, he was moving well, and Spike took a moment to enjoy the power that his lover displayed. *Wields that ax like a pro, he does. Huh, I*

didn't teach 'im those moves. Wonder who did.

The two men appeared evenly matched. The stranger was more muscular, but Xander was faster. The bald man used a sword, which gave him a bit more reach. Xander's ax, being double-headed, was deadly from all directions and had a larger cutting surface. Spike fretted at being unable to help his mate, but tried to soothe himself with the knowledge that Xander was an excellent fighter. *Ah, that's it, luv. Take out his knees and then go for his head.*

After Xander's strike to the bald man's knee, Spike thought the fight nearly over. But Xander stumbled and the other immortal rolled away, coming to his feet behind and to Xander's left. His sword swung toward Xander's neck. Spike tensed, ready to ignore the stupid rules and jump into the fight – and then Xander's ax blocked the strike with barely an inch to spare. In a swift move that even Spike found hard to follow, Xander somehow pushed the sword away and struck with his own blade. The follow through left Xander on one knee as the bald head rolled away and the body fell.

Blue sparks danced and joined over the headless body, becoming blue lightning that reached for the sky and then dove for Xander. At the first touch of the lightning,

Xander gasped and lifted his head. Blue bolts continued to strike him, and Spike felt the hair at the nape of his neck lift in reaction.

Xander was screaming now, and Spike wanted nothing more than to rush over and yank him from the vortex of light that surrounded him. Still he waited, knowing he could do nothing until it was over.

Xander rose to his feet, caught in the quickening. Spike squinted against the light and sucked in a breath as he watched the toes of Xander's shoes leave the ground. Blue light coalesced around the immortal, flashing bright enough to leave an after-image on Spike's retinas. As suddenly as it started, the show was over, and Xander's body fell to the ground.

Spike rushed over, cradling his boy in shaking arms. "Xan? C'mon pet, talk to me. Need to know you're all right." He could see Xander breathing, could hear the steady beat of the boy's heart, and knew his love just needed time – but until Xander spoke, Spike would worry.

"Guh."

“Xander? You with me now?”

“Fuck, that hurts. That guy was like, old. Way old.”

Spike loosened the leather tie that held Xander’s hair in a ponytail, and began to thread his fingers through the dark locks, rubbing at Xander’s scalp. “Yeah? That make it different for you?”

Xander gave a pleased little murmur. “Hmm. Makes the quickening ... harder. More difficult to go through. It’ll take more time to ... absorb the memories.” He sat up with a groan. “I need to get rid of his body, and then I need to meditate.” He blinked slowly. “Give me a hand up, Blondie.”

Together, they stripped the dead man of cash, easily pawned items, and his sword. When Xander pocketed the man’s wallet, Spike stared at him, his eyebrow raised.

Xander grimaced. “Ghoulish, I know. But this gig doesn’t pay well. Doesn’t pay at all, in fact. I plan to live a long, long time, so ... well, every little bit helps. I have a tidy little nest egg tucked away, and investments making more for me.” He smiled sadly. “Anyta taught me how to make my money grow.” He shook himself. “This sword?”

It'll fetch a nice price on the antique auction block."

"You're explainin' yourself to the wrong person, luv – nothin' wrong with takin' what he doesn't need. Bit surprised about the wallet, that's all. Can help with fencin' things, if you need."

Xander's lips twitched and he nodded. "The wallet ... well, I'll explain that in a minute." He moved away from the body, pulling Spike with him, and murmured an incantation in Sumerian. Flames, hotter than any fire Spike had ever seen, sprang up, consumed the body and reduced it to a scattering of ashes. The light breeze that played with Xander's hair blew the remains across the empty field.

"Dawnie taught me that. She doesn't use magic much – although I think she could be tops at it – but she's a researching fool, and knows what's what. She was the only one who didn't freak, didn't question what I have to do to survive, didn't blame me for leaving. She found another group of watchers referenced in the Council's library and figured out what I am." Xander chuckled. "You shoulda seen her. She was so damned excited. Apparently these watchers predate G-man's group. Anyway, she found this old Japanese guy to train me.

Little bitty thing – handed me my ass more times than I can count. But I learned.”

He bumped Spike’s shoulder and grinned. “You taught me to fight, but Master Wakahisa is somethin’ else. Later Dawn helped me set up another identity so I can disappear if I need to. That’s why I took the immortal’s wallet, by the way. A lot of immortals are as stupid about passwords and pin numbers as anyone else. I’ll look through everything when I have more time. Might find a nice bank account I can bleed dry, uh, drain ... shit, you know what I mean.” He glared at Spike, who was nearly doubled over with laughter. “Asshole. Anyway, Dawn said I couldn’t take a chance on modern forensics catching up with me, so she made me learn the spell to uh, get rid of the evidence.” Xander rubbed at his eye. “I miss her. She was major pissed at the others when they ... when I decided to leave. We keep in touch, but ... it isn’t the same.” He turned and walked away, stumbling over the uneven ground.

Spike was at Xander’s side in a flash, looping an arm around the tired man to support him. “Let’s get back to the room, pet. You said ya need to meditate. What’s that about?”

Xander leaned into Spike as they walked. "Taking another immortal's quickening is like ... well, kinda like being possessed." He wrinkled his nose. "Not really, but ... anyway, I gain their life force, and their memories. Sometimes the memories don't want to ... settle, I guess. When that happens, I'm like that woman who had multiple personality disorder. Smaller scale and different reasons, but still a bitch to live with. Dawnie showed me how to meld the memories with my own through meditation."

The countryside gave way to the small park on the edge of town. "Sounds like Li'l Bit was there for you, yeah?"

Xander yawned. "Yeah. She and I figured out the hyena was back. Or, not back, but uncaged. Happened after my second quickening. The first one was the immortal equivalent of a fledge. Just a newbie, like me. The second guy ... he'd been around longer. About fifty years after his first death. Taking on his memories kinda shook me up, and then it was say hello to my little friend. But Dawn's meditation program helped with that, and now the hyena's integrated with me." Xander rubbed his eye again and sighed. "We shoulda ridden in closer. God, I'm tired."

Spike led him toward the copse of trees that hid the motorcycle. “This bike isn’t meant for dirt roads, pet. We might want to swap it for somethin’ else – a car with a roomy trunk, or a van, maybe. Somethin’ to protect the combustible half of this duo.” He manhandled Xander onto the back of the bike and slid in front of the brunette. “Come on – feet up and hang on tight. Be tucked up safe in bed in two shakes.”

Five minutes later he helped a staggering Xander into the hotel room. “Let’s get you cleaned up and into bed, luv.” He stripped Xander down to his briefs, wiped him off with a washcloth, and pushed him toward the bed.

Once there, Xander sat propped against the headboard, legs tucked under him. “I have to do this now, Spike. Otherwise I’ll have nightmares. Besides, if I wait it’ll be twice as hard to merge things. Don’t worry, I’ll go from this to a natural sleep.”

Spike eyed him cautiously. “Yeah? And how will I know when that happens?”

Xander grinned. “Dawnie says I keel over and start snoring.”

~*~*~*~*~

The next morning, drinking coffee at the small table, Spike stared at his lover grimly. “Pet, we need to get that eye fixed.”

“When we have more time, okay? We haven’t stopped moving since you came back.”

Spike narrowed his eyes. He’d been back three months, and Xander kept putting this off. Granted, they were still on the road, but that wouldn’t stop him finding a healer. Xander always had some seemingly rational reason to stall. Another demon to find, another town to visit, another trail of death and dismemberment to follow. After last night’s close call, however, Spike was in no mood to wait. “What’s the problem, Xan? I get that there’s always summat going on, but whenever I bring it up you push it aside. ‘S not like it’ll take weeks and weeks, yeah?”

Xander picked at a rip in the knee of his jeans. “Yeah, but ... I mean it isn’t that big a deal. I’ve lived with one eye all these years, what’s a little longer?”

“It is a big deal – it’ll help you see better, which’ll help you fight better. Give ya back depth perception. Last night was too fuckin’ close. I don’t fancy losing you, luv.”

Xander didn’t look up. “I remember that day, and the days that followed – every tiny little detail. I remember you saving me, and I remember all those who fell. You told me it was a badge of honor, not something shameful.”

“And I meant that – but that doesn’t mean ya don’t get it fixed if ya can. Doesn’t lessen your bravery any to mend an injury.”

Xander’s head jerked up and he stared at Spike.

“Bravery? I wasn’t brave, Spike – I was terrified. And the girls were scared, too. But I still talked them into going, and I still led that charge. And they died. Because I didn’t plan well enough, I didn’t have enough intel, I didn’t fucking think. I just took them out there and they died.”

He gestured at his face. “This? This is a reminder that I ... getting it fixed would be a slap in the face to every girl that fell during that fight.” His voice had risen, and when he finished, he was standing and shouting at Spike.

Spike moved forward and stood toe to toe with his lover. “That’s it, innit? Their deaths are your fault, and the loss of your eye is your punishment. That how you feel?”

“And what’s wrong with that? It’s the truth.”

Spike crossed his arms. “Bloody well *isn’t*. I thought you’d gotten past this self-important, selfish shite. Thought you’d grown up, Harris. Instead, I find you sitting here wailing ‘woe is me, everything bad that happens is my fault.’ Got news for ya, mate – you aren’t that flippin’ important in the grand scheme of things.”

Xander snorted. “You just don’t get it, do you? I led that charge!”

Spike stabbed Xander in the chest with a finger. “No, *you* don’t get it. Wasn’t just you, was it? Slayer was there, and the witch, and the watcher. Hell, *I* was there. And we all – *all* – worked on and agreed to the plan. So, you blamin’ the slayer? Red? Rupert? You blame *me*?”

“No! I just–”

Spike’s voice grew quiet. “Cuz *I* do. Blame m’self for not being faster, stronger, for not being able to protect you.

Would understand if you felt the same.”

“What? No, Spike ... a world of no. You got there faster than anyone else could, and you saved my other eye. You saved my *life*. How could I blame you?”

Spike sat down and pulled Xander into his arms. “Then you gotta stop blamin’ yourself, pet. What happened was no one’s fault – was just the way things fell out. Roll of the dice, yeah? None of us knew what Caleb had going on. None of us knew he was so bleedin’ strong, or that he had so many minions to call on. The slayer felt there was something in that vineyard she needed. *Everyone* decided to help her get it. And she was right, wasn’t she?”

“But–”

“Shut it. Was no one’s fault, it just happened. Was a war, pet – people dying, people gettin’ hurt – hell, that’s all part of it.”

“War ... yeah, I get that. But it never ends. I mean, I’m not part of the inner circle anymore, but I’m still on the battlefield. It just...” Xander shook his head. “I don’t ... I can’t...” He sighed deeply and scrubbed at his face. “I’m

just ... really tired, I guess.”

Spike gathered Xander in and held him close. “Can understand that, luv. Been seven years since Sunnyhell, and none of ’em easy. Hard to think clearly when there’s no end in sight. But you’ve no reason to be so down on yourself.” He petted Xander’s hair, rubbed at his scalp and neck, and started the rumbling purr that soothed his lover. “Tell you what – let’s take some time off. Find ourselves a place to settle, yeah? Have us somewhere to take down time, get a bit of breathin’ room between all the tussles.”

Xander relaxed against him. “A place that’s ours, instead of motel rooms or a tent somewhere. And ... maybe I could do some carving, again. I haven’t worked with wood in ages. It always relaxes me.” He turned and smiled at Spike. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

Spike hugged him even closer. “You got it, pet. Just so happens, I heard of a clan of Elzagel not too far from here. I know their shaman and I know he’ll give us a listen. He’d probably be able to convince the others to let us stay with them. Want to check it out with me?”

Xander chewed on his lip. “As long as they don’t freak

and get all 'kill the slayer's minion' on me ... yeah, sure. I'm not ... I've never heard of these El-whatever demons."

Spike chuckled. "Not demons – from another dimension. They're real peaceable blokes. Humanoid, sort of. Got horns, and they're furred, but other than that, look just like you 'n me." He chuckled at Xander's snuffle of amusement. "Yeah, so there's differences. Some of 'em take human mates. Horns are right pretty – all curved and spiraled. They live in seclusion, though – don't blend in well, do they? Still, they're more likely to offer ya tea and sweets than to threaten ya." He pursed his lips. "Now that I think on it, they hold the slayer and her group in high regard. Probably heard of you. Might consider it a bit of all right to have you stayin' there."

"That sounds ... strange, but good. I'm ... I've always had a place to go at the end of the day. Something that was mine, you know? It wasn't always the greatest, and sometimes I thought I'd have been better off living somewhere else, but ... this drifting with no anchor is..."

"Gets old, doesn't it? Did that many a year with Angelus, and then Dru. Was always nicer to have somewhere to stop and rest. A place where you know the sounds the

floor boards make, where the chairs are molded to your shape, where the sheets smell familiar.”

Xander smiled and kissed him – a gentle kiss that sought and gave comfort. “That’s a beautiful way to say it. And exactly right.”

“That’s that, then. Come sundown, we’ll load up the bike and take a little trip. Until then...” Spike twisted and bore Xander down onto the mattress. “We’ll just have to keep ourselves occupied, yeah?”

Part Three

The next evening they were out the door and headed west and then north on Interstate 80. They stopped in Paradise Valley for food, drinks, and to stretch their legs. “Gonna be a rough ride soon, luv. The village is hidden deep in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, and there won’t be no paved roads to travel. Get the kinks outta your muscles while ya can.”

Xander fluttered his eyelashes at Spike. “But I thought you liked my kinks.”

Spike snagged Xander’s arm and hauled him in for a hard kiss. “Git.” He pulled the leather tie from Xander’s hair

and ran his fingers through the shaggy mass, smoothing the dark curls and untangling the snarls. “You don’t have to hide from me, pet. Know you’re nervous ’bout meetin’ the Elzagel. S’okay to feel that way.”

Xander ducked his head, burying his nose in Spike’s neck. “Yeah, I know, but ... it isn’t just about meeting them. I want ... I want this to work, y’know? I’m so tired of ... I spent seven years without you, just drifting, and now ... I need...”

“Ya need a place to call home. Understand that – need it too, don’t I? I can’t promise Drangstot and his clan will let us stay. They won’t hurt us, that I guarantee. But taking outsiders into the clan is a big deal for them. So – that’s not a sure thing. I got a good feelin’ about it, but it’s down to them, yeah?” He rubbed his cheek on Xander’s hair, breathing in the scent of love and [mate](#). “I do promise we’ll find a place. If not with them, then somewhere else. Somewhere safe and warded, where we can just be. Okay?”

Xander sighed and relaxed into Spike’s embrace. “Yeah. Okay. I trust you, baby. You’ll take care of it.”

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After a slow, careful ride through ever-thickening trees, they finally broke through the woods and stopped atop a small hill. Below them was a wide valley, sparsely populated with modern houses of varying architectural styles. Spike turned off the motorcycle, dropped the kickstand, and he and Xander dismounted. After listening to the snarl and growl of the Harley's engine idling through the wilds of the forest, the silence was both shocking and welcome to Xander's ears. He stretched slowly, working out the tension and numbness caused by hours on a motorcycle.

"That's where we're headed, pet. We walk in from here."

"Why's that? The houses look ... um, current. So I'd guess they keep up with modern times."

Spike chuckled. "Oh yeah, they like their conveniences. Some, anyway. Nah, it's just the polite thing ta do. Don't want to come roaring through the middle of town on m'bike. Might startle the kiddies. Wouldn't make a good first impression, would it?" He reached for Xander's hand and interlaced their fingers. "Ready, luv?"

"As I'll ever be. You'll uh, do most of the talking, right?"

Spike nodded and they walked hand-in-hand down the hill toward the dirt road that led to the village. The houses were spread around the town, dotted over the valley with plenty of land around each dwelling. The town itself was small, with only six buildings directly off the dirt road. The road was a large circle, starting and ending at the entrance to the town. Around the circle were five buildings that looked like small stores. In the center of the circle was a larger building. Xander could feel ... something ... some kind of power, emanating from the central building. A sideways glance at Spike, and a slight nod in return, told him Spike felt it, as well. Xander gave a mental shrug. If his vampire wasn't worried, he'd trust in that.

A group of seven beings exited the central building, and Xander studied them calmly. They were tall - not one stood under six feet - but seemed taller by virtue of the horns that grew from mid-brow straight up six inches. After that, the horns began to curve, following the line of the head and curling around their ears. He noticed that some of the Elzagal had horns that barely reached around their ears, while the horns of others circled the ear more than once. He also noticed that of the seven Elzagal present, only two were female. All were slender

and fine-boned, but the males had a bit more bulk and muscle to them.

Spike leaned in and spoke quietly. “Their horns show their age. The more horn, the older the Elzagal. That bloke in front of the others, the one with the red horns? That’s Drangstot, my friend. He’s the one will likely be able to sway the rest.” He straightened, and tugged on Xander’s hand. “C’mon, pet. Let’s go meet the village elders.”

Drangstot walked toward them while the other Elzagal remained in front of the building. Xander took in the tan fur that covered what he could see of Drangstot’s body. It was finer over his hands and face, and considerably darker and thicker where his horns began, and over his head. Drangstot’s eyes were a dark, liquid brown, and Xander thought of the deer they’d passed on their way through the forest.

They stopped in front of Drangstot, and this close, Xander could see the dusting of white through the man’s head fur. Another indication of age, he thought, and glanced at the others. All but one showed the same sprinkling of white in their fur, some more than others. One of the women was clearly younger, her fur dark and

glossy under the lights from the building. Her horns were a rich amber, and Xander spared a moment to wonder what genetic factors combined to produce the horn color.

Spike squeezed his hand, and Xander brought his attention back to the male – *man, he's a man, no matter the species* – before them. Spike lifted his chin in a reverse nod. “Evening, Drangstot. Heard you’d settled hereabouts.”

The horned head tilted to the side in an obvious query, and Xander thought he saw gentle amusement in Drangstot’s eyes. “And you could not help but stop by to say hello?”

Spike grinned and winked. “Well, a bit more than a passing visit, mate. Me and the boy are looking to settle in somewhere. Want a place that’s safe, yeah? Somewhere hidden from those what might be lookin’ for us. Since we were in the area, so to speak, you came to mind.”

Drangstot inclined his head in a regal nod. “I would gladly grant you and your companion leave to stay for a short time, my friend. I have no right, however, to decide if you

may live here. That must be determined by all who give guidance to the clan.” He gave them a gentle smile. “I am honored, however, to present your request to the elders. They know of you, the Souled One, through my tales of our shared history. As for your companion, few there are indeed who have not heard of the Slayer’s White Knight, and his gallant heart.” He sighed. “Still, it is a serious matter, and we will need to discuss it amongst ourselves. While it is true that our settlement is protected from ... outside interference, the Knight has enemies. As do you, and all who take a stand for what is good and right. We, however, must consider the safety of all those who dwell here.”

Xander cleared his throat. “I don’t want to endanger anyone who lives here. If the elders decide our presence is too risky, we’ll leave without arguing. You have my word.”

Spike nodded. “Mine too, mate. Don’t wanna bring trouble to your doorstep. You give the word, and we’ll be on our way.”

Drangstot stepped aside and gestured to the benches outside the building. “I will discuss this with the elders. Please, sit and rest. If you like, my daughter will bring you

refreshments while you wait.” He lifted his hand, and the young woman joined them. “Ursuna, this is Spike, formerly known as William the Bloody, of the Aurelius line. The souled vampire.”

“Oi! Not the only souled vamp. Don’t be confusing me with the poof.”

Drangstot laughed. “As if that could ever happen.” Ursuna shook Spike’s hand, and the two Elzagel turned to Xander. “And this is Spike’s companion, the White Knight of Sunnydale, Alexander Harris.”

Xander held out his hand, even as he felt his eye widen. “Um, just call me Xander, okay? All that other stuff is way too big a mouthful.”

Ursuna and Drangstot both shook his hand, the young woman smiling at his words. “Ah, but many have heard of you, Alexander Harris. The White Knight of Sunnydale, the Slayer’s Heart, and the One Who Sees. Welcome to our village. I hope the elders find it within them to allow you both to stay.”

Drangstot placed his hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Perhaps we should enter the Meeting Hall and see that

they do, my daughter.” He turned to Xander and Spike. “While you wait, would you care for something to drink?”

Spike glanced at Xander, who shook his head. “Nah, mate – we’re fine. We’ll just enjoy the peace and quiet for a bit, while you talk to your people.” He smiled cheerfully at Drangstot. “No matter how it turns out, it’s been a treat seein’ you after all these years.”

Drangstot grinned briefly, then sobered and led his daughter and the elders back into the building.

Spike and Xander sat down, relaxing against the back of the bench. Xander sighed and looked out to the heavy woods that surrounded the village. “You, uh, you won’t mind living here?”

Spike draped an arm around Xander’s shoulders. “Nah, kinda like it. Nice people, remote area, but there are good-sized towns an easy ride away. Got the added benefit of shutting down that bleedin’ immortal buzz, too. Must be their wards. Can’t say I mind the quiet at all, so what’s not to like?”

“No mosquito chorus, huh? That’s weird, but nice for

you.” Xander shrugged. “For me, there’s nothing to dislike. It’s peaceful, beautiful, and feels safe. I think I could learn to relax here. But Nevada is a desert state, and I know you hated Sunnydale because of that. Longer days, shorter nights. Well, and the Hellmouth.”

“Lotta reasons ta hate Sunnyhell. None that apply to this place.” He pulled Xander closer. “Yeah, this is the desert, but we’re high up in the mountains. Got the woods all around us, trees all through the town, providin’ plenty of shade. Oh, I won’t be walking around in the middle of the day, but ... could build us a nice life here, couldn’t we?”

Xander smiled. “Yep. And maybe, if they have a house close to the tree line, we can dig a tunnel – just in case you need to get in or out during the day.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes, and then Spike nudged Xander with his knee. “What’s it like, the quickening? You said you get their memories – doesn’t your head get mixed up with all that in it?”

“The first time, yeah. I was a mess. It was like I had two separate people in my head.” Xander picked at a loose thread on his jeans. “No, that’s not right. I had the guy’s memories, but he wasn’t there. No influence like with

the soldier at Halloween, or the hyena from the zoo. More like ... watching a movie at high speed, but feeling everything like it happened to me. I'd see something and it would spark one of his memories, and I'd get sorta lost in it. The others were ... well, they tried to be understanding, but ... Dawn found an old watcher's diary. Really old. She had to find someone to translate it, cuz it was written in some dead language she didn't know. Anyway, the watcher said he observed his immortal taking a quickening, and nearly going mad from it. But the immortal's teacher showed him how to meditate and sort of ... hell, I don't remember the word she used, but the guy learned how to file the memories away. He could access them if he wanted to, but they weren't screwing with his head all the time."

Spike lit a cigarette and blew the smoke away from Xander. "And this meditation technique was spelled out in the journal?"

"As if, Blondie. When's anything in life that easy? But you know Dawnie. The girl just doesn't quit. She spent days researching different therapies, meditation techniques, mental disciplines, stuff I've never even dreamed of. She sorta ... grabbed the best pieces from several different things, and put them together into something I could

learn and do on my own. And it worked.” He snorted.
“Better than she realized it would. Turns out, it was kinda chaotic in my head, even without this other guy’s stuff. I had memories of my own life that I’d buried pretty damn deep. Got most of them sorted out when I went under the first time. A couple days later, I tackled the new memories. Now it’s like they’re written in a book, and I can see that book in my head, but unless I open it...”

“The memories stay inside the covers, yeah?” Spike nodded. “Good on the Bit – that’s a right lovely idea. Could you ... teach me?”

Xander’s eyebrows rose. “Well, yeah, I guess – but why?”

“Got over a century and a half of living in me head, pet. Could do with a bit of housekeeping.”

Xander grinned. “Might even be fun. Who knew I could teach the Big Bad something useful?”

“Berk. Taught me plenty. Taught me more about loyalty, courage, and forgiveness than anyone ever did. Taught me about warmth of the heart and soul, and that doing the right thing usually hurts like hell, but it still has to be done. Taught me more about honest laughter and joy

than I knew a demon could learn.”

“Careful, vampire mine. You’ll ruin your rep with that kinda talk.”

“Don’t have to worry about that with you, luv. Do I?”

Xander ducked his head and kissed Spike’s cool lips. “Not with me. Never with me.”

Spike kept the kiss gentle and then leaned back. “Been meaning to ask, pet ... what the hell happened to your chest?”

“My chest?”

Spike slid his hand inside Xander’s shirt and across his bare skin. “Mm. Used have the loveliest bit of hair here ... all silky and soft. Not that I mind the new look, but I know you’re not shaving, nor using that chemical shite to remove it. So ... where’d it go?”

“Oh. That was, uh, a drunken mistake.”

Spike’s scarred eyebrow rose. “You – drunk? Not somethin’ I’d expect.”

Xander sighed. “Not me. I was recovering from an injury. Dawn put me in the den, on the daybed. She couldn’t get me up the stairs. No problem, really ... it was a room no one used. She was gonna stay with me, but she got called away. I was sort of dozing. Everyone else was out doing ... something or other. Anyway, Willow was ... she and Kennedy had been fighting about something, as usual, and then they went to a bar and made up. Willow got sloshed. Or maybe they made up cuz Willow got drunk. Who knows? We’re talking total brain meltdown for Willow. They stumbled into the den, and somehow or other got to talking about shaving. Y’know, woman-type shaving. Legs and underarms, and how much nicks hurt and how crappy electric razors are and ... hell, I don’t know. I kind of faded out. Wasn’t really interested.”

Xander scratched his chest, the memory of that night clear in his head. “Then I heard Willow say something about a spell she’d written, and how she’d prove to Kennedy that it worked. Next thing I know, my chest got tingly and hairless. Well, I didn’t know about the hairless part until the next day, but ... yeah.”

Spike’s blue eyes widened and bled to gold. “And you didn’t tell anyone? A powerful witch gets pissed as a

newt, uses an unconscious friend to demonstrate some ridiculous spell she shouldn't have written in the first place and you just let it slide? Xander, that's—"

"Hey! Of course I told them – I'm not stupid." Xander turned his head away and took a few deep breaths.

Spike moved his hand from Xander's chest to his neck, stroking over the taut muscles. "Sorry, pet. Didn't mean you were. Just, sometimes you overlook things done to you, to keep your friends out of trouble."

"Yeah, well, Willow misusing mojo isn't one of the things I overlook. Been there, done that, and had her slash the tee shirt while I was wearing it. I told Giles, Buffy, and Dawn. Ranted at Willow about it." Xander pressed against Spike's hand and sighed. "Giles was concerned for a day or so, until Willow swore she wouldn't drink so much again, and that she'd written the spell a long time ago, before she knew better. Buffy said I should be more understanding - Willow was going through some harsh times with Kennedy, and she was sure Willow was sorry. Willow ... well, she baked sugary treats for three weeks. Dawn was furious, but she's only one person, and couldn't get the others to agree that there was even a potential problem."

Spike jumped up and began pacing. “What the fuck is wrong with them? I don’t get it. Never did. Everything you do has always been subject to scrutiny and dissection. The witch and the slayer pull this shite and barely get called on it – and then only when someone or something gets mucked up enough that it could cause an enormous problem. How can they be so selectively blind?” He stopped and stared at Xander.

“Careful – your education’s showing. As for how that works – hell if I know. It’s always been that way. I guess ... I guess they’re just too crucial to saving the world. People don’t want to ... upset them, or call them on their occasional stupidity.”

Spike dropped back onto the bench. “Could be, I suppose. Still, the more powerful a person is, the more careful they have to be. And the more others should hold them accountable for their actions.”

“With great power comes great responsibility.” Xander grinned at Spike. “Spiderman, by Stan Lee.”

Spike chuckled. “Think your superhero was borrowing from someone, pet. Phrase has been around in various

incarnations for centuries. Still, wisdom is wisdom, yeah? No matter where you find it.” He leaned in for another kiss. “Can see why you felt the need to get away, luv. Maybe that’s why...”

“Why what, baby?”

Spike sat back, blue eyes narrowed. “Ever wonder why I was called back?”

“You said you’d been called to help a champion.”

“Mm, and so you are. But what’s the greater purpose? S’all fine and good to hunt the baddies and make life safe for mum and da and the kiddies, but going on like we have ... not a huge difference we’re making, yeah?”

When Xander opened his mouth to protest, Spike held up a hand. “Hold on, pet. M’not sayin’ this right. What you do, what we do, *does* make a difference. Everyday, people live on who might not, except for us steppin’ in. And that’s a rare and wondrous thing. Not to be taken lightly at all. But ... and this is the sticking point, yeah? – would the Powers that Muck About consider that a good enough reason to resurrect a dusted vamp, even one with a soul? Shouldn’t there be something more earth shattering to get them to interfere?”

Xander blinked. “Huh. Hadn’t really thought of it that way. You’re right. They think on a larger scale than we do, so ... yeah. Don’t know what their bigger deal is, but ... it has to be more than just wandering around like we’ve been doing. Not that I mind the time spent with you – I’ll take that anyway I can get it, thank you very much. But, it isn’t ... enough, somehow. I mean, Buffy was all regular slayer girl, until her first watcher died. Then they moved to Sunnydale, and suddenly it was one apocalypse after another. Like someone in charge knew what was coming, and moved her into place beforehand.”

Spike nodded. “You told me Willow was more into computers and research at the beginning. But when your group needed someone with more magic than Rupes could provide, she got ... how’d you put it? ... amped up?”

“Yeah, in a majorly bad way. But I see where you’re going with this. She took some scary side trips, but there’s no way we could’ve defeated the First Evil if Willow didn’t have mondo mojo on tap.”

“Exactly. So – why are we here?”

Xander slumped. "I don't have a clue."

Part Four

The door opened behind them, and they stood to greet the village elders. Ursuna stepped out first, followed by Drangstot. The other Elzagel nodded and returned to their homes.

Xander stepped forward. "So ... what's the verdict?"

Drangstot regarded them both with dark, unreadable eyes. "We would be honored to have the White Knight and his Guide dwell among us." He smiled, and his brown eyes lightened. "Welcome to our village. Ursuna will help you find a home. We have a few that have been abandoned, for one reason or another. You may take your pick. They were all cleaned last week. I felt it was necessary, though I didn't know why." He placed a gentle kiss on Ursuna's cheek. "See to them swiftly, my

daughter. We have yet to eat our evening meal.”

Xander stepped forward. “Wait, please. I, uh, we don’t want to ... to be a drain on your village. Is there ... I mean, what, um...” Xander looked to Spike for help.

The blonde grinned and then assumed a more sober expression. “We mean no disrespect, but would like to repay you for the offer of a home. How may we do that?”

Drangstot laughed. “You needn’t be so formal, Spike. We’ve known each other too long for that. What can you do?” He shrugged. “Having the White Knight Who Sees and the Warrior’s Incorruptible Soul living here is payment enough. But, we are always in need of someone who can wield a hammer or a battle ax with equal grace. Our talents lie elsewhere, and we welcome any assistance you wish to give.” With that, he walked away.

Ursuna showed them three vacant houses. One was close to the woods, and although it needed some work, this was the one they chose. The front door opened to a combination living room, kitchen, and dining room. Beyond that was an arch leading to a small hallway. Off the hall were two bedrooms, with a large bathroom between them. A covered patio, accessible from both

bedrooms, was at the back of the house. Soft grass covered the ground between the patio and the trees. Xander looked around outside and inside, peering into cabinets, studying doorjambs, window frames, and the foundation.

Spike raised an eyebrow when Xander returned to the main part of the house. “Well, pet?”

Xander grinned. “It’s perfect – or it will be when I’m done with it. It’s a sound building, just needs some touching up. Nothing major, thank goodness.” He glanced at Ursuna. “Can we use the furniture until we get our own? And the curtains and other stuff?”

Ursuna nodded. “Of course. A young man lived here with his father. After his father passed, he took a mate. When their children began to arrive, he decided to move into a larger dwelling, rather than renovate this one. When you have no more need of these things, let me know. We will move it to the store rooms. Now, I will leave you to settle in.” She pursed her lips. “There is no food here, but if you need, I can arrange for some to be brought to you.”

Spike shook his head. “Not a problem, but thank you. We’ve some bits and bobs with us. Be fine until

tomorrow.”

As Ursuna walked toward the door, Xander stopped her. “Hey, how did Drangstot know I can handle a hammer? We didn’t mention that.”

Ursuna grinned. “He is the shaman. He knows many things without having to be told. That is what a shaman does, isn’t it?”

Xander chuckled. “Yeah, it is – I’ve met some here and there. But I always ask.”

Ursuna nodded, smiled, and left. Xander shut the door and eyed Spike, who was leaning in the arch of the hallway, a leer on his face. “I know that look, Blondie, and what you have in mind gets my vote – just as soon as we do a little organizing and make sure the windows in this place are vamp-proofed. Get the bike ... I put some duct tape in one of the saddlebags. We can use that to seal the curtains and make the house safe for you. Later, maybe we’ll install shutters.”

“Can do, luv. Tomorrow we’ll see about ordering new furniture. That bed isn’t nearly big enough for fun and games.”

~*~*~*~*~

They stopped working near sunrise, and snuggled in their temporary bed. “Did you catch what Drangstot called you?” Xander was leaning back against the pillows, Spike in a relaxed sprawl between his legs. Xander was running his fingers through the vampire’s soft, platinum curls.

“What? That bit about a soul? Only two of us vamps with a soul, pet. Makes people notice.”

Xander popped him on top of his head and then resumed the gentle stroking. “Uh-huh. The Champion’s Incorruptible Soul. Even I could hear the capital letters in it. Fancy title, Blondie.”

“Pfft. You got one, too. Given my history, wouldn’t think anyone would consider me incorruptible.”

“Except you are. You do what you think is right, and damn the consequences. Once you make up your mind, nothing will sway you. If a hell goddess can’t make you back down, nothing can. Face it baby, you’re one of the ultra good guys now.” Xander pressed a kiss into Spike’s

hair. “Now me, well, he didn’t call me anything new. Angel named me Buffy’s white knight, and Caleb dropped ‘the one who sees’ tag into the mix. Huh, I got named by bad guys. What’s that mean?”

“Means they saw a lot more in you than your friends do. Although your friends got one thing right about you.”

“Hmm, what?”

“Remember the spell to take down Adam, and the part you played?”

“Yeah, sure. I was the heart.”

“That’s right, luv. When you were all in Sunnyhell, you were the heart of the Scoobies. Kept their morale high, eased their pain, strengthened them. Without a care for yourself. Even when they blasted ya for it, ya kept on.”

Xander shrugged. “It was what I did.”

Spike twisted around and straddled Xander’s lap. “It’s what you are, pet. Their heart.” He kissed Xander. “And now, you’re mine.”

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For the next three weeks they worked on the house, trained, and got to know the villagers. Xander discovered that vampire strength came in handy for holding drywall in place, lifting furniture, or carrying loads of paneling. Spike tapped his own accounts to order furniture for every room, and specially formulated glass that would allow them both to enjoy the sun, without turning the blonde into a pile of ash.

“Didn’t know I’d bagged me a wealthy man.”

Spike shrugged. “Kick around the world long enough, bound to have a bit put by for a rainy day, pet. Now, what about electronics? I need my telly, and you’ll probably want a computer, yeah? To check into your investments, email the gang, and the like, yeah?”

“Uh, do they have net access here? I mean, I know demons do in the cities, but ... here?”

Ursuna, who was stocking a cabinet with healing herbs and teas, laughed. “We do access the web, Xander.

Unlike you, we cannot go into town and purchase whatever we need, unless we use a glamour. It is much easier to order online.” She shrugged. “There are many demons who live and work among humans undetected. We had some friends set things up for us. Get your computers. When you have them, let Drachir know. He will install what you need.”

Xander blushed. “Thanks. I didn’t mean to ... I mean, no offense, okay? It’s just that this place is kinda off the beaten path. Way off, you know?”

Spike grinned. “Gotta say, surprised me as well. No power lines mucking up the skyline. Didn’t think you’d have hot and cold running, let alone computers and the internet.”

Ursuna just shook her head. “We are modern Elzagal – we enjoy lights at the touch of a switch, refrigerators, stoves, and three hundred channels on the television.” There was a twinkle in her brown eyes that belied her somber tone.

Xander grinned. “Cool. Just think, Spike ... one of those channels might have reruns of Passions.”

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They'd been in the village for a month now, and Xander knew everyone by sight. He even knew most of their names, although their language was still giving him trouble. He and Spike were sparring outside their house one evening, just past sunset, The air was still warm, and they'd drawn a small crowd of children. The young Elzagal were entranced as they watched the flash of Spike's sword and Xander's battle ax. Spike got past Xander's defense and scored a line of red across the brunette's chest. They stopped to rest and tend one another's wounds, although none of the cuts were serious. One of the older children wandered closer. She was slender, with short, tawny fur over most of her body that darkened to a reddish-brown at her brow. Her spiraled horns were about six inches long, the color of a ripe plum, and were just beginning to curve over her head.

Xander smiled at her. "Hi there. I'm sorry, I don't remember your name."

She gave him a shy smile. "I am called Rendba. You and

the souled one are ... mated, yes?"

"Yep."

"You are mated, yet you fight. You hurt each other when you fight, but ... I think just a little. Not as much as you could."

Spike stepped up. "We don't fight, Rendba. We train. It's a way of keeping in practice. So that when we need to fight someone, our skills are still sharp, yeah?"

She nodded. "I understand this. We do the same with healing potions, and spells. But I do not understand why you hurt each other."

Xander sat on the grass tailor fashion, and Spike joined him. Xander chewed on his lip for a moment. "It's a little difficult to explain, unless you know about fighting sweetie. You folks are peaceful by nature, but ... is there something physical you do, that takes a lot of training? A dance, maybe? Or some kind of sport?"

The other children gathered closer, and a small boy spoke. "Sport? Like the ones we see on television?"

Xander grinned. “Yeah, like football or baseball. You guys play those games?”

The boy nodded. “Yes, we like football! Catch the ball, and the others run after you and try to tackle you before you reach the goals. It’s fun.”

“Okay, good. Could you play if you worried about getting a little hurt? Like a scraped knee, or a twisted ankle? Do you run faster because you know the other players won’t be easy on you? Because you know if they catch you, you’ll fall?”

The children frowned and muttered at each other in their native language. Rendba shushed them. “We ... practice ... so that we won’t get hurt. And so that when we play, we will know how to get away from the others, and get to our goal.”

“Well, see ... that’s what Spike and I do. If he didn’t hurt me, just a little, when we fight ... then when I have to fight for real, I might hesitate, because I’d be afraid of being injured. Understand now?”

“You inflict little hurts now, so you won’t be frightened of bigger hurts in a true battle.” Rendba gave a vigorous

nod. “Yes! This makes much sense.” She turned to the other children and spoke. Xander was learning their language, but couldn’t follow her rapid-fire words.

When she finished talking, Spike took over. “Remember this, kiddies. I’m a vampire, and heal from just about anything. Xander’s an immortal, so the same goes for him. And we both know what we’re doing so we don’t go too far. Don’t any of you get the bright idea to start sparring with each other, yeah? Wouldn’t want your mum or da coming to us all bothered if ya get hurt. Might make for bad feelings, like.”

Drangstot spoke from behind the children. “Spike is wise to caution you, children.” He tilted his head, studying the group. “Perhaps, if the champions are willing, they might teach those of you who are interested.” The children shifted eagerly on the grass. “I do not think such lessons would begin with blades, however.” At the groans from the youngsters, Drangstot smiled. “You have to learn to catch the ball before you can be trusted to run with it, true? So first, if they are willing, Xander and Spike will teach something more suited to beginners.”

Xander laughed. “Hey kids, you know what I had to learn first?” Wide-eyed faces turned to him, but no one spoke.

“No guesses? Well, before Spike let me throw my first punch, before he’d teach me anything else ... he taught me to fall.”

A little boy with blue horn stubs snorted. “To fall? Everyone knows how to fall! Babies fall all the time.”

Spike poked Xander in his side. “Let’s give ‘em a demo, eh pet?” He stood and pulled Xander to his feet. “There’s a likely spot ... that tree branch.” He walked Xander to a nearby tree, followed by the children and Drangstot. With easy strength, he boosted Xander into the tree. “Go up a few more feet, luv.” Once Xander was in position, Spike turned to the children. “Any of you climb a tree? Yeah? How many have fallen out of one?” Several children raised their hands. “Hurt, dinnit? Know why? There’s a trick to knowing how to fall. Any of you think you could fall from that branch and not get hurt? No? Didn’t think so. Now, watch this.” He looked up. “Anytime, Xan.”

The children gasped as Xander stepped back and fell off the tree limb. In midair he twisted, landed on his feet with his knees bent, rolled forward, and popped back up, bouncing lightly on his toes and spreading his arms. “Ta da! It took Spike a long time to teach me how to do that

without hurting myself. When you fight, you're gonna hit the ground. You'll trip, or your opponent will knock you over, or sometimes a rock shifts under your foot. So knowing how to fall is important." He looked at Spike, received a tiny nod, and turned to Drangstot. "If the children will agree not to try anything without our approval, and if you can arrange to have a healer nearby for any accidents, Spike and I will arrange a training schedule. Just let us know how many kids to expect."

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Spike finally found a truck that he liked – a big Chevy with four-wheel drive. It had saddle tanks that held twenty gallons of gas each, and a shell camper with blacked out windows to protect him if they traveled during daylight. They bought it and drove back to the village. Xander was behind the wheel while Spike fiddled with the radio. "You keep in touch with any of the other Scoobies?"

Xander blinked at the abrupt question. "No ... well, sorta. When I'm in a town that has public computers with internet access, I'll send off an email. It isn't ... I don't usually stay in one place long enough to ... besides,

they're pretty busy, what with saving the world every other week. Why?"

"Just wondered. Red seemed to find ya easy enough when I popped back into existence. Figured you lot talked on a regular basis or some such."

Xander scowled. "Talk? No, but she has a strong tracking spell she uses when she wants to find me. Can't seem to duck it."

"Yeah? Wouldn't think that would bother you. She's been your friend a long time. Probably just wants to make sure you're okay."

Xander snorted. "Right. Truth is she checks the obits for every place I've been, looking for unusual deaths – like people minus their heads."

"Get the feelin' I'm missing something here. What's that got to do with anything?"

"She doesn't email me, you know? I mean, no small talk, no hi, how ya doing, nothing. But when she finds what she considers evidence that I've taken an immortal's head, she'll send me pages on how I should've gotten to

holy ground, or left town, or knocked the guy out, or anything but kill him. She says it's murder, that it's wrong because they aren't demons. She won't ... Giles tried to reason with her while I was still there, but ... and I don't think Buffy cares much, except that I'm upsetting Willow. Her words, not mine. Although you'd think Buffy would be the one going off on me, with her whole 'humans have souls' bug. But Willow can't ... even when I have no choice, she just ... it's not like I'm *hunting* immortals. I don't give a fuck about the damn Game – but I don't want to die, either. She ... well, she doesn't like it."

Spike wanted to snarl. *That bitch – what the hell's runnin' through her damn head?* "Ah. Can see why ya find it ... intrusive. Could probably get someone to help with that, if ya like."

Xander narrowed his eye. "You know someone who can do that?"

Spike nodded. "Most likely. There's ways to block it, to hide you so she won't know where you are, or where you've been. Charms or amulets you could wear. Know she can't find ya here – the Elzagel have a natural protection that covers the entire community. They bolster that with powerful talismans and magicks. Was

one of the reasons I wanted us to settle here, yeah?" He shrugged. "Not sayin' it would be easy, luv – just sayin' it can be done." He raised an eyebrow. "That's if you really want it, o'course."

"Want it? Gee, lemme think – continue to get the Willow emails of doom about how horrible I am, or drop from her radar and have some peace and quiet. Tough choice, Blondie. But I think I'll pick door number two."

"Thought you might. There's a catch. You gotta do something for me."

Xander sighed. "Should've known you'd have a condition."

"Naturally. I'm still the Big Bad."

"Uh-huh. And what do I have to do?"

"You have to promise to talk to Ursuna about your eye." Spike held up a hand to still the protest he could see forming on Xander's lips. "Don't gotta promise to get it done ... just that you'll talk to her."

Xander's shoulders slumped. "You just love beating this

horse, don't you? What's to say I won't agree and then conveniently forget to talk to Ursuna after?"

Spike laughed at that, and then laughed some more at Xander's glower. "Cuz I know you, pet. If you give your word, you'll die trying to keep it. Not that dyin' would be necessary in this case."

Xander grumbled a bit and then sighed. "Fine, set it up. You have my word that I'll talk to her about my eye." He took a deep breath. "So, who do we have to see about blocking the tracking spell?"

Spike grinned. "That would be ... Ursuna. She's not just a healer. She's a dab hand at amulets and charms."

Xander smacked Spike's arm. "Bastard."

Spike chuckled. "I'm a rude, bad man, pet. Thought you knew that." He squeezed Xander's thigh. "Already spoke to her. She'll see you whenever you want."

Part Five

Ursuna was sitting on the porch talking with her father when they arrived at her place. The two Elzagal looked up and smiled. Drangstot kissed Ursuna's cheek and stepped off the porch.

He nodded at Spike and turned to Xander. "It is good that you have finally come to see Ursuna. She will help you remain hidden from the one who seeks you, even when you have to travel." He gave Xander a sly grin. "She will also help you heal, and that is even better. You cannot fulfill your destiny until then."

"Destiny? What, as a warrior? What destiny? Do you know what the Powers want with us?"

Drangstot patted Xander's shoulder. "All will become clear, my friend. But ask yourself this – if the One Who Sees lacks an eye, how true can his vision be?"

"Oh, no. Huh-uh, no way. Cordy has the seer gig, and she handles it with style and class. They don't need me for that."

Drangstot raised an eyebrow. "Did I say you are to be a seer, young one? You have vision, yes ... but your path for using that vision is not the one your friend follows."

He held up a hand. "I know no more. You will find your own way."

Ursuna shook her head, her amber horns glinting in the light from the doorway. "Always a riddle from him. And yet, always the truth." She opened the door and gestured them inside. "Come. I am glad you came along, Spike, for I have gifts to bestow on both of you." She gestured to the large sofa and took a seat near it. "Let me tell you what I am prepared to do for you. Then you can decide if you wish it done. First, I cannot prevent the Red Witch from casting a tracking spell, or scrying for you, for that is action taken by her, and I cannot control her. I can, however, block anyone from finding you by magical means. I can do the same for you, Spike. This I would strongly urge both of you to do."

Xander nodded. "That's the biggest reason I'm here. It's ... Willow's been my friend for a long time, but ... I don't like being on her leash. And that's what it feels like."

Ursuna tilted her head in an abbreviated bow. "Indeed. That is a thing no one would like. Very good. I am happy to take care of this for you." She reached into an inlaid box that rested on the low table beside her chair. She pulled out two crystals. They were a frosty blue-green

that reminded Xander of the sea glass Jesse had found one year. Each crystal dangled from a leather cord. “As long as you wear these, magic will not be able to find you. These came from our guardian stone – you have seen it in the meeting hall. It is not from this dimension, and is impervious to this plane’s magic. It is what keeps this village safe and unseen.”

Spike and Xander took the crystals from her and immediately fastened them around their necks. Ursuna nodded in approval, reached into the box again, and pulled out two metal items that jingled as she handed them over. “I have other gifts that will serve you well. For you, Spike, a byrnie ... a chain mail shirt. It is elvish in origin, and will protect your heart.” She turned to Xander. “And for you, a pixane ... chain mail for your neck, so you keep your head on your shoulders, rather than lose it.”

Again they took the items, but this time Xander frowned. “You know about immortals, and I’ve told you about their stupid game. Do you think ... I mean, I’d hate for anything to happen to any of you because I’m here. Can they find me here?”

Ursuna smiled and shook her head. “No one finds our

village unless we will it, or they have a good heart and a strong need. That is part of the protection our guardian stone gives us. Worry not, Knight Who Sees ... none shall track you here.”

Xander sighed and relaxed. “That’s good. That’s great. And thank you for the crystals and the collar. And for Spike’s shirt thingy. Now I won’t have to worry about someone dusting him with a stake or an arrow.”

“There is more, my friend. If you wish, Spike, my father can place upon you a tattoo that will prevent the sun from burning you. He cannot stop all the things that can harm a vampire, but this small thing he can and will do.”

Spike’s eyes widened and he stared at her. “You mean ... I could be in the sunlight? For how long? How long would it last?”

“It would last as long as you live. It is better if the Guide can follow where his Champion must go, is it not?”

Xander grabbed Spike’s hand. “This is ... this is huge! Spike, you have to do this. Not just for me ... for you.”

Spike blinked. “To be able to feel the sun warm my skin

without burning. I would be ... most grateful.”

Ursuna merely nodded. “Then it shall be done. It is a simple enough spell, and takes but moments.” She smiled, and her eyes twinkled. “My father will be back soon. He said he knew the spell would be needed, and left to prepare it.” She turned to Xander, and grew serious once more. “And now for the wound you bear. Too long you have carried the pain of this scar, and all it stands for. Will you allow me to heal it? Or will you continue to carry the pain in your heart?”

Xander lowered his head and stared at the floorboards between his feet. “Spike and I have talked about this. And I know he’s right – what happened wasn’t my fault. At least, my head knows that. My heart ... my heart just hurts, and it’s ... I’m tired of hurting, but ... I don’t want to forget, either.”

Ursuna reached over and placed a hand on his knee. “You will never forget, Xander. But to choose this as a remembrance dishonors them. They would not wish you to carry this burden. Nor would they wish to be the cause of so much pain. They chose to join the battle. Honor their memory – and affirm their choice – by freeing yourself from the past, so that you can face the future

whole, and carry on the fight in their names.”

Xander swiped away the wetness from his eye and sighed. “I ... you’re right. Both of you. I have to let go and ... and remember them with pride, not pain.” He lifted his head and took a deep breath. “Please ... I want this. I want to see clearly again.”

Cool arms circled his body and held him close. “I’m so proud of you, luv. Know it isn’t easy, giving up the guilt. Carried a lot of that around m’self, and I know it’s strangely comforting. But you can do this. Always knew you were strong. This just proves it, yeah?”

There was a tap at the door, and Drangstot entered. He was carrying a stone bowl and a sharpened quill. “You have been busy, my daughter. This is good. It is also good that our gifts have been so well received.” He sat on the far end of the couch and smiled. “The herbs in this bowl, when combined with four drops of blood from each of you, will seal the spell into your skin, Spike. Shall we begin?”

Ten minutes later, a stylized sun had been drawn on the left side of Spike’s chest. Drangstot sat back and studied his work. “Yes, that is perfect. A few words to set the

spell, and we are done.” He glanced at Spike. “This will hurt, but only for a moment.” He muttered a few words in a strange language and waved his hand over the tattoo. The marking began to smoke and Spike screamed. Xander reached over to smother the tiny flames that licked up from the rays of the sun. Drangstot stopped him. “It is nearly done, but you must not touch it until it stops burning. Nothing of such value and importance is easily attained, my friend.”

Xander clenched and unclenched his hands. He wanted – no, needed – to soothe his mate’s pain. But he trusted the shaman, and so he waited. Seconds later, the design stopped burning and the smoke vanished.

Spike fell back, panting, and glared at the shaman. “Might’ve warned me about the fire thing, ya git. Would be the polite thing ta do.”

Xander scooted in close to Spike and lifted his hand, holding it just above the tattoo. “Is it ... are you all right, baby? Does it still hurt?”

Spike leaned into Xander’s shoulder. “Nothing a bit of blood won’t cure, luv.” He blinked as a tanned wrist was thrust under his nose. “Uh, Xan ... didn’t mean I needed

anythin' this instant."

"Drink, I want you to. It'll help. I ... I want to make you feel better."

Spike kissed the pulse point in Xander's wrist. "You always do, pet. But maybe we should wait for this, yeah? Got your own bit to go through yet. Might need all that lovely immortal blood to heal yourself. I can dip into the reserves in the fridge."

Xander pointed at himself. "See this? Resolve face, buddy. Now take a drink. You said you wouldn't need much."

Drangstot intervened. "It will cause Xander no harm, Spike. Honor your Champion, Guide."

Spike nodded, kissed Xander's wrist again, and slid his fangs gently into Xander's skin. He drew a single mouthful, carefully sealed the punctures with his tongue, and lifted his head.

Xander touched the tattoo. Already it had healed and changed. No longer black and charred looking, it was a deep, blood red. He bent his head and placed a reverent

kiss on the mark. “I can’t wait for sunrise,” he whispered. “You’re gorgeous in the moonlight – the sun will love you. It’ll be beautiful.” He gathered Spike close and held him until the vampire’s trembling stopped.

Spike finally pulled away. “Right – now that’s done, s’time you lot took care of my boy.”

Ursuna smiled at them, and Xander figured she saw through Spike’s snarking easily enough. “I suggest we return to your house. The ... procedure will not take long, and Xander’s eye will heal almost instantly. However,” she cautioned, “your mind must relearn what it has forgotten. It will take a week or so before the pathways are forged between eye and brain. You will be more comfortable if you are within familiar surroundings.”

They all stood, and Spike and Xander led the way to their home.

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Ursuna was as good as her word, and within an hour, Xander was resting while he recovered from his ‘surgery.’ She’d volunteered the information about the eye’s donor

... a man in his fifties, who had died just yesterday in a car crash.

Xander thanked the shaman and his daughter for their help and promptly fell asleep. Spike walked the Elzagal to the door.

“It’s just a natural sleep, right? Just to heal?”

Drangstot patted his shoulder. “That’s all, my friend. He will wake in a few hours. But as Ursuna said, it will take longer for him to adjust to having full vision.”

Spike squeezed the hand that still rested on his shoulder, and leaned over to kiss Ursuna’s cheek. “I know Xan will thank you both when he’s up and about. This is from me. Thank you – for helping him see. In more ways than one.”

Drangstot smiled. “You are most welcome, my friend. Go now – rest with your mate. He will no doubt be hungry when he wakes. A few of the villagers heard what would happen today, and came by while you were with Ursuna. I believe they left food for you and yours. So, feed him well, and make sure he rests. Immortal he may be, but this will have tired him.”

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Xander woke three hours later, ate a huge meal, and returned to bed. Spike slid in beside him. He hadn't asked any questions, knowing it was too soon for Xander's eye to be working. He could scent no fear or pain, and was content enough. He pulled the covers up and began to card his fingers through Xander's hair. He wasn't surprised when his lover spoke.

"Wanna know the real reason I've been avoiding Willow? Yeah, her constant harping is a downer, but..."

"But what, pet?" The bedroom was dimly lit, allowing Xander time to adjust to having both eyes again. Spike was curled into him, soaking up the warmth of his human.

"It's because she's right, in a way. Part of me ... enjoys it. Maybe not the fact that I have to kill someone, but the fight itself – yeah, part of me opens up and revels in it. And the quickening is like – shit, don't know what it's like. The finest of wines, the greatest roller coaster ride, best sex ever – all those and more. Well, maybe not the

best sex ever. You give me that. But anyway – part of me likes it. And that makes me think I’m not a good person. How can I be good if I enjoy something like that?”

Spike snorted. “You’re not bad or evil. Know evil, don’t I? And you? Not got it in you, Xan.”

“But, then why—”

“Everything what has a conscience has good and bad in ’em. Otherwise, they wouldn’t need that moral leash, would they? Some pay it no mind, just go on about the business of bein’ evil with never a twitch. Others are so filled with good the bad in ’em doesn’t stand a chance, and their conscience never gets a workout. Most folks fall somewhere in the middle – they try to be good, or at least not too bad.”

Spike propped himself on his forearms and looked down at Xander. “You – you’re something different, just like any warrior for the light. Warriors need that touch of darkness that comes from seeing evil up close and personal. Without it, they’d never go into battle. It gives them their edge, gives them power and strength to fight. Gives them an understanding of what they’re fighting, and why. You’ve seen it, time and again, in the Scoobies.

Faith gave in for a time, let the darkness take over. Rupert did the same in his youth. So did Buffy, and Willow. Hell, Willow's trip to the dark side was as bad as Angel when the soul went walkies."

Xander looked up at him hope clear in his eyes. "So I'm ... like them? A good guy with an occasional side order of bad? I can live with that, I think."

"Pet, you're miles from them. Been around nearly a century and a half, and you're the only warrior I've met who's never given in to that darkness."

"It's okay – you don't have to lie. It's enough to know I'm not all evil, just a little. And recovering, like an alcoholic. You know, one day at a time. Each day without evil is like a day without booze. Hey, maybe I should get a 'not gone bad' pin from the Powers. If they had meetings, I could attend. 'Hi, I'm Xander, and I've been not-evil for six months.' That would be - well, okay, that would be weird."

Spike chuckled and shook his head. "You're barmy. Good thing I love ya." He dropped a quick kiss on Xander's upturned lips. "But you're not a recovering evil addict, pet. When was the last time you did something bad? And

ya don't get to count killing other immortals, cuz that's self-defense. When did ya hurt someone, just because you could? When did ya go after someone weak or helpless? When did ya kill just for killing's sake? When did ya seek revenge against the world, cuz you were hurting? I'll tell ya when – never.”

“Well, there was the time in high school, when I ran with the Pack...”

“Possessed – wasn't you at the controls, was it?”

“What about the love spell that went wonky?”

“A minor blip on the radar. Who wouldn't try to regain their love?”

“Every female in town was after me, just because I wanted Cordy back!”

“Yeah, and ya took such a huge advantage of that, right? Bedded and left 'em, did ya? No, wait - you protected them from themselves.”

“What about lying to Buffy so she'd send Angel to hell? That's big.”

“Hmm, yeah – would be if that was your intent. Didn’t know she’d stab him in the gut and shove him into that hell dimension, did ya? No, you just wanted her on her game, so she’d end the threat of Angelus before he ended the world.”

It was Xander’s turn to snort. “I’m not sure my intentions were all that noble. I never really liked him. After he lost the soul, I just ... I truly hated him – what he’d become, what he’d done. I wanted him gone.”

“Like I said ... you wanted to end the threat. Face it, pet – Angelus had the right of it. You’re a white knight ... and your armor isn’t even dented.”

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Xander surpassed Ursuna’s expectations, and was seeing perfectly within three days. He resumed sparring with Spike, teaching the children, and his self-appointed job as the village handyman. He liked the work. It was nice talking with those who needed his services. He definitely enjoyed the thanks they gave via cookies and tea. He’d discovered an unknown penchant for the various sweet

teas the Elzagal brewed.

Xander finished replacing the shaky railing on Lerusa's porch, and sat down to a cool glass of mint tea. Lerusa was the village's mid-wife. She was middle-aged – Xander thought that put her in her hundreds – and as serene as Tara had been. Xander had been thinking about Tara, and Willow as she'd been with Tara, the entire time he'd been working. He watched the sun set from the porch, and smiled. Spike would be headed this way. He knew Xander's schedule, and made a point of seeking him out at the end of Xander's working day. Spike sometimes joined him earlier, soaking up the sun and handing over tools while Xander worked.

“Lerusa, how do you handle death? I mean, you've been around a long time, and you told me you've had a lot of friends who were human. I figure you've outlived some of them, so ... doesn't it hurt that you go on, and they don't?”

Lerusa nodded, still serene. “Of course, young one. How could it not? But my life would be much poorer had I never known them.”

“Yeah, I know that. I mean, in my head I understand that

most of the people I know and love will die long before I do. But in my heart..."

"Your heart wishes to protect itself. You think that by pulling away from those you cherish, the hurt will be smaller when they are no longer with you. But, think carefully, now. Is this truth?" She gestured out toward the dirt road that served as the village's main street.

"Tomorrow, lightning could strike any of the people here. One could choke on a piece of food, or drown in the swimming hole. Will my heart hurt less should this happen tomorrow, rather than if they die ten, twenty, or one hundred years from now?"

Xander frowned. "But ... doesn't it hurt *more* if you've known them longer, been with them longer?"

She patted his arm. "Young one, the heart does not measure love or pain with the number of days passed. When we love, time becomes meaningless. How long or short we are with the ones we love does not make the hurt smaller when they are taken from us. We will always wish for more time. But, we have what the creator gives us ... no more, no less. It is foolish to harden our hearts now, at the expense of sparing ourselves future pain."

Spike stepped in from the shadows beside the porch. “You’re thinkin’ about your friends, aren’t you, pet?” He jumped onto the porch, walked over to stand behind them and rest a hand on Xander’s shoulder. “She’s right, you know. Five days or five decades from now, it doesn’t matter. When your friends pass on, you’ll hurt. Shutting yourself away from them won’t change that.”

Xander sighed. “Maybe you’re both right. I don’t know, I just...”

“Xan, think about this. How much regret will you have if Willow dies, and you two hadn’t made up, hadn’t talked with each other in all that time? Remember Joyce, Larry, Anya, and the others? Would it have been easier if you’d cut your ties with them before they died? Or would you have fretted that you’d lost so much time – time you could have spent being with them?”

Lerusa stood and nodded. “Listen to your mate, young one. He knows the truth of it. Time is always too fleeting – it is better to hold close to friends and family while you can.” She patted Xander again and entered her house.

Xander stood, stretched, and reached for Spike’s hand, twining their fingers together. “Come on, vampire mine.

Let's head home. I think ... maybe I need to talk to the gang again."

Part Six

As soon as she woke, Willow strolled into the library, trying to appear calm and at ease. Her break up with Kennedy still hurt. *How dare she cheat on me, I've been nothing but good to her. I should ... I should... She sighed. I should calm down and get them to help me find Xander. I need my Xander-shaped friend.* She spotted Giles and several researchers ensconced at the largest table and walked over.

"Morning, everyone. Giles, I need a little help finding Xander. Not that he's lost, cuz I'm sure he isn't, but I can't find him, and ... usually I can pinpoint exactly where he is, and then I read the papers for the area ... just to know he's all right, nothing bad or anything ... but he was in Nevada and then he just vanished. Poof! Well, not poof like something took him away or he died ... oh,

goddess, maybe he ... no, no, he isn't dead, the spell would've showed that, so ... but, anyway, I can't find him, and so that's why with the needing help."

Giles looked up, his eyes red-rimmed and tired behind his glasses. "I'm sorry, Willow. We've been trying to unravel this latest prophecy for," he glanced at his watch and yawned, "the last thirty-six hours. I'm afraid we're all a bit fatigued."

A young slayer came in with a tray of drinks and sandwiches. Giles took a cup of tea and a plate from her. "Thank you, Maria. Most thoughtful of you. Enjoy a short break, everyone. Eat and drink something, and take a moment to stretch your legs. We'll get back to this in half an hour, all right?"

The researchers stood, stretched, and followed Maria out of the room. Giles took a long sip of tea and bit into a sandwich absently. Willow could see his attention had returned to the scrolls and books spread before him. "Giles, I know you're busy ... although I don't know with what, because no one asked for my help ... what prophecy are you ... no, never mind, getting side tracked. I need a tiny bit of help. It really won't take long."

Giles sighed, cleared a space on the long table, and set his plate and cup down. "Again, my apologies. You said you needed help locating Xander. Why? Has someone indicated that he's in trouble?"

Willow shook her head. "No, but ... look, when he left, it was ... bad. Because nothing was settled. He ... we were all upset, and he wouldn't listen to us, and then one day he was just gone. And so I've been sort of keeping tabs on him, just to make sure he's safe and ... anyway, I've been trying to find him for a couple of weeks, but I can't. So ... help?"

Giles frowned. "Willow, he could simply be somewhere that's shielded from magic. It doesn't mean anything's wrong. Dawn told me she received an email from him just a few days ago, so I'm sure he's fine. Why don't you check with her?"

Willow felt her temper flare and struggled to control it. "I did. She wouldn't tell me where he is. She said she doesn't know."

"Perhaps she doesn't. I can't imagine she'd ask about his precise location. He does travel a great deal. However, as she's heard from him, obviously he's in no trouble. Have

you tried sending him an email?”

“I did. He hasn’t answered. Of course, he hasn’t answered any of my emails for a long time, but that’s because ... and that’s so not the point. What’s important is that I need to see him, and I can’t find him.” She bit down on her rising impatience. *Stubborn old man! Help me. Don’t argue about it.*

Giles set his food aside, removed and cleaned his glasses, and replaced them. Much of his usual sharpness had returned, and Willow fidgeted under his gaze. “Willow, how long have you been tracking Xander?”

“Well, pretty much since he left. He’s my best friend, and I just wanted...”

Giles raised his hand. “Stop. I don’t care what your reasons were, you should not have done this without his permission. You know full well how he feels – how we *all* feel – about having magic used on us willy-nilly.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “He’s a grown man, Willow. He has cares and concerns none of us can fully understand, but he is quite capable of facing his challenges on his own. Aside from which, he *isn’t* alone. Spike is with him, remember? If they needed our help,

I'm sure they would call. Furthermore, if Xander hasn't, as you've stated, been in touch with you since he left, perhaps the fault lies with you. You can be ... resistant to change, Willow. Xander has changed a great deal in the last few years, from necessity. If you wish to remain his friend, you will have to adapt to those changes."

"Why should I be the only one to adapt? He should, too! Besides, I'm not the one running around the country lopping off people's heads, and then saying I didn't have a choice. There's always a choice, and he just--"

"That attitude certainly won't help, Willow. Would you prefer him dead?"

Willow gasped at the harsh words, and collapsed onto a nearby chair. "No! I just ... I want him the way he used to be. Here, and joking and laughing, and ... with me. There has to be a way to make it work. Maybe we could bless the buildings here, and, and the grounds. Make them holy, so he wouldn't have to--"

"You would make him a prisoner, to satisfy your own wants? What he does isn't wrong, Willow. It's a matter of survival."

“But he-”

“Enough. I will not help you with this. Be his *friend*, Willow. Apologize for whatever you’ve said or done that has caused this rift between you, and I’m sure he’ll do the same.” Giles drained his cup, set both it and the empty plate aside, and reached for his notes. “Now, I could use your assistance. Perhaps you could read this and help me translate it. It’s a bit more important than a tracking spell.”

Willow took the scroll he handed her and ducked her head, glaring at the writing. *Guess I’ll have to find a way to do it myself.* She blinked at the parchment in her hands. “It’s ... someone’s going to try to open the old Hellmouth? This is what you’ve been working on? When is it supposed to happen? And who’s going to do it?”

“That is what we’re trying to determine. The scroll is old, and the writing is faded. It’s making things rather difficult.”

Willow sighed. She could help with this, and then find Xander. “All right, what do you have so far?”

Giles pointed at the chalkboard. “That’s it. We can’t

translate who, or even what, this person might be. Or precisely when the event is supposed to occur, although we're fairly certain it will be within the month."

Willow read the words out loud. "The ... will return ... of power. She/he/it will seek ... what was taken/stolen/lost ... the ground/soil/earth recalls/remembers ... unlock the mouth of hell that was buried ... sealed forever ... darkness descends ... land."

Willow sat back. "Uh, Giles ... there are a lot of blanks in there, for such a short prophecy. I get the bit about the Hellmouth. Sunnydale is the only 'mouth of hell that was buried' so ... yeah. But power taken, stolen, or lost? Not much with the sense. Where's the part about when it will happen?"

She and Giles were hard at work when the other researchers returned. Willow frowned at the scroll. "Giles, staring at this won't make the letters and markings any more legible. You guys have been hunting through books and manuscripts for almost two days. That isn't going to work. We don't have enough time." *This might be just what I need.* "I have an idea."

Giles leaned back and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“And what would that be?”

“I’ll go to the Hellmouth and wait, sort of ... um ... like a stake out, okay? I can teleport there, now. And, and you guys can keep digging, and when you figure out who the latest baddie is, you can join me, and we’ll get rid of him, her, or it. And, and Dawnie can tell Xander what’s going on, and get him to meet with us, so we can all see him. It’s perfect.”

“Willow, I’m not sure that sending you to Sunnydale is the best idea. You have a history there, and it isn’t all pleasant. Why don’t we wait a bit? Dawn will be arriving in an hour, and I’m sure she’ll have some insights to offer about both situations. If nothing else, perhaps she can go with you. I realize you want to help and that also you see this as an opportunity to reconnect with Xander, but given your emotional state-”

“No, really ... this is just what I need. I get to be all helpful-girl, and make things better with my bestest bud. You’ll see – it’ll all work out. It’s like it was meant to be.”

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Xander sent Dawn a priority email, asking if she could set up a webcam conference with the rest of the Scoobies. *It's important, Dawnster. You guys are my family, and I've been away too long. Get them all together so we can talk, okay? XOXO Xan*

His computer beeped five minutes later, with a request from Dawn to meet on camera. He set it up so he and Spike were in camera range, and moments later they were viewing the Council library, and a scene of chaos.

“Dawnie, what the hell is going on? Another apocalypse?”

“Um, not exactly. I'm a little confused, myself. I just got here about twenty minutes ago. Seems they were working on some prophecy about the Sunnydale Hellmouth and how someone or something is going to try to open it, and um, Willow argued with Giles about something and walked off in a huff. Buffy caught the tail end of the fuss, so now she's all pissed at Giles, and apparently Kennedy and Willow broke up again. Like I said, confusing. But that's pretty normal around here. How are you guys doing?” She stared at him and squealed. “You, uh, maybe have some big news for us?”

She turned her head and waved wildly at the other Scoobies. “Guys, guys! C’mere! This is so awesome. Look at Xander!” Buffy, Giles, and Andrew gathered closer to the monitor. “Xander, c’mon. Tell us what happened. This is so cool – you must be jazzed beyond belief at this.”

Xander’s attention had been caught by the writing on the board behind Dawn. He felt his stomach clench when he read the words. “Uh, yeah ... a healer fixed my eye. Was pretty easy, actually. Dawn, where’s Willow?”

Giles interrupted the babble that began between Dawn and Buffy. “Ah, Xander. I’m so glad you were able to find a healer who could help you. I confess, I hadn’t thought your status as an immortal would allow such a thing, but I see the proof before me. Well done, my boy. Have there been any complic-”

Xander cut him off. “Where is Willow? Why isn’t she with you?”

Giles huffed, a frown marring his brow. “We had a minor altercation earlier over a course of action. She retired to her room. It’s nothing to worry about. I’ll send someone to fetch her – I’m sure she’ll be excited to hear your

news.”

“Uh-huh.” Xander pointed to the blackboard. “Did she see that? What did she want to do?”

Giles looked at the board and shrugged. “I asked for her aid in translating the scroll. She wanted to ... what was the word? ... ah, yes ‘stake out’ the Hellmouth. I told her that wasn’t wise, and she-”

“Let me guess. She ran off. And you didn’t stop her. What the hell were you thinking?”

Giles whipped off his glasses. “Now see here, Xander. You aren’t part of our day-to-day operations any longer, and you’ve no right to-”

Buffy interrupted Giles to rant about Xander’s manners. Dawn’s voice overlapped hers and the three of them were arguing in seconds.

“Shut up! All of you. Zip it, *now*.” They stared, mouths open, at Xander. “She read this, wanted to go to the Hellmouth, and you just brushed her off. You ignore one of the most powerful witches in the world when she’s angry and hurt, and expect her to be waiting patiently in

her room. Shit.” He shoved his fingers through his hair, calming slightly at the touch of Spike’s hand on his shoulder. “Dawn, check her room. Hurry.” Dawn rushed off and Xander stared at Giles. “I’m betting she isn’t there. She’s already gone - to a place that once had a hugely *bad* influence over her magic. I can’t believe you let her see this, as upset as she is. Are you all insane, blind, or just terminally stupid?”

Buffy planted her hands on her hips and glared. “That’s enough, Xander. You can’t talk to Giles that way. I’m sure Willow’s just sulking upstairs. She’ll get over it.”

Xander watched as Dawn hurried into the room. She shook her head, and he groaned. “She’s gone, isn’t she? This is a total cluster fuck.” Spike’s hand tightened on his shoulder, and Xander straightened up. “Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do. Dawnster, I know you hate doing magic, but you have to. This is way crucial. You need to transport you three here, and then all of us to Sunnydale.” When Buffy and Giles started to object, Xander jumped to his feet. “Be quiet! Not one word, from either of you. You made this mess, but I’m gonna have to clean it up. Dawn, gather what you need, please. And make it fast.”

Dawn nodded and left the room again. Xander flopped into his chair, Spike's hand held tight in his. "We warned you, and you ignored us. Dawn and I told you Willow was on shaky ground magically, and you said it was nothing. Well, this isn't *nothing*, guys. She's heading right back to black hair and visible veins. Why the hell didn't you listen to me?"

Giles took a deep breath, visibly trying to restrain his temper, although Xander could see it in the darkening of the older man's eyes. "And just what is it you think you know? You haven't been here, haven't seen her nor even spoken with her, apparently. You don't know the first thing about this prophecy. Just who do you think you are to speak to us this way?"

Xander looked again at the board, and the whole thing fell into place for him. He spoke softly, but clearly. "*The child will return to the origin of power. She will seek to regain what was taken from her and sealed away. The ground beneath remembers her, and will grant her aid to unlock the mouth of hell that was buried. Unless her heart is opened, or her magic sealed forever, darkness will descend upon all the land.*"

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Silence reigned until Dawn returned to the library. “Got what I need, Xander. Where am I headed?”

Her calm acceptance and faith buoyed Xander, and he smiled at her. “Thanks, Dawnie. Bring everyone to Paradise Valley, Nevada. There’s a little cafe on Main Street called Belle’s. Spike and I will meet you in...” He looked at Spike. “How long will it take us to get there?”

“Thirty minutes, if we push it. Forty on the outside.”

Giles shook himself. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to teleport directly to your home? Oh, and I’ll make sure to bring along a shade spell for Spike.”

“Don’t need the spell, Watcher. Got summat to cover that. And ya can’t come here. The village wards wouldn’t let ya in. Don’t want ya bouncin’ off and endin’ up who knows where. Just meet us where we said, yeah?”

Dawn glared Giles and Buffy to silence, and nodded at the camera. “We’ll be there. Come as fast as you can, guys.” Before the camera shut off, Xander saw her pick up a thick, leather bound book from a corner table and slip it into her bag.

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“Let’s go, pet. No time to waste. If she opens the Hellmouth, I doubt even you could stop her this time.” Spike began gathering a small assortment of weapons, stowing them in a long canvas bag. He pulled out a smaller bag and shoved clothes for the two of them into it.

“Spike, I won’t be able to use a blade against Willow. You know that.”

The blonde looked up, sympathy clear in his blue eyes. “Not for you, luv. For me. And not to use against her. Stopping her is your job. But if she’s pulling power from the remains of Sunnydale, she’ll be attracting a lot of attention.” He zipped up the bag and slung it and the weapons duffel over his shoulder. “I’ll be the one keeping everything else off your back.”

Xander stood and nodded. “Okay. Grab a cooler – I’ll get some blood bags from the freezer. If we’re both hurt, I know you won’t feed from me. I want to make sure you have what you’ll need to heal.”

They were finished and ready to go five minutes after that. They loaded the truck, locked the shell camper, and turned to find Drangstot waiting at the driver's door. "Be strong, my friends. I have faith that you will arrive in time."

Xander bit his lip. "Do you know, or are you just trying to reassure us?"

The shaman tipped one hand in a 'who knows' gesture. "The future is fluid, Knight. Else there would be no need for seers. But you and the Red Witch have a strong bond. I believe you can reach her." He opened the truck door and gestured for Xander to get in.

Xander slid across the bench seat. Spike would drive – he could get them to town faster than anyone Xander knew. Spike hopped in and turned the key.

Drangstot waited until the engine was rumbling before he spoke again. "Know this, Champions ... your road always leads back here, to safety and comfort. You, and those you would bring with you, have a home with us, and with all the clans, for as long as you live."

With a stunned look and a slam of the door, Spike pulled out onto the main road. Once outside the village proper, he pressed the gas pedal down and the truck took off like a greyhound after a rabbit.

“Um, Spike ... why did you look so shocked at what Drangstot said?”

“He promised us a home among all the clans forever, Xan. That’s ... well, it’s unheard of, is what it is.”

“Huh? But they already said we could live here as long as we wanted.”

“Yeah, us ... here, with them. This is ... luv, he spoke to every Elzagal clan on the planet. Wherever we are – we find a clan, we have a home and protection. No questions, no problems, no hesitation. Forever, Xan.”

Xander gulped. “Oh, uh, when you say it like that ... I mean, that’s ... um, wow.”

Spike shook his head. “Wow, indeed.”

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Twenty-five minutes after leaving the village, they parked in front of Belle's with a squeal of the tires that brought Dawn, Buffy, and Giles running to them. Dawn launched herself at Xander before anyone could speak. "God, I've missed you so much. Both of you. It's so good to see you, even if the reason is sucky. And your eyes!" She cupped Xander's face with her hands, tears in her own eyes even as she smiled at him. "Your beautiful eyes. I'm so happy for you, Xander."

Spike nudged her shoulder. "What? No hug for me?"

Dawn sniffled and yanked him in with one arm, maintaining her grip on Xander with the other. "You're in the sun, and that's way cool. We'll talk about these major changes later. But don't you two ever just drop out of sight again, you hear me? I don't care where you're living, I'll find you if I have to hire a Retack demon to do it." With a final squeeze of their shoulders, she wiped her eyes and stepped back.

Xander brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and kissed her forehead. "Missed you, Dawn Patrol. Maybe you can come visit once we get done with this." He took an unsteady breath and lifted his head, briefly directing

his gaze to Buffy and Giles before returning it to Dawn. “Are you ready to do this, kiddo?”

Dawn nodded. “Yep. And I can get us closer than just Sunnydale.” She pulled a pouch from her bag. “This has some of Willow’s hair from her brush. I grabbed it from her room. It should take us right to her.”

Spike frowned. “Might not be a good idea to get all of us that close, Bit. Red’s not firing on all her cylinders right now – hard to say how she’ll react if we barge in as a group.”

“Spike’s right,” Xander said. “She’ll think we’re ganging up on her. Can you get us close, but maybe not in her direct line of sight?”

Dawn reached into her bag again and pulled out a map of the sinkhole that was Sunnydale. “No problem. I mapped the crater out a couple years ago – physically and magically.” Dawn huffed at Buffy’s squawk. “Someone had to do it, but you guys shut me down whenever I suggested it. Something like this was bound to happen. I knew we’d have to go back someday, and I for one didn’t want to go in blind.”

Giles opened his mouth and Xander raised his hand. “You can fuss later, but not now. Be glad she did this. It’ll be a huge help.” He turned to Dawn. “So, can you show me where she is?”

Dawn laid the map on the truck’s hood. “Okay, there’s a natural cavern system that was under the town. When the town sank, it covered most of the entrances, and filled some of the caverns. There are still openings to the surface here and here.” She pointed at two spots on the map, not too far apart. “The Hellmouth itself, or at least, the seal, is in this area. I figure Willow transported directly to the seal. Excavating would take too long, even magically. And it’d be exhausting to use magic to do that.”

Xander scratched his chin and thought about their approach. “How close can you be to where you want to teleport a person? And how often can you do it? If you take us to one of the openings, can you still send someone else to the other one, and Spike and I to the cavern? Or would it be better to do it all from here?”

Dawn shook her head. “The closer I am physically, the easier it is. So, all of us to Sunnydale, and then we split up?”

Xander nodded. "That's the plan." He looked around, spied a convenient alley, and motioned the others to follow him. Once there, he pulled them into a rough circle, made sure everyone was touching Dawn, and nodded at her. "Do it to it, kiddo."

With a sickening wrench, they appeared at the edges of the sinkhole that used to be their town.

Part Seven

Before Dawn could teleport her away, Buffy stepped back and rounded on Xander. "Listen, *I'm* the slayer. You don't get to order me around. I'm the one who goes in and ... takes care of things."

Xander looked at her, his gaze hard and remote. "You want to slay Willow? Be my guest. But take your lunch, and plan on facing me when you're done."

She stepped back. "I ... that isn't what I ... damn it, Xander! Of course I don't want to slay her. She's ... she's my friend, and she's human, and..."

Xander shook his head. "Jesus. Buff, you can't stop her without killing her, because you won't be able to reach

her heart. And I'm not so sure you *could* kill her, even if you wanted to. This is 'Tara died, I'm gonna end the world' Willow. You couldn't stop her then, and she's stronger now." He sighed. "I don't know if *I* can reach her, but I have to try. She's my Willow, always will be. I can't just walk away." He straightened and faced them squarely. "You, Dawn, and Giles are my last line of defense. If she gets past me, you have to stop her. Whatever it takes."

Giles frowned. "And just where will Spike be during all this? Wouldn't he serve better guarding one of the exits?"

Spike glared at the watcher. "I'll be where I'm supposed to be, ya bloody idiot. Right behind Xander, guarding his back. You think Red's the only nasty waiting down there?" He stomped off, muttering under his breath.

Xander jerked his head in a short nod. "Okay, let's do this. Dawn, send Spike and I in. Then put Buffy at one entrance, you and Giles at the other."

Dawn laid her hand on Xander's arm. "Just a suggestion. Send Giles with Buffy. He has magic that might help if ... if she needs it. If I see Willow, I can bring them to me in a

blink.”

Xander glanced at Spike and then back at Dawn. “Good idea, sweetie. Make it happen.”

~*~*~*~*~

Xander blinked until his eyes adjusted to the sudden gloom of the cavern. He moved forward quietly, following Spike, trusting his lover to lead him to Willow. Spike stopped after a minute or two and leaned in close to Xander’s ear. “The Bit’s good, luv. Red’s just around this next turn. Opens into a large cavern, from the sounds of it. And I can hear movement all around. Stealthy-like.”

“Yeah, figured you were right about her drawing baddies. I’m not magical, but I can feel what she’s doing crawling on my skin like ants over a hill of sugar.” He pulled Spike to him suddenly, kissed him hard, and released him. “Make sure you stick around this time, Blondie. Don’t think I can go on without you.”

“I’ll be here when you’re done, pet. Don’t lose your head.” Blue eyes melted into gold as Spike allowed his

demon to surface.

Xander traced the ridges on Spike's face with a tender hand, turned abruptly, and strode into the cavern. He spotted Willow immediately. Her hair was already black, as were her eyes. Her skin remained smooth, but he didn't think it would be much longer until the veins appeared. "Hey, Wills. Can I join the party? And what are we celebrating? Where are the balloons, and the funny hats?"

"Xander? You ... you're here. And ... your eye grew back. I've been hunting for you for weeks. You ... I thought you were gone."

"Nope, still kicking." He took a few more steps toward her. "Willow, what are you doing? Haven't we been here before? It wasn't much fun the first time." He could hear the sound of fighting behind him, and prayed Spike would be all right.

Willow frowned. "You don't understand. No one does. It's ... Kennedy cheated on me. And, and you aren't around. You aren't my friend anymore. I'm ... Buffy doesn't have time for me, not really. And Giles is stuck in his books, and busy running the council. Dawn's gone at

school most of the time. It's been ... I'm all alone!"

He edged closer. "Aw, Wills ... you're not. Any of us would come when you needed us. You just gotta let us know."

"You wouldn't! You don't even answer my emails!"

"Maybe not, but I read every single one. And if you ever asked, I'd be there in a heartbeat. You know I would."

Willow tilted her head as if listening to a voice only she could hear. "No, everything's changed. You've changed. You're not my Xander anymore. You ... you kill humans, and you're with Spike now, and you left us. You left me. Everyone leaves me."

Xander watched as dark veins began to cover her skin, and he felt the cold breeze that lifted her hair. "Yeah, I've changed. That's kinda the way life works, Wills. You've changed, too. But you're still my friend, my Willow-girl. You always will be. Remember what I told you before? I love you, Wills ... that never stops."

Her dark eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you. You're not my Xander. My Xander wouldn't cut off heads. He'd,

he'd..."

"He'd what? Cower on holy ground? Run like a frightened fifteen-year-old boy? Die? No, I'm not that Xander anymore. I've grown up. I had to. We all did. Not much youth or innocence left to the survivors of Sunnydale. Doesn't mean I don't love you."

"Stop saying that! That's what you said the last time, and you made me ... made me hurt. And then they took away my magic! It makes me special, important. They need me to know this stuff, and I won't let you take it away again."

Xander saw Willow twitch her fingers, and a blast hit him in the chest. He staggered, but managed to stay on his feet. "Whoa. Gotten way stronger there, Wills. That hurt a helluva lot more than last time. But look – I'm still standing. And I'm gonna say the same thing as before. You wanna end the world? Go for it. But you gotta take me out first. Cuz I won't let you do this ... not to yourself, or anyone else."

Willow screamed, and Xander's eyes burned with the flashes of raw, magical energy she threw at him. His chest felt like it would explode. The heat built and built

within him, until his screams overpowered hers. She transferred her attention to his neck, and that scared him. His Willow was gone, lost in the dark magic – but still aware enough to know his weakness. The pixane began to glow, brighter and hotter, pressing in on his throat and silencing his cries of pain. When he thought he could take no more, when dark spots began to invade his vision, when he was sure she would win, he felt the pressure ease.

He opened his eyes to see her slumped and unconscious, Spike's arms all that supported her. Wild, golden eyes met his over her lolling head. "Spike," he croaked, his voice nearly gone. "Why ... how ... what did you do?"

"You distracted her a right treat, so I snuck up behind her and bit the silly bint. Took just enough that she passed out. Won't hurt her none, luv. Wouldn't do that 'less there was no choice."

Xander staggered the last few steps to lean against his [mate](#). "But, you were fighting. How..." He looked around the cavern, now littered with the corpses of the demons drawn to Willow's dark power. Giles, Buffy, and Dawn stepped out of the shadows.

“Command decision, Xander.” Dawn grinned tiredly.
“You kept us outside to protect us. Didja think I wouldn’t figure that out? You’ve been protecting me my whole life.” She leaned against her sister, who was also smiling.

Giles stood behind the girls, a hand on each shoulder.
“No, Dawn – he’s been protecting *all* of us his entire life. It’s what he does – what he is. And we’re poorer for not having realized that before.”

Xander stood quietly, exhaustion and pain gnawing at him, while Buffy and Giles took Willow from Spike. When they had bound what remained of her powers and she was resting, Xander reached out a shaking hand and brushed her red hair from her forehead. “It’s okay, Wills,” he whispered. “We’ll take care of you.”

~*~*~*~*~

Dawn had just enough energy to teleport them all to the Hyperion Hotel. Angel seemed unsurprised to see the bedraggled group. But then, Xander thought, Angel seldom showed any expression. He did manage to scowl at his child, but Spike lifted two fingers in the dark vampire’s direction and proceeded to ignore him from

that point on.

Xander blinked slowly and lurched forward, intending to sit down on the nearest soft surface. Strong, cool hands intercepted him. “C’mon, pet ... let’s find a bed we can curl up in. You’re knackered, and I’m not far behind.”

Spike led Xander to an empty room, stripped him quickly, and tucked him under the covers. He bent down and placed a kiss on Xander’s hair. “Back in a flash, luv. Just gonna heat and drink some blood. Then I’ll be snuggled up with you.”

Xander drifted hazily until he felt his lover’s lean body slide into the bed. After that, he fell into a sleep so deep it might have been a coma.

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Xander woke to Spike’s furious whisper.

“Ya wake him, ya ponce, and I’ll smack ya so hard the cheerleader will feel it.”

Barely opening his eyes, Xander patted the arm that

rested over his waist. "It's okay, Blondie. Need a bathroom and food, anyway. In that order." He blinked repeatedly until Spike's face came into focus. "Hey, baby. Everyone all right?"

"Everyone's fine. How are you, luv? You had some kind of burns on your chest last night." Spike lifted the blanket to check Xander's torso. "Looks ta be okay now, but ya took some hard hits. Saw the marks around your throat. Bitch tried ta take your head."

"Yeah, well ... she was off hers. And I'm fine. Hungry, still a little tired, but fine."

Angel spoke from the doorway. "Giles and Buffy are downstairs. They ... have some questions about what happened."

Xander felt Spike's body tense above him. "C'mon, vampire mine. Let me up." Spike moved and Xander pushed himself upright, groaning. "Okay, let me amend my previous statements. Not quite so fine as I thought. Gimme a hand to the bathroom, baby. Then I need some serious calories. Should've eaten last night, but I think I probably would've keeled over into my food."

Xander started to push the covers back, but Spike's growl stopped him. The blonde was aiming a golden-eyed glare at Angel, who lingered in the door.

"Beat it, Peaches. Not gonna let you ogle my boy's bits. Tell the others we'll be down soon as we get ourselves sorted."

Angel pressed his lips into a thin line, but he left, a scowl still firmly entrenched on his face. After the door closed, Xander giggled. "Think his face froze that way? He only has two expressions that I've ever seen ... pissed off and morose."

Spike helped Xander into the bathroom and leaned against the doorjamb. "Could have done. The two look remarkably similar. Not that I give a shite. Won't have him starin' at you. Wanker." Spike steadied Xander to the sink, stood by while he washed up, and then supported him back to the bed. "Sit. I'll get your kit and help ya get ready to face your friends." He grabbed a bag from the floor and rooted in it for clothing.

"Huh, I didn't see you pick that up before we left the caverns."

Spike set out jeans and a tee shirt for each of them, stripped and redressed swiftly, and turned to help Xander into his own clothes. “Didn’t. Left the weapons, too. Bit twitched her nose and brought ‘em back.”

Xander snickered. “I’m gonna call her Samantha, and blame it on you.”

“Oi! Remember payback, whelp.”

“Yeah, yeah. Come on, let’s get the inquisition over with. I’m hungry.”

Spike grunted. “Then you’ll eat before you answer a single bloody question.”

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Spike and Xander faced the Scoobies and the L.A. gang over the kitchen table. Spike sipped at a mug of blood, alternately scowling at the others and watching Xander eat. Xander shoveled massive amounts of eggs, bacon, and biscuits into his mouth, washing it all down with glass after glass of orange juice. At last he pushed aside plate and glass, settling in with a cup of coffee provided

by Buffy. He smiled at the group ranged around the table.

“Thanks to whoever cooked. It was great.”

Dawn grinned at him. “No problem. I actually took classes. Did you get enough? I know you burn a lot of calories healing. And you looked pretty rocky last night.”

“Plenty, hon. I’m comfortably stuffed.” He took another sip of coffee, set the cup on the table, and sighed. “Okay, let’s start. I’ll need to sleep again, soon. I know you all have questions. So, who’s first?”

They spent half an hour talking over what had happened yesterday before Giles got to what Xander thought were their real concerns. “You said that Willow has been ... er ... on shaky ground, magically. What did you mean by that? And how, how could you read that prophecy so easily? You didn’t even see the original scroll.”

“Giles, a year before I left, I told you Willow was unstable. She was back to using magic for everything. Hell, I saw her change her hairstyle with a wave of her hand! And did you forget the no-need-to-shave spell? That’s not responsible use of magic, but you basically

told me to mind my own business. You know why I wouldn't email her, or talk to her? She used magic to follow me all over the country. Any guy who died under suspicious circumstances near me meant I got a five-page rant on how evil I was. Didn't matter whether I had anything to do with it or not. No one can tell me that's rational behavior." He leaned into Spike's shoulder for support, both physical and emotional. "So yeah, the casual, everyday use of magic wiggled me out. But no one was listening to me except Dawn, and no one was listening to *her*, either."

Spike slid his arm around Xander's waist. "Finish this up, pet. You need to rest."

"Yeah, okay. The prophecy ... well, I don't know what to tell you about that. I looked at what you had on the board and just ... filled in the blanks. I mean, it was in my head, perfectly clear. I can't tell you ... I don't know how I did it. I just ... saw it."

"Caleb," Buffy said. "He called you the One Who Sees."

Spike snorted. "This is news? Right then. Yeah, Xan's the White Knight, the One Who Sees. And now? He's going to be seeing the inside of his eyelids. I'm takin' my boy to

bed.”

Buffy held up her hand. “Wait, one more question. Willow’s been ... she’s down in the basement, raving that you stole her magic. And I know you didn’t, because you’re not magic guy, but ... just what *did* you do?”

Xander slumped against Spike, tired beyond belief. Spike hauled him to his feet and glared at Buffy. “You saw, didn’t you? Don’t you know what happened? The murderous bint threw her magic at him. I know you’ve seen a quickening. It’s a kind a magic, yeah? So what happens when a powerful witch shoves all her magic at an immortal?” Spike turned to lead Xander upstairs, pausing at the doorway. Without turning around, he spoke. “He didn’t *take* her magic, you stupid sods. She forced it into him.”

Stunned silence met Spike’s statement, broken finally by Giles. “Oh, dear,” he muttered. “That’s ... that’s a tremendous amount of power for you to hold, Xander. We should, ah, try to ... to tap it, or perhaps a magic sink could drain it from you. I can’t in good conscience allow you to keep it. You know nothing of magic. It could warp you...”

Xander turned his head. “Like it did Willow? And you’ll help me ... like you helped her? Thanks, but no thanks. I have people who can do whatever needs doing at home. Which is where we’re headed as soon as I can travel.” He sighed heavily, and tried to keep the bitterness from his voice. “You can at least trust me to try to do what’s right. I don’t want the magic. I don’t want to use it. But ... I wouldn’t give it back to her even if I knew how. As for everything else ... we’ll talk, okay? Just ... not right now.”

~*~*~*~*~

The Scoobies and the L.A. gang sat at the table and watched Spike help Xander up the stairs. When the pair were gone, Dawn looked at the others and shook her head. “I can’t believe you guys. After everything that’s happened, you still underestimate him. He’s taken everything the Hellmouth dished out, and kept smiling. His best friend tried to kill him – twice – and he didn’t blink. But you ... you say you’re sorry, and then pull this shit.” Her chair screeched against the floor as she shoved away from the table. “Tell you what. *I’ll* help him.”

Buffy stared at her sister. “*You?*”

Giles winced. “Er, Buffy, perhaps you should-”

Dawn faced her sister, hands on her hips. “Maybe you should just shut up, Buffy. Yeah, *me*. I know a lot about having incredible power inside me, and I’ve learned how to control it. And I don’t happen to think Xander’s an idiot who can’t be trusted! So, for future reference, I’ll be staying with them, if they’ll have me. You want me, send an email. I’ll get back to you.”

She stormed out of the kitchen and ran up the stairs to Spike and Xander’s room. Spike met her at the door.

“Heard what was said. All of it.” He spoke quietly and ushered her in, nodding at the bed where Xander slept. “Think you can help him? He won’t say it, but I know it scares him, having her magic inside him. She ... she twisted it, and he’s afraid it’ll twist him, yeah?”

Dawn nodded. “I get that. But it won’t. Xander’s too strong. And yeah, I think I can help him. He already knows how to handle a quickening – this is just more of the same.” She shrugged. “I’ll probably teach him some spells ... emergency use things. But mostly? He’ll be like me. A lot of power on tap, that’s used very seldom. If I can do it, he can.” She smiled at Spike. “So ... do you two

have a spare bedroom at home?”

Spike pulled her into a hug. “Yeah, Bit, we do. And you’re more’n welcome to stay with us.” He pursed his lips. “First thing we’ll have to do is put a silencing spell on our room. Boy’s right noisy in bed.”

Dawn muffled her giggles behind her hands, but sobered quickly. “Listen, I’ll go back to my room, give you two some privacy.”

Spike shook his head and climbed onto the bed still dressed. He arranged himself carefully behind Xander, pulling the sleeping man into his arms. “Not necessary. Won’t be doing aught but sleepin’ tonight. You can take the other bed – get some rest. Wanna head home soon as Xan wakes, yeah?”

Dawn nodded, ran to her room, gathered her things, and returned just as quickly. She settled on top of the other bed facing them. “Have you ... have you seen him die?” She spoke quietly. When she saw the grief and rage on Spike’s face, she wished she’d held her tongue.

“Once. Was enough. We were in the woods near the village, just having a walk, yeah? Found a bloody

T'segrus. Biggest one I've ever seen. Xan came up behind it, trying ta get to its belly. The tail caught him. One of the spurs went straight inta his heart. He dropped without a sound." He took a deep breath. "If my heart beat, it woulda stopped. I tore the bastard apart."

Dawn chewed on her lip, uncertain how to comfort the master vampire. "It happened three times while I was with them. Just about killed me, every time."

Spike sighed. "Yeah. My head knew he'd be all right, but ... seeing him lying there, so still." He sniffed. "I grabbed Xan and ran to the truck ... didn't even bother collectin' our gear, or hidin' the beastie. Took 'im home, cleaned 'im up, and crawled inta bed with him. Just kept ... pettin' him, and talkin' to him, willing him to wake up." He rubbed at his eyes. "He did, of course. Wasn't nothin' to worry about, really."

Dawn curled around her pillow. "I know, but ... you worry anyway. I kept thinking what if it doesn't work this time? What if he doesn't come back? I stayed with him, all three times. The others would leave him in his room, but I didn't want him to wake up alone. I thought maybe some part of him would know if someone was there. It just seemed ... cold, somehow, to abandon him."

“You’re a good friend, Nibblet. Ya done right by him.”
Spike kissed Xander’s hair and smiled at her. “Get ta
sleep, now. We all need it.”

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Everyone was gathered by the front door when Xander,
Spike, and Dawn came downstairs the next morning.
Spike growled quietly. Xander bumped the blonde’s
shoulder in reproof. “You knew they’d be here, Blondie.
They’ll apologize, I’ll forgive them, and we’ll move on. It’s
what I do, remember?”

Spike nuzzled Xander’s cheek. “It’s what you are, luv.
You’re all heart.”

Epilogue

Dawn stood at the door, watching Xander. He'd changed over the years, but even more since settling with the Elzagel clan. Gone was the nervous tension that had seemed an integral part of him. He was calmer, his emotions much more controlled. It was odd that that same control seemed to give him more freedom to express the happier aspects of his personality. Xander hadn't hidden his feelings before, but now his anger was slower to ignite, and his joy in life and his friends was there for anyone to see.

Spike had changed, as well. More and more of William showed through every day. Not the shy, stuttering bookworm she'd heard about, but the well-educated, warm, and loving man he'd become. Even his clothing had changed. Gone was the black on black with an occasional splash of red. Now he dressed in faded jeans, sweats, and cutoffs. He had an assortment of tee shirts in various colors, and even some dress clothes. He retained his beloved duster, of course, and could call up the Big Bad when needed – but he didn't hide behind that persona anymore.

Dawn smiled as she recalled last night. The Elzagel had held a ceremony, formally joining the Champions to their clan. Both men now bore magical tattoos on the back of

their left hand, and would be instantly recognized and welcomed by all Elzagal anywhere in the world, forever. After the tattoos had been sealed, Spike and Xander had joined the village in an impromptu dance, leaping and twirling to the beat of drums and the lilt of flutes. They made up their own steps when they couldn't follow the Elzagal, to the amusement of everyone. And then they laughed and dragged Dawn from her seat on the grass to dance with them.

And now Xander was sprawled on a chaise lounge on the patio, soaking up the sun like a lizard, and looking as energetic as a sloth. His hair was unbound, and curled around his face in sable waves that were sun-kissed with gold and copper. A glass of mint tea sweated on the low table next to his lounge, ice melting in the summer heat. She opened the door and stepped onto the patio. Xander tipped his head back and grinned at her.

“Morning, kiddo. Did you hear from Buff?”

Dawn flopped into a chair, kicked off her sandals, and propped her feet on Xander's chaise. “Yup. Willow's doing well with her therapy. Who knew the Council had psychiatrists on staff? Giles finally let her haul him into the 21st century, and he's actually impressed with how

easy it is to run the Council's business via computer. Buffy is dating some guy from Scotland, who she says is adorable, but in reality is probably a dweeb. And Kennedy was sent to the Hellmouth in Alaska."

Xander laughed. "Never piss off the best friend of the woman who hands out the slaying assignments. She won't kill ya, but she can make you wish she had."

"You got that right. Oh, Faith is back in Los Angeles, taunting Angel on Spike's behalf. I'm not sure how that happened, or why. But Cordelia says it's a beautiful thing to see." Dawn giggled. "Why does everyone enjoy picking on Angel?"

"Because he's there." Xander's lip twitched in a smirk. "They might not do it so much if the guy ever let down his hair. The soul's nice and permanent now, but he can't even smile."

"Hmm, could be." She tilted her head and studied him. "How about you? It's been two months – is the gang keeping in touch with you? Are they, uh..."

"Are they behaving? Are they treating me right, or are they trying to stuff me back into the Zeppo suit? That

what you wanna know, hon?" At her nod, Xander closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sun. "They're ... trying. Giles has called and emailed a few times to ask my opinion on some prophecy or other. He honestly seems to listen, and to value my input. I think, for him anyway, it's both harder and easier. We're his kids, and it's tough when your kids grow up. You want to keep them at home, safe and protected. So both the holding on and the letting go are natural processes." Without opening his eyes, he snagged his tea and took a drink. "Buffy ... well, she's different. I think it has to be the slayer mindset. When you're right there in front of her, fighting beside her every day, she can focus on you very intently. That feels both good and annoying, but it's her way of showing she cares. Since I'm half a world away, that intensity is gone. It's almost like we've just met. Getting to know each other, finding out about likes and dislikes. It's a slow thing, but in the end, we might actually be better friends because of it."

Dawn reached over him and stole a drink from his glass. "Yep, she's been the same with me. I kinda like the big sister I'm getting to know. And now for the tough one – how's it going with Willow?"

Xander shrugged and fingered his pendant, which glowed

brightly against his skin. She and Drangstot had worked together to help Xander channel the magical energy into his crystal. It was a good solution – there if Xander needed to tap it, safely contained if he didn't. He'd developed a habit of rubbing the crystal while he thought, much like a worry stone.

“That’s a whole other thing. She – you know she’ll never regain her power, right?” Dawn hummed agreement, and he sighed. “I think part of her resents that, and part is relieved. She really did believe her magical ability was all she had to offer. And we’re all partly to blame for that, because for a long time, that was what we came to her for.”

“Hey! Was not – she’s always been the best at research and organization.”

Xander blinked at her. “Yeah, but when was the last time that was anyone’s primary reason for turning to her? In an emergency, it’s always been her magic we’ve counted on.”

Dawn frowned and sat back. “Okay, she’s upset that she can’t help us that way. I can understand that. She feels not so useful – angry and resentful, too. So, where does

the relief come in?”

Xander closed his eyes again. “Well, for one, she doesn’t have to deal with that temptation, ever again. And man, do I understand just how tempting it can be, all that power at your fingertips. The feel of it humming just under your skin.” He touched the pendant briefly and grimaced. “*You* know what I mean. Anyway, that’s something she never has to feel again, and she’s relieved because it makes her future a little easier. I think, now that everyone has stopped looking to her for some kind of magical rescue, it’ll get even easier. She ... Willow needs to be needed, more than the average person. If Giles is letting her computerize the Council, and if he turns to her for her brains and her heart instead of her mojo, she’ll be fine.”

“And you and Willow? Will you two be fine?”

Xander opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Dawnie, Willow and I will always be the best of friends. For a long time, Willow, Jesse, and I were the only family we had. After Jesse died, it was me and Willow. No matter what happened, no matter who else wandered into our orbit, we’ve always belonged to each other. And we always will.” He leaned back and relaxed. “We’re getting there.

It'll take time, but yeah, we'll be fine."

They sat quietly for a few minutes, comfortable with each other and their own thoughts. When Dawn reached again for Xander's tea, he spoke. "Hey, before you teleported here, I saw you grab a book from the library. I meant to ask you about it. Is it something important?"

"Oh! I totally forgot about that. Hang on." She jumped up, ran to her room, and bounced back, book in hand. "This is so cool. I found it stuck behind a bunch of really old Watcher diaries. It's a journal ... an immortal's journal. I don't know how it got into the Council's library, but I read it, and it's fascinating."

Spike, in torn jeans and a tank top, strolled over and settled onto the chaise beside Xander. Dawn smiled at the color in the vampire's skin. Spike would never be as dark as Xander - he was too fair-skinned for that - but he did love the sun. She and Ursuna developed a lotion he could use that had no scent to distress Spike's keen sense of smell. He'd gotten one sunburn, and that was more than enough. Now he didn't go out without using the sunscreen. After years of pale perfection, Spike now sported a light tan. He'd stopped bleaching his hair while on the road with Xander. Now it was the color of pale

honey, the tips golden from the sun.

Spike shifted and stretched out along Xander's side, curling his arm around Xander's waist. "Yeah? What's so great about this journal, Bit?"

"Well, see, this guy wrote it in the 1200's, and he was already old. Like four thousand years old. I figure that made him the oldest known immortal at the time. And Xan, he wrote in here about stuff that became the rules for the Game."

Xander sat up, nearly knocking Spike onto the patio. "Wait, what? You mean he..."

Dawn nodded. "Yep. He invented the whole thing. Said he was bored, and wanted to spice things up. The big jerk. Anyway, all that stuff about not fighting on holy ground, keeping the fights one on one, and the prize? All a lie."

Xander blinked. "But ... the explosion in the church..."

"He set that up to move his 'game' from myth to reality. He said it was easy, that the people of that time didn't understand what he'd done. And, he took the guy's head

right before the bomb went off. They were safe in the basement, by the way. So the quickening, plus the big boom, was pretty impressive. He took the guy's body and head away, so there'd be nothing for anyone to find. And it worked."

Xander rubbed his face. "I knew it. I knew it was all bogus. So this guy, he wakes up one morning and says 'I'm bored. I think I'll play head games with the other immortals. How can I do that? I know ... I'll say there's rules to how we do things, and make them believe it. Ooh, sounds like fun!' I swear, if I ever meet the man, I'll skin him. And then I'll turn him over to Spike for a few weeks. The bastard."

Spike rubbed Xander's back. "Steady on, pet. Likely he's not around now, yeah? I agree he was a right prick to do this, but no sense gettin' worked up when ya can't task the man with it." He glanced at the book and then up at Dawn. "So, what's his name, luv?"

"I don't know. It's *his* journal – why would he write his name in it?"

Xander shrugged. "You're right ... he wouldn't. But there is a legend about the oldest immortal. He's rumored to

be over five thousand years old.” Xander snorted. “Of course, that could all be bullshit, too. His name is Methos. I’ve never met anyone who actually knew him. It’s always a guy, who talked to some guy, who knew a guy ... you get the picture.” He waved his hand. “Whatever. Was that the only journal you found?”

Dawn shook her head. “Nope, there were three more. This was the only one in the library when you called. The others were in my room.”

Spike grinned at her. “Were? Where are they now, Bit?”

“Still there, for now.” She smirked. “But tomorrow I’ll ask Buffy to mail them to me. And I’ll ask Jocelyn, one of the researches, to send along any others she finds. She found two of the other three when she was reorganizing some books. You know, I think they’re all from the same guy. I mean, two of them are in English, and the handwriting’s almost identical. The others are in different languages, but ... the style is the same. The way he uses words and phrases. It’s kinda neat, actually. Aside from the jerk factor. I mean, there’s a lot of history in those books.”

Xander frowned. “Anyone else think it’s weird that these books were part of the Council library, but aren’t

mentioned anywhere?”

Spike leaned back on the chaise and pulled Xander down against him. “What d’ya mean, pet?”

“Well, if the Council had found these diaries, they’d be in the card catalog. And written up in at least half a dozen Council papers. Those old farts wrote everything down, multiple times. And they cross-referenced every single book in the library. Except these.”

Dawn’s eyes grew wide. “Holy cow! He must have worked there! As a watcher. A watcher of immortals, I mean. See, for a lot of years, the two groups were housed in the same building, although the slayer watchers were like a secret society within the immortal watcher group. Then the slayer watchers got more paranoid than usual, and moved away. The journals must have gotten lost in the shuffle.”

“You could be right, Nibblet. Say he got tired of fighting, wanted a quiet place to write his bloody memoirs or count his nose hairs. He made himself a red herring, and hid in plain sight.”

Xander started laughing. “He’s got balls, I’ll give him that.

Now I don't know what I'd do if I met him. It's a toss up between punching him for inventing the damned game, and shaking his hand for having the audacity to join the group that keeps track of immortals."

Dawn chuckled and then sighed. "Well, it's all conjecture, but it holds together. Too bad we'll never know, huh?"

Xander grinned. "I'll learn to live with disappointment."

Dawn giggled. "You've been watching *The Princess Bride* again."

Xander chuckled. "Guilty as charged."

Spike snorted. "Whelp's got the soddin' thing memorized. Recites bits of dialogue while we watch."

Xander poked the vampire in the side. "You do the same thing, Blondie."

"Course I do – but I only quote the good bits." He moved to straddle Xander, a mischievous grin on his face. "*Since the invention of the world, there have been only five kisses that were rated the most passionate, the most pure. This one left them all behind.*"

Dawn knew a cue when she heard one, and returned to the house to prepare lunch and give her boys some privacy.

The End