Balance – Resetting the Scales

by

LadyMerlin

Part One

Xander felt like he’d been running through the graveyard for hours. His heart was thumping
and his legs were starting to tire as he splashed through the puddles and slid around obstacles in his path. His pursuers were only fledglings but there were three of them and that was two more than he felt comfortable handling on his own.

“Yep, great idea Xan, I’ll take patrol. Nothing ever happens up there anyway. Nope, no problem.”

Xander rounded the corner at top speed, throwing up mud and bits of grass only to come to sudden halt.

“Shit, dead end.” He couldn’t believe it. He’d managed to get himself cornered in an older section of the graveyard between the back wall and an old enormous crypt. He briefly considered trying to scale the wall but discarded the idea. It was too wet and slippery. He would simply slide back down into the hands of the vamps and he had no interest in being tonight’s dinner.
Gathering his courage he turned to face the first of the three vampires as he slid around the corner in pursuit. He was an ugly brute and Xander hoped just as stupid as he looked. He tightened his grip on his stake and threw out a taunt. “Hey ugly, looking for me, moron.”

Okay, not as good as Buffy but it seemed to get the job done. The enraged vampire growled and launched himself towards Xander, who brought the stake up allowing the vampire to impale himself.

Xander allowed himself a small smile. “I just might survive this after all.” The smile quickly faded as the remaining vampires appeared just as the dust fell. They looked smarter than the ugly brute. The one in the lead barely slowed as he kept running straight towards him. Thinking fast Xander used a nearby gravestone for balance while kicking both feet out and into the vampire’s chest knocking him back into his companion. Both of them landed on the ground, one on top of the other. Using the gravestone to gain momentum, Xander pushed off and landed
on top of the pile, bringing his stake down in the process. He fell as the first vamp dusted and his stake continued down in to the chest of the remaining vamp who barely had time to register surprise before he too was dust.

Xander lay on the ground for a few minutes to catch his breath. He sat up and checked himself over for injuries. Everything seemed to be in working order. He turned towards the gravestone he’d used to launch his attack.

“Thanks William Thomas Bradley, you saved my bacon. Huh, I used to know a guy with those same initials. A William the Bloody. Don't suppose his last name was actually Bloody though. So, when were you born William?” He crawled closer to the marker for a better look. “1856 to 1880. Wow you were young, sorry man, hey is this mom and dad, Thomas Sinclair Bradley and Anne Elizabeth Bradley. I... are you?” Xander considered the idea briefly before discarding it as ridiculous. This was not the area of London Xander would picture Spike growing up in and he was gone now anyway. He got up
from the damp ground and brushed himself off as best he could. With one last look over his shoulder, Xander turned and strolled towards the gates of the cemetery that would lead him back to Council Headquarters. He muttered to himself as he walked away. “Be careful Xan, first you start having crazy thoughts and then you’re gonna start talking to yourself.”

**Part Two**

Xander knew he was dreaming. He remembered giving his report at the Watcher’s Council and then heading home. He remembered the bliss of the hot water as he scrubbed himself free of the dirt and grass stuck to his skin. He remembered tumbling into bed after a quick swipe with a towel and putting on some sleep pants that kept trying to stick to his still damp legs. He remembered all this and yet, the dry, grassy plain before him seemed so very real.
“Hello Xander”

Xander quickly turned when he heard the familiar voice behind him. “Cordelia,” he exclaimed. He smiled upon seeing his one time girlfriend but his expression quickly turned puzzled. “You look good but uh….aren’t you in LA and in a coma?”

“And wasn’t that a lousy deal. I mean, they left me there for how long. It took forever for you to be ready.”

Xander held up his hand to stop anything else she might have added. He was more confused than ever. “Whoa, not helping to clear things up.” He indicated a large rocky outcropping. “Lets have a seat and then you can explain using small words and diagrams if necessary.”

Smiling, Cordelia took a seat and began the task of trying to explain the events of the past few months. “Sorry, it’s difficult to know where to start.”
“You know what they say - the beginning is as good a place as any.”

She seemed to ponder this for a moment before making herself a bit more comfortable, as if settling in for a long while. Xander knew he was definitely dreaming, he was way too calm given his current situation. His attention turned back to Cordelia as she began to speak.

“Right, okay. We needed to talk and this is the only way I could do that. Like you said, I’m currently dreaming in LA.”

“So, I’m just dreaming all this?”

“Sort of, it’s kinda complicated and I’m not entirely sure how it works. I only know it does. We needed to talk about what’s happening and what you need to do and so here we are,” she gestured towards the plain, trees and wildlife, “in Africa.”

“Okay, I get that...sorta, but Africa?” he asked.
“Hey, don’t blame me. It’s your dream world.”

“My... Huh? I think I need one of those diagrams right about now.”

“Look at them. It’s still a part of you,” she said bringing his attention to the hyenas lounging not too far away. “Even more so now since the spell, you just keep denying it. Xan, you remember how Willow did that spell with the scythe?” she asked.

“Yeah, the one that made all the potentials slayers,” he nodded encouraging her to continue.

“Right, that’s the one. It worked great but it did more than just turn potentials into slayers. It would be a good idea to get into research mode. You’ll find most of the answers there.”

“You can’t just tell me and save me the trouble?” he asked.

Shaking her head she replied, “I’m only allowed
to nudge you in the right direction. I can help set you on the right path but you need to do the travelling yourself.”

“Now you sound like one of those mysterious prophecy type people,” he asked not quite believing what he’d heard.

“Maybe it’s because I am one of those mysterious higher beings now,” she said giving him a smile. “Look it’s simple. The hyena has always been a part of you and now it always will. You need her as much as she needs you. There’s been a shift in the balance. Willow’s spell did a lot of good but it did some damage as well. All these slayers shouldn’t be here and the powers are going to need some new champions.”

“I’m no champion,” he denied shaking his head.

“You’re stronger than you think but no you’re not a champion.”

“So if I’m not the champion then who is?”
Cordelia looked reluctant to answer which made Xander very suspicious. “Cordy please tell me it isn’t Angel.”

“Okay, it isn’t Angel but...”

“But what? Cmon, you might as well tell me.”

“Angel isn’t the champion but he does need a bit of guidance. Your champion isn’t here yet.”

“Right and who will that be and if someone else is the champion what am I supposed to be doing?”

“You’ll know who it is, besides they’ll be in LA too and you’re a guide.”

“A guide, what does that mean? What do I do? Not that I’m agreeing to the doing of anything.”

“It’s not as complicated as it sounds. I was Angel’s guide for a while and you do what you’ve always done. You see and speak from your heart. You’ll be fine. I know it, I’ve got to
go.” Leaning forward she placed a soft kiss on his lips before fading away.

Xander startled awake and jerked upright in bed. He lifted his hand and felt the lingering warmth on his lips.

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“Giles, I’m telling you, it seemed so real.” Xander stated from his position in front of the head watchers desk.

“Perhaps on some level it was Xander. It is not unheard of for higher beings to communicate with us in our dreams. Slayers have prophetic dreams for example.”

Xander considered this for a moment. “But what am I supposed to do?”

“From what you’ve told me, it sounds as if you are needed in LA and we need to start researching the spell Willow used to release the power of the scythe.”
“But what about everything that’s going on here and what do I tell Willow and Buffy?”

“We will fill them in at the morning meeting,” Giles said as he looked at his watch. “Which should be starting right now. Shall we?”

**Part Three**

Xander dutifully followed along behind Giles as he led them down the carpeted hall towards the conference room at the far end. Giles kept up a commentary outlining the morning agenda as they walked, leaving Xander free to run over the list of jobs needing doing around the large mansion. The sprawling Victorian mansion Giles had bought to house the new Council of Watchers Academy had, in recent years, been used as a school but it was old and still needed constant attention. It was perfect with many of the rooms already converted for use as offices or classrooms and even a dorm area with bedrooms for all the new slayers. Xander was
grateful for the more private accommodation for the original scoobies and Giles as well. After staying in a house full of potentials, he had no desire to live with all those slayers. The roomy cottages scattered throughout the grounds which had once housed the staff for the old Victorian mansion were the perfect solution. He was kept busy between the training and the fixing but he kept getting the nagging feeling something was missing from his life.

Xander was abruptly brought out of his inner musings when he nearly ran over Giles who had stopped to open the conference room door. They entered the room to find everyone else seated around the table enjoying coffee and donuts. Xander smiled knowing he wasn't the one who had to play gopher. Nope the donut fetching Xan-man was no more. He got to sit back and enjoy all that sugary goodness. Taking a seat and snagging the box with a finger, he slid it across the table so he could peer in to the lovely depths and select a delectable cream filled - “Hey,” Xander said with a frown, “who took the last chocolate covered, cream with
rainbow sprinkles?"

Willow's eyes went round and wide and she stopped mid-bite with a guilty look on her face. “I-oh. I'm sorry.” Xander turned her way and spotted the donut in question clutched in her little hand. He looked from the half eaten donut to her face and back again.

Willow visibly swallowed and held out the hand holding the baked confection. “I've only eaten a bit?”

“I think I'll pass.”

“Oh,” Willow said sadly.

“It's just a donut! Here,” Buffy said handing him a jelly filled instead. “Have this one.”

Xander looked at Buffy in surprise. How could she not know he didn't even like the jelly ones? “Thanks,” he said quietly as he took the offered item. When Buffy turned to answer a question, he passed it along to Giles who smiled and set it
beside his cup of tea.

“Since we are all here why don't we get started?” Giles said loudly enough to cut through the chatter and get everyone's attention.

Xander moved to the seat at the end of the rectangular table next to Willow, who held out half the remaining bit of donut. Xander smiled and gratefully accepted the offered treat as he settled himself in his chair. He listened with half an ear as the meeting proceeded through what he lovingly referred to as watcher bullshit. Oh, he knew it was important stuff like paying the bills, recruitment and the gathering of the many new slayers but did they have to make it so dull? Xander was of the firm belief that a properly trained watcher could make anything sound dull. He grinned when he considered the extremely starched and stiff insert stuffy watcher name here reading some really hot porn while the other watchers nodded along with their hoity toity attitudes.
“Thank you James,” Giles said as the elderly, and one of the few remaining, original watchers finished giving his rather lengthy Research Department report. Xander stifled a yawn. “I believe that gets everyone up to speed on all Departmental activities so I suggest we move on to any new business.” Giles looked around the table and received either a verbal agreement or a nod in response “Good. Xander came to see me this morning about something I feel could be rather important. He described a...for lack of a better term, dream he had during the night.”

“A dream? Why would Xander's dream be important?” Willow bit her lip and turned to Xander. “No offence Xan.”

Xander shrugged. “None taken.”

“Perhaps dream is an inaccurate term. Xander's description combined with some other information which has come to my attention recently, leads me to believe his dream to be akin to a prophetic dream of a slayer or a communication of sorts.”
Buffy sat up stiffly in her chair, her face a mix of annoyance and confusion. “Why Xander? I mean I'm the slayer!”

“I understand your confusion Buffy but considering the information given to Xander and the messenger, it does makes sense.”

Willow reached over to pat Buffy's hand in support and turned to regard Giles calmly. “Who was the messenger?”

“Cordelia.”

“Cordelia?!” Buffy snatched her hand out from under Willow's, eyes round with surprise and her voice took on a shrill tone which made Xander's ears hurt. “Cordelia Chase? The Cordelia who is in a coma in LA?”

Giles nodded his head. “Precisely.”

Buffy still looked a bit shell shocked and confused. “But...but? How is that possible.”
“Is that possible?” Willow asked.

“Apparently the answer to your question would be yes,” Giles replied reasonably.

Xander studied the tabletop and fiddled with his coffee cup while Giles recounted the details of his dream. He could feel the others in the room constantly looking in his direction. Every time he dared a peek though, their eyes would skitter away, unwilling to hold his gaze. It reminded him of when he first lost his eye. People didn't seem to know where to look and would talk to a spot just over his shoulder. Did they think he wouldn't notice? He'd wanted to rant and shout and tell them although he'd lost an eye, he was still the same guy. Thankfully, his friends had adjusted to his new look fairly quickly and he'd eventually adjusted to the awkwardness of others. He hardly even noticed it any more.

Xander continued to listen quietly while Giles recounted their conversation from earlier. He tried very hard not to flinch at the sounds of
disbelief which punctuated the gaps in the tale. He could, maybe, understand some of the watcher types not believing him but not his friends. It hurt more than he wanted to admit when he heard the gasps from Buffy and Willow. He kept trying to deny the feelings of separation which had been forming since the move to England. Kept pretending he enjoyed his watcher duties. Buffy and Willow had seemed to find places for themselves within the new council with ease but Xander still felt like he was floundering and trying to decide what he wanted to do with his life. It made him feel like he was in Sunnydale all over again with the girls moving on to University while he was still going nowhere and being left behind.

Xander suddenly felt the room around him go out of focus and the voices became distant and tinny. They continued to fade until he couldn't hear them any more and he found himself somewhere else entirely, feeling like someone else. Unable to make any impact on what was happening, he was more of a passenger along for the ride in someone else's body, in someone
else's life.

Nearly blinded by a bright orange light, he felt surrounded by a searing heat and felt a hand grasp his own, intertwining the fingers. Squinting his eyes, he looked down and saw Buffy looking up with tears pooled in her eyes. Their entwined hands burst into flames but there was no pain.

“I love you,” Buffy said sadly.

He felt a confusing torrent of emotions wash over him and gave her an ironic smile in return. “No you don't. But thanks for saying it.” The ground heaved and trembled under their feet. “Now go!” He shouted. “I wanna see how it ends.”

The heat and light increased until suddenly it was gone and there was nothing. No pain, no sounds, no light. No sensations at all really. As if no one dared disturb the sound of silence. At first it was soothing but the isolation, the lack of sensory input started eating away at him. He felt
his mind beginning to slip away when he was abruptly thrust back into the room and the chatter of conversation. Xander jerked in his seat and looked around the table.

Willow leaned closer to whisper in his ear. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Xander wiped away the beads of sweat which had formed on his forehead. “I'm fine.” He gave her a smile to prove how fine he was when she continued to look at him with a concerned little frown. Willow finally gave him a small smile in return and turned back to the conversation. Xander took a few minutes to get himself back under control and tried to still the shaking of his hands. He remembered being dragged to the mall by the Buffy and Willow for an afternoon of shopping. There were these sensory deprivation tanks you could try. What he'd felt was like being in one of those tanks and yeah at first it's okay and kinda soothing but then it starts to get to you and this...dream...vision, whatever, was even worse. While he'd been wherever he was, he couldn't
even remember feeling his own body. No wonder he started going out of his mind. He shook off the last few remnants of his experience and tuned back into the discussion.

“I'm not sure I understand what it all means. I researched the spell I used very carefully. You even checked it yourself,” Willow said with a small frown.

“Yes I did.” Giles agreed, “but there wasn't a lot of time given the circumstances. It is possible we missed something.”

“But what? Everything went fine and now we have all these slayers to help Buffy and we are rebuilding the Council. I don't see the problem.”

Xander looked up from his study of the coffee grounds at the bottom of his mug as a thought occurred to him. “Have there been any new slayers? I know we lost some in the final battle against the First and a few others since then so are there any new ones?”
“We're finding new slayers all the time Xan. Kinda the whole point of having the Academy.”

Xander flinched a bit at Willow's condescending attitude but refused to be dismissed. He just knew he was on to something and he wasn't going to allow Willow's annoyance at another spell gone wrong keep him from speaking out. “That's not what I meant Wills. The Coven used the scythe to locate all the potentials turned slayers.”

“Right so?”

“So we know where they all are but have they found any new ones lately?”

Giles cleared his throat and twirled his glasses thoughtfully. “Now that you mention it...no. This is a very good point. We need to contact the coven for confirmation but I think you might be correct and no more new slayers are being called.”

Buffy looked alarmed at the prospect. “What!?!”
“Please, we need to remain calm. We won't actually know anything until we've contacted the Coven and had the chance to do some research.”

“But Giles, Cordy said something about needing new champions which would make sense if there are no more slayers being called. We've got to do something.”

“I understand you're upset Buffy but what, exactly, would you have me do?”

“I dunno but we can't just sit here.”

“And we won't. There is research to be done and we still need to continue training the slayers we have here. There is another matter as well. I was going to send Gary to LA as I have some concerns regarding Angel and his group. However, under the circumstances mentioned earlier I think it would be prudent to send Xander instead.”
“Me?” Xander asked in surprise shaking his head.

“Wouldn't Buffy be a better choice?” Willow questioned.

“I think it would be best if Xander went while we handle matters here.”

Still feeling the isolating effects of his vision, Xander wanted nothing more than to stay with his friends. “I don't really wanna go Giles.”

Buffy gave Xander a sympathetic smile. “Maybe I should be the one to go if it concerns Angel?”

“No Buffy,” Giles shook his head. “With what we have just learned. I think it would be best if you remained here in England. Please Xander, would you reconsider? Apparently Angel has started working as the CEO of a law firm. Wolfram and Hart.”

Willow frowned in puzzlement. “And that is a problem because...?”
“They are not the most reputable of firms.”

Xander snorted. “I think that is polite Giles speak for evil law firm.”

“Yes. Quite. I really do need someone we can trust to pay Angel a visit and in light of your dream it would make sense if it was you who went Xander.”

“I'll think about it,” he agreed and raised his hands in defence at the looks he received from the others around the table. “Hey best I can do right now. I'm still trying to understand all this and I have a lot of my own why me stuff going on.

“We understand Xander and that will do for now. Thank you.”

**Part Four**

The sounds of the forest animals and his own pounding feet in crisp morning air accompanied
Xander as he ran along the well worn trail through the woods surrounding the Academy grounds. He'd taken to running every morning enjoying the stretch and burn in his legs and the peaceful quiet among the trees. He was glad he didn't have to change his routine after his recent bout of sleepless nights.

Each night since the first time he'd experienced the odd occurrence during the Watcher meeting he'd been awoken by the same disturbing vision over and over. Each morning he fully expected to feel worn out and groggy. Instead, he awoke feeling as refreshed as if he had slept through the night. The only problem was the lingering feelings of sadness, resignation and then the horrid out of control sensation of a mind losing its grip on reality. Xander shuddered as he recalled the eerie feeling as his feet, well used to his morning routine, headed down the small path on the left which would lead him back to the Academy grounds.

Sometime between the third and fourth night in a row, Xander had strongly started to suspect
the visions were very real. Having no idea how to approach Buffy and ask about those final moments in the Hellmouth, he had yet to confirm his suspicions. Seeing the arc of bright yellow sunshine at the end of the trail, he put on a burst of speed.

Leaving the shelter of the natural canopy of trees, he smiled as the warmth of the sun beat down on his bare arms. He gasped and his mouth hung open as he stared at his watch. Surely the time had to be wrong. His normal hourly morning run had just taken him twenty minutes. He stood staring at the timepiece on his wrist as his mind raced through the last week and picked out all the little details he had glossed over. The time he'd ducked a wildly thrown punch on his blind side or the other night on patrol when he took out a vamp all on his own without breaking a sweat. Knowing what was being served for breakfast in the large dining hall because he could smell it all the way from his house. Yeah, a talk with someone was probably way overdue.
Xander took the steaming mug of coffee with a grateful smile. “Thanks Wills.”

Willow smiled back and sat next to him on the couch. “Now. Not that I don't enjoy a visit from my favourite eligible and handsome friend, what's up?”

Xander almost dropped the chocolate chip cookie he'd just picked up. “How did you?”

“You've been fidgeting like you've been bit by a Gluemer Beetle,” she laughed before turning serious. “You haven't been bit by a Gluemer, have you?”

Xander laughed and shook his head. “Ah, no. My manly bits are totally safe and can I say the whole idea of anything at all happening to them is the stuff of nightmares.”

“Then what's wrong?”
“Ever since I had that dream. The one with Cordelia?” Willow nodded. “Well, things have been happening.”

Willow leaned forward and placed a small hand on his knee. “What kind of things? You're not? I mean you're okay, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I'm fine.” Xander replied covering her hand with his own. “Although I've kinda noticed I'm able to do things I couldn't before.”

“Like what?” she asked, eyes wide with curiosity.

“I can see Wills.”

Willow frowned at him. “But-”

“Not what I mean,” Xander interrupted. “I can see over here,” he said waving a hand in the general area near his eye patch. “It used to be a blind spot for me and now I know when something is there. And I'm faster. This morning? I ran about 12 miles in twenty
minutes. Now I'm not bad at my normal five minutes a mile but that? That's like a two minute mile. I think I could even give Buffy a challenge. The other night when we went patrolling I knew that vamp was sneaking up behind me. I felt it. It was like electricity crawling across my skin. I just knew. I've always complained about being the token human in the bunch. So what? Am I supposed to be grateful? Okay. Yeah. I sorta am but what the hell is going on?

“Oh Xan,” Willow said turning her hand to grasp his fingers. “We'll figure this out but it doesn't seem like it's a bad thing. I mean it's like you got your own superpowers. Go you! And there hasn't been anything bad, right? So we can tell the others-”

“No we can't. Not yet. Please?”

Willow stiffened and sat up straight. “What? Why not? Don't you want to be sure?”

“Sure?” Xander asked, his voice rising as he sat
back. “Sure of what? That I'm not crazy? C'mon Wills. I know we've been drifting apart but we've been friends forever. You know me better than anyone. How could you ask that?”

“Xander, I know I've been spending a lot of time with the coven and Buffy needed me but you could have come to me. I can't help if I don't know there's anything wrong.”

Xander's irritation at being questioned suddenly faded as he realised she had a point. “Look I don't want to fight and I suppose it's my own fault too. I've not exactly been sharing have I?”

Willow relaxed and her features softened. “I don't want to fight either. I'm sorry I've been so busy but I'm here now and ready to listen.”

Xander offered her a small smile. “There's more Wills. I've been having... visions.”

“You've been seeing things?”

Xander nodded his agreement. “But more. It's
like I am part of them. Like I'm there but as someone else. I can feel what they feel. It's so real.” He sighed in frustration not knowing how to make her understand how real it felt.

“How long?”

“About a week. Ever since the meeting when Giles told everybody about my dream. I had the first one then. You asked me what was wrong remember? I didn't know what to say. The way everybody was reacting, I figured I better keep my mouth shut.”

“Oh, Xan! I'm so sorry sweetie. We never meant to make you feel that way. We love you and we care about you. I don't understand why you don't want to tell the others. This is probably all connected.”

“Because in the visions I-l'm...” He trailed off not knowing how to say it.

“It's all right Xan,” Willow encouraged. “Who is it?”
“Spike,” Xander answered simply before it all came out in a rush. “I think I'm Spike. And Buffy was so upset after everything and Dawn. Jesus she cried for weeks. I so don't wanna drag that all up again. And then there's Giles who tried to kill the guy. What would he say? I just don't see how telling everyone would be for the best.”

Willow winced in sympathy. “I can understand that but you can tell me.”

Xander took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “I think it's his final moments right before he-the end. Buffy is there and she tells him she loves him. I- he doesn't believe her and tells her to go.” Xander doesn't even notice he's jumping between he and I but he does notice the pinched look on Willow's face. “What?”

“What did they say exactly? Describe what you saw in as much detail as you can remember. Trust me. It's important.”

“Oh, I can remember. Only been having the
same dream, vision, whatever for the past week. Uhm, Spike is standing in this orange glow and it feels hot and then I can feel someone hold my hand. I look down and it's Buffy. She looks so sad. She says 'I love you' and Spike says 'no you don't. But thanks for saying it.' The ground shakes and then he shouts at her to go and he wants to see how it ends. And then it gets hotter until there is nothing. And I don't know how to describe where I find myself. It's like a great big nothing. And it's awful Wills. I mean, really awful. And I can feel myself starting to go crazy. Then I wake up or find myself back in the room and it's so disorienting and overwhelming after all that nothing.”

“Oh my goddess,” Willow said in a small shocked voice. “It's true.”

Xander felt offended by her doubt. “Of course it's true. I'm not gonna lie about something like that. Jesus Wills!”

“Oh Xander no!” Willow cried. “I believe you. I meant the vision itself is real. Someone isn't
sending you false images or something.”

Xander's feelings of foolishness are overridden by a different concern. “Could someone do that?”

“There are some demons that could and certainly anyone well versed enough in magic.”

“But you don't think that's happening here?”

“No. No I don't. I spent a lot of time with Buffy during those weeks and we talked. She told me what happened and you described it Xander. Exactly what happened. No one else would know that.”

“Any ideas what it all means? Why the Xander upgrade and the sudden visions of Spike?”

“No but I'll get on it. There's a few people at the coven I know we can trust. We'll figure this out.” Willow slid her arms around her friend and gave him a reassuring hug.
Xander hugged back and smiled. It felt good to have his friend back. Oh, he knew she hadn't actually gone anywhere but it had felt like it.

“Thanks Wills.”

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Xander had gone to bed with a lighter heart than he'd had in weeks. It felt like he and Willow had been able to bridge the gap which had started appearing between them after the move to England. He hadn't realised how much he'd missed her until he had her back. He also noticed a lack of visions starring Spike since their long talk and sleep came quickly and easily.

Xander found himself floating in a sea of nothing. Surrounded by a blankness so complete there was nothing to be seen, heard or felt. He sucked in a breath and cursed the Harris luck. He should have known better but the vision did seem different this time. Instead of starting in the Hellmouth like all the other times, he was suddenly thrust into this nothingness. He could feel the twisting, clawing ache of loneliness.
Xander's body shuddered at the tickling sensation within his mind as he desperately tried to keep a grip on reality and his sanity. He didn't even have the comfort of the raw ache from his useless screams of frustration and despair.

Just as he was tiring from the fight to retain his sense of self, he heard a sound. It was quiet and hesitant at first but quickly gained in volume and speed. The rhythmic thumping hurt his ears and he suddenly realised he could feel. His relief was short lived as he felt his body begin to drop.

He tumbled over and over. Wrapping his arms around his body trying to hold himself together. His fall came to an abrupt, painful halt as his body forcefully contacted with a hard surface. He kept his eyes closed against the brightness and tried to sort the cacophony of noise barely discernible over the consistent thumping. He curled around himself with his arms curled protectively around his head. Rough fibres scratched against the sensitive skin of his side and he shivered with cold. The overwhelming
input of sensation had him almost wishing for the return of the darkness. A rough hand grasped his shoulder and a familiar voice broke through the noise. His stomach clenched in fear at the sound and a quiet whimper escaped his lips.

Xander sat up with a gasp, blinking into the darkness of his bedroom. Seeing the familiar shapes was comforting and Xander took deep, measured breaths to calm himself.

“Fuck,” he whispered and felt a bit better for hearing his own voice.

Xander shivered in the coolness of his room as the sweat dried on his skin. He knew that voice. He also knew if the visions were anything close to being accurate he would have no choice but to go back to the States. He couldn't leave anyone to go through all of that alone and then find themselves stuck with someone as emotionally stilted as Angel. Especially someone who saved the world. Even if that someone was Spike.
Part Five

Xander breathed a sigh of relief as he settled back against the comfortably padded seat. He closed his eyes and allowed the tension of the last few hours to melt away. He hated lying to people, especially his friends. And maybe it wasn't exactly an outright lie but he was still keeping secrets. He still thought it best to keep his suspicions to himself for now but it didn't help his stress levels nor did the increasing sense of urgency he felt building up inside.

“Would you like a drink?”

His eyes snapped open at the question and he offered the pretty air hostess a small grin. Shit he could use a drink right about now. “Got any beer?”

Her smile widened. “Of course Sir. We have a wide range of domestic and imported varieties.”
Would you like to see a list?”

“No,” Xander laughed and shook his head. He couldn't imagine trying to choose himself while his head was already so preoccupied. Also, considering he was on a British Airways flight, domestic probably meant the stuff they served in the pubs and he still hadn't worked them all out yet. He gave her his best charming smile. “Why don't you choose for me?”

She flashed him another mega-watt smile and brushed her fingers lightly against the soft fabric of his sleeve. “It would be my pleasure.”

Xander grinned and ducked his head. Of all the times to have a pretty young girl flirt with him and he was far too messed up right now to do anything about it. He thought he should feel a pang of regret but he only felt a nice warmth in his chest. It felt nice to be noticed, wanted.

The rest of the flight was unremarkable and long. He tried to sleep and Elaine, the attractive
young air hostess now had a name to go with the pretty smile, had taken very good care of him. He collected his luggage without incident and took a cab to his hotel. He exchanged his single room for a double and hoped the guys in accounting wouldn't mention it to Giles.

He stood in the room looking at the spare duffle bag he had packed while still in his little house outside of London. It contained black jeans, a plain black t-shirt, a soft sweater to go over the top, and black socks and boots. He'd had to guess the sizes but thought he'd gotten them about right. He stood contemplating the items inside. Still not entirely sure why he'd purchased them and then gone to the trouble of bringing them along. Even worse was the fact that he actually knew what to buy and what to leave behind. His hand had actually hovered over the selection of boxers and briefs before he remembered, snickered, and walked away empty handed.

Of course, if his visions turned out to be accurate, they would be needed. Is that what he
wanted though? Did he want to wind up having Spike thrust into his life, and home, yet again? He supposed it didn't really matter any more. He was here and he knew one thing for certain. There was no way he would leave Spike here with Angel. He transferred the black ensemble to his backpack, slid the room's key card in his wallet next to the Council credit card, slung the pack over his shoulder by one strap and headed out the door.

~*~

Xander hitched his pack higher on his shoulder and paid the driver.

“Thanks,” he offered before turning away to look at the impressive glass structure of the offices of Wolfram and Hart. He would have liked to have found out more about the firm before stepping into the lion's den but some... sense kept urging him forward. Kept urging him to hurry.

Striding to the doors, he hoped he looked far
more confident than he felt. There was a shiny panel on the wall next to the elevators with names and locations all etched in stark black letters. Xander skimmed down the list until he found what he was looking for and reached over to press the up button. His foot jiggled like it had a mind of its own while he waited for what seemed like hours for the elevator to arrive. But arrive it did with a little ping and he stepped inside and watched the rays of sunlight as they streamed through the windows of the lobby before the doors whooshed closed and the car began to rise. The ride up didn't appear to be any faster than the wait in the lobby but at least this time he had music. It wasn't half bad either, even if it was evil music provided by an evil law firm.

The doors slid open and Xander stepped out and stopped. He blinked but the perky blonde behind the desk remained. Sitting at a desk filing her nails and chattering a mile a minute to whoever was on the the other end of the phone. Her eyes lifted and went wide when she saw him before a squeal of earth shattering
proportions escaped her pink painted lips.

“Xander! Xander Harris. Oh my gosh! And don't you look all handsome and rugged.”

“Harmony?”

“Well, who else would I be?”

“What? What are you doing? Here?”

“I answer the phones and make appointments. Very important stuff you know. The boss wouldn't be able to get along without me.”

“No really. What are you doing here?”

“I told you. Oh, you're such a joker,” she said slapping him playfully on the shoulder. “But what are you doing in LA. Did you come for a visit?”

“Sorta. I was looking for Angel.” Xander looked over his shoulder when Harmony bit her lip and looked at whatever was behind him. He shook
his head at the imposing double doors. “Of course,” he said, turning and heading in the direction of what he guessed was Angel's office. “Thanks Harm.”

“No! No, no, no, no!” She shouted while tottering about on her pointy high heels to cut him off. “You can't go in there. He's in a meeting and doesn't want to be disturbed. He can be super grumpy. You have no idea.”

“Look, I appreciate the warning but I think I'll take my chances, okay?” Xander stepped around her and grasped the knob.

“Don't say I didn't warn you.” Harmony shrugged and flopped back down in her chair with a pout.

Xander swung the door open and started walking through the doorway only to stop in his tracks at the sight that met his eyes. It was like looking at his vision come to life. There was Angel, angry and shouting. Angel bellowed again and started shaking the figure huddled
protectively around itself on the floor. Xander didn't know what the hell a Shanshu was but the action got his feet moving. Before he had a chance to consider his own actions, he'd crossed the room and shoved Angel aside.

“What the hell?! Harris?”

“Look, Angel, shouting isn't gonna help.”

“Oh and you can?” Angel questioned blocking his path to the shivering figure.

“Yeah,” Xander replied smugly, hoping like hell he was right.

Angel didn't step aside but he did seem to deflate a little. “What are you doing here anyway?” Angel asked, sounding a lot less angry than he did a minute ago.

“Later, okay? Right now... let me do this?” Xander sighed and added, “please?”

Angel studied him for a moment before moving
to stand with the rest of the occupants of the room who were standing about looking a bit shell shocked. Xander didn't really pay much attention to them instead he focused his attention on the huddled figure near his feet. The bare skin glowed under the fluorescent lights. Each knob of the vertebrae showed as the back curved protectively over bent knees. The head was down and long slim fingers were interlaced over the delicate arch of the neck.

Xander ever so slowly reached out a slightly shaky hand but didn't quite touch the pale, trembling shoulder. Taking a deep calming breath, he leaned forward.

“Spike?” He whispered trying not to startle the vampire.

The blonde head rose slightly and bright, blue eyes filled with fear and confusion peeped out at him. Xander tried to recall his own experience and how disoriented and overwhelmed he felt every time he was thrust back into reality. He placed his hand very gently on one pale
shoulder and noticed how very cold the skin felt under his fingers.

“Can someone get a blanket,” he asked over his shoulder before turning back to Spike without even bothering to see if anyone listened. “Hey, it's okay. Nobody,” he said shooting another look across the room but this time pinning Angel with a hard, steely gaze, “is gonna hurt you.”

A blue blanket appeared near his hand and he looked up and saw a young woman with a concerned little frown on her face. “Here,” she said and Xander noticed she had a soft Texan twang to her voice. “Is he gonna be all right?”

Xander took the offered blanket and slid it around Spike's shoulders. He was relieved to see Spike grasp at the edges with his hands. He gave the girl a nod and she gave him a small watery smile in return. “Is there anything else we can do?”

“I brought some things along. Clothes and stuff. Is there somewhere we can go?”
“Oh!” She said a little startled as if she hadn't noticed Spike's nakedness before. “Uhm. Angel?”

“There's a bathroom through there,” Angel said with a nod in the direction of a door Xander hadn't had a chance to notice before now.

“Right. Thanks.”

Xander leaned over to reach for his discarded backpack but jumped in surprise when he felt a hand on his arm. He looked over at Spike who was staring back with wide, frightened eyes and it just looked so very wrong. Spike was strong and annoying and larger than life. Not this frightened, skittish, timid, almost unrecognisable person huddled in front of him. Xander looked at those eyes and wanted nothing more in that moment than to make it better. To make Spike better.

“Just gonna get my bag. I've got some clothes for you.” Xander watched as Spike's eyes quickly
darted about the room. “Not out here. There's a bathroom through there. Think you can make it if I help?”

Spike nodded and Xander realised the vampire still hadn't spoken a word. Spike kept his death grip on the blanket while Xander helped him to his feet. Spike shook unsteadily and Xander seriously doubted if the vampire's legs would hold him upright long enough to get the bathroom. In the end, they did make it with Spike breathing heavily and leaning most of his weight against Xander. Probably only moving one step in front of the other out of sheer Spike stubbornness Xander remembered so well. Spike's stubbornness seemed to run out as soon as the door closed and he sagged in Xander's arms, the blanket slithering to the floor.

“Woah,” Xander said, tightening his grip. He managed to get Spike over to the toilet and kicked at the lid with his foot. It closed with a bang which echoed in the small room and made Spike jump in his arms. “Sorry.”
He settled the vampire carefully on the now closed seat. “How are we doing?” He asked the bowed head before him.

Spike's head snapped up. “Yer fine as far as I can tell. I on the other hand, feel like shite.”

“And there's the Spike we all know and love,” Xander responded with no real anger in his voice.

Spike simply stared at him and continued to look alternately confused and annoyed. The staring made him uncomfortable so Xander busied himself with getting the items of clothing he'd purchased out of his bag.

“Ooookay, so here we have the required black on black ensemble. Had to guess your size.”

“They'll do,” Spike said, taking the denims with trembling hands and trying to get a foot in the right opening.

Not knowing if he should help or where to look,
Xander looked around the rather large room. And it was kinda big for a bathroom. There was the toilet where Spike was currently sitting and cursing and a really big shower with lots of shower heads which looked like it would feel really good on aching, sore muscles. There were also warming racks with big fluffy towels and shelves filled with all sorts of products from hair care to shower gel. No mirror he could find though and maybe that was for the best just now. He probably looked like a disheveled mess. He turned when something hit him in the back of the head. He stooped to pick up the jeans and looked at Spike who was sitting with his elbows resting on his still bare knees and his head in his hands effectively covering his face.

“Let me help?” Xander offered.

Spike scrubbed his hands over his face, sighed and nodded. With Xander helping getting clothing on the naked vampire went much better and Spike was soon looking more like his old self. Xander picked up the sweater nervously.
“Uh. I wasn't sure if-” Xander dared a little peek to see how his explanation was being received, “thought you might be cold.” Spike took the offered item and Xander helped him slip his arms in the sleeves and get it slipped over his head. “Ta,” Spike said quietly, looking warmer.

Xander debated about how much to tell Spike. He still seemed kinda out of it and then there was Angel and the rest waiting on the other side of the door. Xander wasn't sure how long Angel would wait for his explanation and Xander figured the last thing Spike needed right now was Angel going all caveman on them.

“How are you feeling?”

Spike looked surprised by the question. “Seriously?”

“Wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know.”

Spike shrugged. “Feel different. Everything is so
— so harsh. Bright. 'M cold and my head is thumping.” He rubbed at a temple with his fingers. “What happened?”

“Understandable you feel a bit out of it. I'm not entirely sure of where you've been. You might have a better idea than I do but we don't really have the time just now. Angel isn't going wait forever so I'm gonna go with the condensed version.” Xander paused and Spike gave a little nod. “The First is defeated and Sunnydale is nothing but a big hole in the ground.”

“Buffy? Bit?”

“Both fine. We lost-” Xander stopped and cleared his throat. Decided it could wait and forged ahead. “We lost a few but most everybody made it out safe. You did good Spike. After a short stop in Cleveland we moved on to London. Rebuilt the Council and opened an Academy for all the new slayers.”

“Why are you here now? How did you know?”
“I don't have a short version for that one and I'd rather only tell it the once. We better get back out there before he breaks down the door. Can you manage?”

Spike surprised Xander by reaching out and grasping his hand. “Real?”

“Yep,” Xander reassured him. “As real as ever and right here. I'm not going any where. You ready?”

“Yeah.”

Part Six

When they came out of the bathroom the others were either seated in one of the comfortable looking leather chairs or standing nearby. Xander studied them while keeping a reassuring hand at the small of Spike's back. It went a long way in showing just how affected Spike was when he neither commented on it or
moved away. Xander knew Angel, of course, and he thought he recognised the other dark haired man standing at Angel's side who broke off his conversation with the vampire.

“Sit. Please. Would you like anything. Coffee? Or tea perhaps?” Xander noticed he had an accent very similar to Giles and peered closer.

“Wesley?” Xander asked, surprised at the change in the former watcher. Willow had told him he was here and he was different but seeing the change for himself was startling. Xander wondered what other changes had occurred within the group.

“Yes,” Wesley replied politely. “Xander, if I recall correctly?”

Xander nodded his head as they moved to the couch. He had no doubt Angel had already informed the group of exactly who he and Spike were while they were in the bathroom but chose not to say anything.
Spike scrunched himself into a corner of the long, leather couch as far from everyone else in the room as he could get and tugged on Xander's hand until he sat down next to him.

Angel paced and kept shooting looks their way which was making Xander uncomfortable. The vampire looked like he was barely restraining himself from pouncing on them. Fortunately, Wesley grasped Angel's arm and said something quietly to the larger man. Angel's mouth set itself into a firm line, and he nodded once briefly before sitting down in a chair which, by its position and opulence, obviously belonged to the CEO.

Xander remembered the Angel who had helped them in Sunnydale and the one he'd seen from time to time who spent his time helping the helpless in LA and tried to reconcile those memories with the vampire seated before him now. Xander was finding it difficult to figure out the connection between Angel Investigations and Wolfram and Hart. It really didn't make much sense and it reminded him of his promised
duties to the Council. But first, he supposed explanations were in order and perhaps it would make Angel's group more inclined to talk about themselves.

Wesley finished preparing coffee and tea with the help of the slender girl who had given Xander the blanket earlier. Wesley handed out drinks while Angel made introductions.

“You already know Wesley,” Xander nodded into the pause, “he heads up the Research Department and this is Gunn,” Angel continued, indicated an attractive dark skinned male leaning casually against the chair where the girl was seated. “He's part of our law team and an expert in contractual law and this is Fred. She's head of the Sciences Department. And this is Lorne, head of Entertainment.” Xander looked at the green skinned demon in the garish purple suit and smiled. “This is Xander Harris who worked with Buffy back in Sunnydale and Wil-Spike.”

Mutual nods of acknowledgement followed
most of the introductions although, Spike simply glanced up and away again. The hand Spike had grasped when he tugged Xander down beside him was hidden between their thighs and Spike still gripped it tightly. Their palms had become slick with sweat and something about that niggled at Xander. He didn't have time to consider it further as he realised Angel was still waiting impatiently for his explanation. He decided to be as honest as possible while leaving out anything they didn't really need to know. He could fill Spike in on anything he'd left out later. Xander marvelled over the fact that he completely trusted the vampire sitting next to him but after all these years, he still didn't trust Angel. Not completely anyway.

“I'm not sure where to start,” Xander began. “Do you know what happened in Sunnydale or what used to be Sunnydale?”

“Yes,” Wesley answered. “Giles telephoned shortly after your arrival in Cleveland. He informed us of your successful attempt to defeat The First and has been in touch from
time to time. We are aware of the rebuilding of the Council and the addition of the Council Academy.”

“Okay. Good that makes things easier. A few weeks ago I had a dream about Cordelia -”

“Cordelia?” Angel interrupted leaning forward in his seat.

Xander nodded and looked around at the others but they looked away rather than meet his eye so Xander turned back to Angel. “What's wrong?”

“When was this dream exactly?”

“Uhm. I remember it was a Tuesday because it was my turn to help patrol.” Xander stopped and tried to recall the date. “Sooo,” he began again, drawing out the oh, “it must have been the thir - no the fourth. Yeah it was the fourth. Why?”

It was Wesley who answered. “I'm so sorry
Xander but Cordelia passed away that evening.”

Xander felt a hand squeeze his reassuringly and was grateful for Spike's presence. His heart clenched painfully at the thought of Cordelia being gone. He returned Spike's squeeze to say thank you and turned back to Angel. “So when were you going to bother to let her friends know? Or were you even going to?”

“We – we-,” Angel stammered.

Xander wanted to take satisfaction in Angel's obvious uneasiness but it was cold comfort. Then he remembered his dream and what Cordelia had said to him and realised she was probably happy wherever she was now and he let his ire at the vampire go. Angel simply wasn't worth the effort.

“Never mind. It doesn't matter now anyway.” Xander went on to explain his dream leaving out any details he didn't want Angel to know. “I've had a few waking dreams or visions too which is why I knew to come here. Now.”
“You had a vision?”

Xander shrugged. “Yeah. I knew Spike was going to show up here so here I am.”

“Xander?” Wesley asked, “when you saw Cordelia in your dream, did she kiss you?”

Xander brushed his fingers lightly over his lips. “Yeah. Why? Is it important?”

“Wesley, you don't think?”

“I do Angel,” Wesley said before turning back to Xander. “Cordelia was given her visions by the person who had them previously through a kiss. This could be quite serious actually. Have you been feeling any ill effects? Headaches? Dizziness?”

“No,” Xander said shaking his head.

“No offense meant here but how do we even know he's telling us the truth?” Gunn
questioned. He, along with the others, had been quiet up until now.

Lorne, who was still seated on the other end of the couch laughed. “Simple. They can sing.”

Xander looked around the room with a little frown. “Sing?”

“It would make things easier.” Wesley suggested.

“Yes,” Angel agreed, “and there's the other matter as well.”

“The other 'matter' has a name ya know,” Spike muttered in irritation.

Angel pinned him with a hard glare but Wesley's hand on his shoulder kept him seated. “I haven't forgotten.”

Xander leaned forward effectively blocking Angel's line of sight. “Will somebody please tell me why you want me to sing?”
Lorne reached out to pet his knee affectionately. “Nothing to worry about Sweetness. I'm an Anagogic demon which means I'll know if you're telling the truth.”

“So what? We just sing and you'll know?”

“That about sums it up Sweetness. If you and the delectable blonde at your side would care to give me a few lines.”

“What do I need to sing?”

“Anything you want Sweetness.”

“Right. Okay.” Xander frantically searched his mind and finally just picked a song at random. He cleared his throat and chuckled nervously. He kept his eye on the floor between his feet and felt the warmth of the hand he still held. “Okay here goes.”

*I was born a dreamer, seemed like every day my mind came up with something new.*
But this time it's my heart, with a dream that's here to stay.
There's a chance this one might come true.

I can see me being with you, for the rest of my life.
Two hearts, one love.
And I can see you loving me too, sure would be nice.
Two hearts, one love . . . that's us.*

Xander peeked up through his hair and darted glances around the room. “Is that enough?”

“That was just fine Sweetness,” Lorne told him with a friendly smile before looking over at Spike who was still slumped in the corner of the couch. “Your turn Precious.”

Xander watched and knew the stubborn look which settled over Spike's face. He leaned over and gently bumped Spike's shoulder with his own and leaned down to whisper quietly.

“C'mon Spike. It'll make things easier. Just a line
or two. Please?”

Spike sighed. “Bloody hell, fine. But first, it's Spike and just a line or two, yeah?”

“That's all Precious.” Lorne smiled ignoring Spike's scowl at his continued use of the pet name.

“Right,” Spike grumbled and very softly he started to sing. Xander knew his own voice wasn't bad and he suspected Spike could belt out a song but this wasn't at all what he expected. The loneliness and isolation Spike had experienced must have still been fresh in his mind because it flowed out with his words and tore at Xander's heart.

_I walk a lonely road  
The only one that I have ever known  
Don't know where it goes  
But it's home to me and I walk alone_

_I walk this empty street  
On the Boulevard of Broken Dreams_
When the city sleeps
And I'm the only one and I walk alone**

Lorne knelt on the floor near Spike's feet and tried to catch his eyes. His hand hovered uncertainly over Spike's knee before it dropped back to his side without very touching the denim covered skin. “I'm sorry,” he said quietly before standing and turning to face the room. “They aren't lying.”

Angel angrily shook off Wesley's hand and stood. “What about the prophecy? The Shanshu?”

“What's a Shanshu?” Xander asked.

Wesley came around to stand between Angel and the couch. “It's a prophecy. It tells of a vampire with a soul who will die as a champion to save the world. As a reward he will have his sins absolved and will return as a human.”

“Not stolen your bloody, sacred reward,” Spike complained. “Why the hell would I even want it
anyway. You're such a sanctimonious git, ya know that?”

“Spike,” Angel growled as he stepped around Wesley. “I can hear your heart beating from here.”

Xander's head swivelled around and he clenched the warm hand in his. Warm hand? He slid his fingers up and waited until...there. Fast like the flapping wings of a bird trapped within a cage. The steady, thumping beat of Spike's pulse under his fingers. Xander noticed the complete lack of surprise the announcement had on the others in the room and realised they must have already discussed this while they were out of the room. “Spike?” he squeaked.

Spike flashed him an annoyed glance. “'M not,” he protested before looking back up at Angel.

“William,” Angel's voice had become low and menacing and he seemed to loom over the pair on the couch. “Explain this then.”
Spike's fangs lowered and his features shifted as he growled up at Angel. It was Lorne who stepped between them this time as Spike surged up off the couch to confront the other vampire.

“I read them both Angel. They're telling the truth.”


Spike's face shifted again and he slumped back on the couch. “Don't know do I,” Spike mumbled.

“Maybe I can help.” Fred offered. “I've got access to all sorts of equipment. My lab is just downstairs. I could take some blood and tissue samples. Oh, and maybe that new scanner that came in yesterday,” she added excitedly. “It might be useful too.”

“Don't fancy being poked and prodded,” Spike protested tiredly.
Xander sympathised but thought it might be a good idea. It might not only help to get some answers to the Spike mystery but he might be able to get some information about Wolfram and Hart and why Angel suddenly decided to run an evil law firm. “She might be able to help.”

“I think it's a good idea,” Angel insisted.

“I could do some research as well,” Wesley volunteered. “I have access to some extremely rare volumes. You should get checked out as well Xander. When Cordelia was human she suffered from the visions. They would have killed her eventually.”

Xander nudged Spike companionably. “It looks like we're gonna get help whether we want it or not. Might as well take it.”

“Don't have to like it.”

“No you don't.”
Spike sighed and leaned his head back against the cushions. “Bloody hell.”

Xander noticed how tired he looked. “Can this wait until tomorrow? I know I'm tired and Spike here's been through an awful lot in the last couple of hours.”

“I'll have a room made up for you. Let me just get Harmony to make the arrangements with housekeeping.”

“No Angel. Thanks but no. I've already booked a room at a hotel and I've got an extra bed.”

“Are you sure you wanna take him with you? You can leave him here.”

“Stupid bogtrotter,” Spike muttered under his breath. Xander grinned a little but otherwise ignored him.

“Yeah I'm sure. It'll be fine. We'll come back and see Fred tomorrow. What time would you like us to come over?”
She chewed her lip thoughtfully for a moment. “I would love to have ya come over right away but I figure ya'll wanna rest. I'll spend the mornin' setting everything up and you could come over after lunch?”

Xander smiled. He could very easily get to like this girl and her childlike enthusiasm. “That'll be great. We'll see ya then. You ready Spike?” Xander asked rising from the couch.

Spike stood and locked eyes with Angel for a long moment before heading for the door. “Let's get the hell outta here.”

Part Seven

Spike had been quiet on the ride back to the hotel choosing to simply sit scrunched in the far corner and staring out the window at the twinkling lights of the city. Although he was curious to know what was going through Spike's mind, he didn't push. He hadn't lied when he'd said the vampire had been through a lot in the
past few hours. Hell. Spike had been through a lot in the past six months.

Xander slid the key card through the slot and opened the door with more than a little bit of relief. Spike's uncharacteristic quietness was becoming unnerving. It wasn't just the lack of talking. It was the whole package. In the past, Xander had always associated Spike with noise and motion of some kind. The Spike he knew was full of energy and seemed incapable of remaining still for longer than a few minutes at a time. Xander held the door open and watched with concern as Spike took a moment to look around the small room before carefully making his way to one of the two comfortable leather chairs flanking the round table. No swagger with the enticing swivel of hip which oozed sexuality. It was like the big bad had been deflated and part of Xander hated seeing it. It reminded him of the time right after Spike had escaped from the Initiative. Chipped, hungry and defenceless.

Xander shook his head and made his way to the long counter situated against the wall near the
table. He set down the cooler full of blood Harmony had thoughtfully provided them while they waited for the cab to arrive. And wasn't that another kick to the head. Harmony being thoughtful. Harmony working for Angel, Spike coming back, Angel being a total dick, finding a much changed Wesley, and a thoughtful Harmony. Xander wondered how many shocks he was going to have to deal with today. 'Course he could probably eliminate the whole Angel being a dick one from the list because that was just par for the course in Xander's experience.

Finished transferring the bags of blood from the cooler to the small mini fridge Xander stood and contemplated his on again and off again room mate. “Hungry?”

Spike started slightly as if he'd forgotten he wasn't alone in the room and Xander flinched but didn't apologise. He figured apologising would only accomplish one of two things. Either Spike would get mad because Xander noticed or Spike would get mad at the perceived pity. Either way the end result was Spike in a bad
mood and Xander really didn't want to have to deal with it while he was tired and hungry.

He looked back over at the vampire who was oddly studying his totally polish free nails. Xander chose not to comment on that either.

"'Spose," Spike finally answered with a shrug.

Xander heaved a sigh. This wasn't going to work. They couldn't spend however long in this room tiptoeing around each other. They were going to need to talk but food first. And maybe booze. Lubricate the situation a bit. Might help. Certainly couldn't hurt. "Well I'm starved," Xander plunged ahead, deciding to act as normal as possible and hope Spike would finally relax a bit. "Pizza and beer good for you?"

"Fine."

Xander nodded, dialled room service and placed the order. "You want some blood while we wait?" Xander asked after he'd hung up the
phone. “Do you still need to?” He added as an afterthought.

Spike actually grinned, which Xander took as a good sign, and then seemed to consider the question. “Think so. Not really sure.”

“Do you wanna try?”

“Don't mind the idea. Sure. Give us a mug.”

Things appeared to being going a bit better so Xander made the decision to broach the next topic. Albeit with his back turned and his full, undivided attention on heating up some blood. “So ... I'm gonna need to call England and check in. Let Giles know how things are progressing and find out how the research is going.”

“About that,” Spike began softly. “Do they already know?”

Xander removed the now warm blood from the small microwave, took the empty seat across from Spike and slid the mug across the table.
Spike grasped it with both hands and seemed grateful for the heat. “No. Well not everyone. Just me and Willow.”

Spike gave him a curt nod and played with the handle of the mug. “Maybe you shouldn't say anything 'bout me just yet.”

“I think we can keep it between the three of us for now,” Xander agreed, “but we'll have to tell the others eventually.” They couldn't stay in LA forever Xander wanted to add but kept his silence. He didn't think it was a good idea to bring up the subject of returning to England just yet. A knock on the door saved him from having to say anything further.

By the time Xander had signed for their dinner and returned to the table, Spike's mug was empty. “Still need the blood then?” Xander asked casually while opening the pizza box. The scented steam which escaped made his stomach growl and he almost missed Spike's answer.

“’Parently,” Spike replied eyeing up the pizza
Xander snickered. Obviously he wasn't the only one being affected by the delicious aroma of hot, freshly made pizza. He handed Spike a bottle of beer and indicated the box with his own bottle. “Dig in before it gets cold.”

They ate quietly and downed another beer before Spike started asking the questions Xander had expected long before now.

“So ... why you?”

“Huh?”

“Why did you come here anyway?”

“I'm the one with the visions.”

“I get that but you could've sent someone else, yeah? So why?”

“Send some stranger?” Xander shook his head while he picked at the label on his beer bottle.
with his thumb. “Giles was gonna send Gary but then I started getting the dreams and the visions and got myself elected instead. Besides we all owe you a bit more than that.”

“Do you now? Never thought you even liked me much Harris. Now here you are protecting me from Angel.”

Xander set his bottle on the table with a thump and leaned forward on his arms. “You saved the world Spike. I figure you deserve to be treated a bit better than to be left here with Angel. Besides you're my vampire to hate if I want not his.”

Spike's eyebrow went up at the words 'my vampire' and Xander could swear there was a grin playing about his lips but Spike didn't call him on it. He just nodded and said, “All right then. Don't know why he thinks I'd covet his stupid reward any way but that's Angel for ya. So why was Giles gonna send this Gary?”

Xander explained what he knew of Wolfram and
Hart which wasn't much and filled Spike in on the details of the dream he'd left out when talking to Angel and the others. Spike nodded along and asked a question here and there but seemed to take him at his word. Xander was relieved and more than a little happy it didn't freak Spike out. It had taken enough time and enough beers to get him talking to begin with and Xander really didn't want to have to start all over again.

“So you're a guide now.” Spike leaned forward, sniffed the air and cocked his head slightly to the side. “You do smell a bit different. Wilder.”


“Oh?” Spike asked before his eyes went very wide. “Oh no! 'M not. I'm done. Finished.”

“I don't think you – we get a choice in this.”
“Bollocks is what it is,” Spike spat out.

“Am I that bad?”


They locked eyes over the remains of their dinner and shared a knowing grin of two people who seemed to be cursed with bad luck. Xander started laughing first but Spike wasn't far behind. It was like a valve had been opened and the laughter bubbled up and flowed out of both of them taking some of the tension, fear, and worry away along with it. When the laughter tapered off, the silence between them was far more companionable than awkward. Xander was loath to ruin the mood but he knew he'd put it off long enough.

“I better make that call.”

“Yeah. Gonna take a shower,” Spike announced as he stood and headed for the adjoining bath.
Xander watched the vampire go and felt a huge sense of relief at not having to make the call in front of Spike. He firmly stomped on a twinge of guilt which formed right after the thought and dug his cell phone out of his bag not wanting to use the one provided by the hotel. He scrolled through his contacts until he found the familiar number. Xander sat on the bottom corner of one of the beds, his bag open between his feet, while he waited for Willow to pick up.

”Xander! How did it go? Is everything all right?”

“And hello to you too Wills.”

”Sorry. I saw it was you and I got a bit carried away. So what happened? Were the visions accurate?”

Xander snorted. “You could say that.”

”Spike. Is he? Was he?”

“Yeah. He was there just like I saw and Willow...he's alive. He's got a heartbeat and he's
warm. But he's still all growly vampire. Something is going on and we really need to figure this thing out.”

“Oh Goddess! Is Spike okay? I mean if he was where you said.”

“Not completely no. I mean you can't go through something like that and be okay can you? It hasn't been very long and he can be so quiet and other times it's almost like he never left. I dunno? It kinda reminds me of when he first got chipped.”

“Oh Xan! You don't think he'd ...”

Xander had a flash of Spike in one of his garish, brightly coloured shirts, arms flung wide and falling towards a sharp wooden stake. “No! I don't- I don't think so. Shit. Maybe I'm not the best person to be here Wills. Maybe Buffy was right and she should have come instead.”

“Do you really think Buffy would be good for Spike right now? No Xander. You can do this. I
believe in you and from what you've said about your dreams, it's supposed to be you.”

“Not sure I should say thank you for that.”

“I'm sorry Xan but it's true and you know it.”

“Yeah. I do.” Xander admitted with a sigh. “Look I haven't called Giles yet and Spike didn't want me telling anyone else about him being back. I think that might be a good idea. At least for now.”

“It's Okay. I'll talk to Giles and let him know you arrived safely.”

“Thanks Wills. I still need to figure out what's happening with Angel so we've got some time. Speaking of Angel ... did you know how Cordelia wound up with the visions she used to get?”

“She said Doyle passed them on before he died. I think she said it was a kiss?”

“Yep and Wesley thinks she's passed them on to
me the same way.”

“In your dream?”

“Exactly. So that explains the new visions I've been getting but not the rest. Or Spike and his new heartbeat. Any luck on your end.”

“Some. I talked to a few people I know we can trust at the Coven and they're helping to research the spell I used. They think it might have had a more concentrated effect on anyone who was on the hellmouth when it was cast.”

“So you mean us?”

“Essentially. We need to do some more research but it looks like it may have picked up on anyone not entirely human.”

Xander looked up when he heard the bathroom door open and he watched as Spike emerged with little drops of water still clinging to his skin and a hotel towel draped low on his hips. He caught Spike's eyes and gestured to the phone
with his eyebrows raised in question. Spike actually took a stumbling step back and shook his head vigorously. Xander stretched his free arm out, in what he hoped was a calming gesture, keeping the palm facing to the floor and nodded his understanding.

“Look Wills. I gotta go. I'll call tomorrow.”

“Okay Xan. Talk tomorrow and you be careful.”

“I will. Bye.”

“Bye”

Xander keyed off his phone and dumped it back in his bag. Spike was still standing with his butt backed up against the small chest of drawers.

“Sorry about that. I thought maybe you'd want to talk. I know,” he rushed on when Spike opened his mouth, “it was a stupid idea.”

“‘S'okay. Just not ready to talk to the others yet.”
Xander thought he could see a slight blush creep across Spike's skin and was again reminded of how much things had changed. He stretched and stifled a yawn. “I'm gonna take a shower and go to bed. I'm exhausted.”

Spike gestured to the beds. “Does it matter?”

“Nah,” Xander said already halfway across the room. “Take your pick. Oh and there's some boxers in my bag if you want something to sleep in.”

By the time Xander re-emerged from his decadently hot shower, Spike already appeared to be asleep. Rather than risk disturbing him by checking, Xander quietly changed into some boxers, shut off the lights and slid between the sheets of the empty bed. Xander quickly and easily fell into a deep, dreamless sleep so it was even more of a shock when cries of terror ripped through the stillness of the room and jerked him upright in his bed. He looked around the room with his heart thudding in his chest. In
the weak, watery glow of the light in the car park he could see Spike thrashing on the bed. The sheets were tangled about his legs. Xander sprang from his bed and tried to still the thrashing limbs. Spike bucked and kicked while Xander pleaded with him to wake up. “Spike! C'mon. Spike!”

Spike sucked in a sharp breath and his eyes snapped open. Fear made the blue eyes wide and Xander could feel his heart as it raced in his chest. Xander's own heart wrenched at the sight and without thinking, he pulled Spike into his arms offering comfort in the only way he knew how. Spike didn't object and snuggled deeper into the embrace and hid his face against Xander's chest. He knew he was speaking but if asked, Xander wouldn't have been able to recall what he'd said. It was all so much nonsense. Xander rubbed the smooth skin under his hands and felt a pang of guilt for liking the feeling of holding someone in his arms again. A spark of anger followed when he wondered the why of it all. He gently pushed Spike away and turned his back on the hurt, puzzled look.
“You all right now?” Xander asked, voice still rough with sleep.

“Yeah,” Spike mumbled so softly Xander had to strain to hear. “Thanks.”

Xander climbed back into his own bed and stared at the ceiling with sightless eyes. He wondered if he'd ever manage to get back to sleep with the pictures of Anya playing on repeat inside his mind. Her smile and her laughter. All her funny, quirky ways. He felt a wash of shame as he recalled how nice it felt to hold Spike in his arms. He closed his eye and whispered, “I'm sorry,” into the dark.

Part Eight

Xander woke to the sound of the toilet flushing and had a frightening, disorienting moment when he thought someone had actually broken
in to use the bathroom. He blearily took in the room and the rumpled, empty bed near his own. Finally recognising what had actually happened and who was in the other room, he heaved a sigh of relief, threw the blankets aside, and stood.

He preformed a spine cracking stretch with his arms high over his head before scratching absently at his belly while he watched the closed door across the room. His mind briefly considered what was happening in there and just as quickly skittered away again as he firmly decided he really didn't want to know. Xander lifted the watch he'd left on the table beside the bed and was surprised to see it was almost noon. They had both slept far later than he thought either of them would manage but then they had been both physically and emotionally exhausted.

Xander winced when he recalled the cries of terror which woke him in the middle of the night and his own reaction. He supposed Spike coming back had brought up his thoughts of Anya and
renewed old feelings of grief. Sometime during the night he'd made a kind of peace with himself and now, in the light of day, he could admit he'd done nothing wrong. Oh, he still missed her but the satisfying, warm feelings of being needed and wanted weren't accompanied by pangs of guilt.

The sound of the shower coming on meant Xander would need to wait and he began getting some clothes out of his bag to take his mind off his own full bladder. He shrugged when he realised he hadn't even bothered to actually unpack anything. Deciding it would help pass the time, he started moving his things to the drawers and closet. He wondered if maybe they should go shopping to buy Spike more than the one outfit.

Just as he was wondering if anyone would notice if he used the large, rather ugly potted plant in the corner to relieve himself, the door opened. Spike strolled out in a cloud of steam. Xander's traitorous eye followed the smooth movement of well defined muscles under bare, smooth skin
and damp, tousled curls. He blushed as he realised he was staring and his boxers were slowly rising.

He nearly ran to the open door throwing a quick, “Morning,” over his shoulder. He slammed the door and let his weight rest against the wood while he took deep, calming breaths. He willed his erection away as he crossed to the toilet. Enjoying the feeling of holding someone in his arms when they were scared was one thing but this? Ogling Spike. Spike?! And getting hard while doing it. Xander firmly shoved all the scary, odd thoughts aside while he flushed and reached in to start the water.

Shower finished and any remotely horny thoughts regarding Spike securely banished from his mind, Xander emerged to find Spike already dressed and seated at the small table. He'd apparently ordered room service because there were sandwiches and cans of coke which made his stomach rumble when he saw them.

“Hope you don't mind. Don't exactly have my
own funds at the mo',” Spike said with a small shrug.

Xander blinked. Spike ordering food and drink and charging it to the room was a reassuringly normal sign. Spike being considerate and ordering some for Xander and asking if he minded was another side trip to bizarre-o-world. Xander blinked again, shrugged and remembered the soul. Spike had been quieter and more considerate after he'd earned it back. Xander briefly wondered if he ever actually knew who Spike really was before he shoved it all away to worry about later. Or not. Whatever.

Xander took a seat and waved away any apologies. “It's fine. I was hungry and it will save time. We've gotta leave to meet Fred soon anyway.”

Spike grunted in response. Xander looked up and frowned. Spike wasn't eating but looking moodily towards the windows. Oh right.

“Not a problem. There's a canopy over the front
entrance. I can order a taxi or maybe rent a car. I could get it delivered out front.” Xander explained.

Spike looked at him oddly, stood and made his way dangerously near one of the deadly rays of sunlight streaming in the room. Xander half rose from his seat wondering if Willow had been right and Spike was suicidal after all. “Ah Spike,” he warned, ready to dash across the room and snatch Spike away from danger.

Spike looked at Xander with an unreadable, blank expression while he raised an arm. “You're right,” he said calmly. “Not a problem at all actually.”

Xander's mouth hung open as he marvelled at the sight of Spike's hand and forearm in the rays of the sun. No smoke or screaming or cries of pain. Only bright rays of sunshine making the pale skin glow. Xander snickered and Spike raised an eyebrow in question. “No sparkles?”

Spike glowered at him and Xander thought for a
second that maybe he'd gone too far. But then
the vampire grinned and shook his head. “No,
no sparkles,” Spike confirmed. “Thank fuck.”

Sunlight problem solved, Xander ordered a
rental car while they finished their lunch. After
taking the council's credit card details, the perky
rental car operator assured him the car would
be delivered within the hour. Xander was
pleased to discover she was true to her word
and the keys were waiting for them at the front
desk. They left without incident although Xan
der did notice Spike had reverted back to quiet
mode. He wouldn't say the vampire had talked
his ear off during lunch but he had been much
more talkative. They had even shared a laugh
over what was sure to be Angel's reaction to
Spike's new ability to be in the sun. Nothing like
bonding over a mutual disrespect and dislike.

Xander didn't try to make conversation in the
car and instead filled the silence with some nice
country music. True to form Spike made a face
before leaning over and changing the station.
Xander smiled, left the dial where it was, and
nodded along to the beat. That was better. Xander parked the car in the underground car park and they followed Fred's directions to her lab. Spike seemed a bit jittery while they stood side by side in the small lift.

“You gonna be okay?” Xander finally asked.

Spike glanced at him quickly before turning his head to stare at the closed doors. “Just wondering what it'll be like ya know. If it'll be all sterile and white.”

It took a moment before it clicked for Xander but he did remember the cold, sterile, harshness of the Initiative. He'd hated it and he knew it must have been worse for Spike who'd been captured and held prisoner there. He felt a wave of sympathy. “I'll be there the whole time. And there’s something about Fred. I trust her.”

He saw Spike give a little shrug. “Don't rightly remember much. All a bit hazy. Think you're right but – .” Spike broke off with a small shake of his head. “Doesn't matter.”
Xander put his hand on Spike's shoulder, feeling the tenseness of the muscles beneath his fingers. “It does matter Spike.”

Spike gave him a disbelieving look and Xander figured if the situation was reversed he would probably have doubts too. Not sure how to convince the vampire of his sincerity in the few minutes of privacy they had left, he chose to say nothing. If Xander was right and Spike was his champion then he'd have plenty of time to prove himself. Xander felt his stomach drop and he wasn't sure if the cause was the elevator or his sudden realisation of his own future. The doors pinged open and a smiling Fred greeted them forestalling the panic attack he was seriously considering.

There was no need to make conversation as they followed her down the hallway. She talked enough for all of them which made things easier. Xander kept close to Spike to offer silent support and breathed a sigh of relief when they entered the lab. It was and wasn't what he had
expected. Yeah it was a lab. There was no mistaking that but someone, Fred he guessed, had made an effort to make the place cheerful. There were splashes of bright colour dotted around the room. Some pretty flowers perched on a desk, brightly coloured posters on the wall, and some small plastic figurines which made him smile in fondness for his own lost treasures.

Fred chattered away about how surprised she was when Spike popped out of the amulet in Angel's office making Xander realise he'd never even asked. He had been so sure Spike was going to be there, he'd never bothered to wonder about the how of it. Spike seemed a lot calmer, even giving Fred a smile or two and Xander relaxed. She took blood samples and tissue samples and Spike grumbled a bit but Xander could tell he didn't mean it. It reminded him of how Spike acted around Dawn. Spike would moan and complain the entire time but would still do pretty much whatever Dawn asked of him. They discovered Spike could also hold a cross and holy water had no effect either. Fred felt it was too early to make a definite
decision but she suspected his demon and human halves had somehow merged which resulted in the loss of the normal vampire weaknesses.

When it was his turn to be poked and prodded, Xander remembered the other reason he'd agreed to come back to Wolfram and Hart and asked some of his own questions.

“I thought Angel was living in that old hotel and running a detective agency?” Xander asked while on the inside he rolled his eyes and congratulated himself for his subtlety.

“We were for a while,” Fred answered without either noticing or minding his bluntness. “It was hard though and it didn't seem like we were making much of a difference. Angel pointed out how we could use the resources here to make a much bigger impact. So we all signed a contract and, well, here we are.”

“Just like that?” Spike asked from where he was leaning casually against a desk arms and legs
“Ya'll must think it's kinda strange. Us suddenly working for the enemy.”

“You could say that,” Spike agreed.

Something about what she said struck Xander as odd. “What did you mean 'enemy'?"

“Oh! Well back when we were still Angel Investigations it seemed like the lawyers here were always up to something.”

Try as he might, Xander couldn't manage to keep the scepticism from creeping into his voice. “So Angel thought it was a good idea to join them?”

Spike snorted and shook his head. “That sounds about right.”

“Ya'll think there's something wrong?”

“What?” Xander asked, kicking himself for
alarming Fred. “No. Just ... curious.”

“ Might not hurt to take a look at those contracts,” Spike suggested.

Fred's brow wrinkled with concern. “You are worried. What is it?”

“Don't know really,” Spike answered, honestly. “But I would feel better if we make sure.”

“And you think you can do that by looking at our contracts?”

Xander answered this time deciding it would be better if they worked together. “Maybe. Couldn't hurt.”

Fred looked back and forth between them while she appeared to consider their request. “I suppose you're right. It all has been kinda fast. Angel told us a bit about ya'll and I hope I'm right thinking ya'll can be trusted.” She paused, took a deep breath, and let it out. “Records is in the basement.”
“Thank you Fred.”

“Don't make me regret this,” she warned.

“We won't,” Xander promised. “So what’s the diagnosis?” He went on to ask, curious to know what she'd found out about his new abilities.

“Well it's a bit strange really. It's like you've merged with something yourself but I'm not sure what exactly. With Spike it's understandable. He was already in possession of a demon but you weren't. So where did it come from?”

“Won't hurt him will it?”

Xander looked over at the sound of genuine concern in Spike's voice. Fred, not thinking Spike's behaviour anything but ordinary, rushed to reassure him. “No, no. I don't have all the tests back yet but he appears to be perfectly healthy. Even the visions don't seem to be having any adverse effects.”
Suspecting he knew exactly where his so called demon came from, Xander felt an urgent need to get back to the hotel as soon as possible so he could talk to Willow. “If we're done here maybe we should get going.”

“Is that the time! I'm sorry,” Fred said, looking at the clock on the wall. “I tend to get involved in a project and lose all track of time.”

“It's all right,” Xander said, waving away her apology. “It was sorta nice if you don't count the needles and stuff.”

Xander watched in amazement as Spike gently grasped Fred's hand and brushed his lips lightly across the back. Fred blushed and giggled. “Thank you,” he said quietly, sounding much more like Giles or Wesley than Spike the once evil, now souled, but still obnoxious vampire.

Fred escorted them back to the elevator while giving them directions to the Records Department. “Ya'll be careful down there.”
“We will,” Xander assured her.

“And let me know what you find?”

Xander nodded. “Promise.”

Fred waved a goodbye as the doors swished closed and the elevator descended. Xander kept fidgeting until Spike heaved a sigh and scowled at him.

“What's got yer knickers in a twist?”

“Do you think we can just waltz in there and look through the files? Won't there be security or something? And even if we do get in, what are we looking for?”

“Got it covered,” Spike said raising his hand in the air. Held between his fingers was a key card.

“Spike!? Where the hell? Did you steal that?”

Spike looked offended by the question.
“Borrowed it.” He peered at the front of the card. “From a Knox.”

“Okay. Fine. But I still don't know anything about law.”


“Are you saying what I think you're saying?”

“I haven't said anything. Now shut it.”

Xander smiled as the skin of Spike's face turned a lovely shade of pink but he kept his mouth shut. It was an effort but he figured he owed the vampire a bit of slack. For now.

The elevator stopped and they stepped cautiously back from the doors as they slid open to reveal a long dreary hallway. The walls were a plain concrete painted a depressing shade of grey with a matching floor and dim lighting. Without needing to talk they stepped out into
the hallway together. Spike looking one way and Xander the other. There wasn't much to see other than more grey with the occasional metal door. The corridor to the left ended at a solid, blank wall so by mutual agreement they headed in the opposite direction.

Their echoing footsteps and the occasional whoosh and clang of machinery were the only sounds as they moved carefully along. They stopped briefly to read the letters painted on each door until they came to the one which displayed Records Department. Xander tugged Spike's sleeve and indicated the key pad next to the door. A quick swipe of the card and the little light turned green and a small click could be heard.

Spike grasped Xander's wrist when he reached for the knob and shook his head no. Xander shrugged and back away. Spike grasped the knob and slowly pushed the door open. Spike stepped inside with Xander close on his heels.

The room was lined with large filing cabinets
along all the walls except the one containing the door. A long table with chairs interspersed along its length rested in the middle of the room. Xander noticed a light switch next to the door and flipped it on banishing the shadows. They began searching the cabinets for a clue to the filing system. Fortunately it was extremely well organised and they soon had the contracts for Angel and the others spread out on the table.

Xander tried reading some of them but soon became lost in the legalese. Instead he spent the time studying the vampire. Without any gel to tame it, Spike's hair had dried into its natural waves and curls and Xander felt an urge to reach out and see if it was as soft as it looked. His hands twitched in anticipation and Xander twisted his fingers together to keep them still. Spike absently bit his lower lip while he concentrated and Xander felt a disturbing twitch in his trousers. Giving himself a mental slap, Xander slid one of the contracts over and willed his sudden erection to subside. He was gonna find himself committed if he kept up the crazy thoughts. He could feel Spike's eyes on him and
remembered the sniffing from before. Xander felt his skin heat as embarrassment replaced any feelings of arousal.

They studied quietly until Spike suddenly sat up with a grunt.

“Find something?” Xander asked hopefully. His ass had fallen asleep hours ago and he feared of ever feeling anything below the waist again.

“Yeah. It seems like my sorry excuse for a sire went and made a deal. He agreed to run Wolfram and Hart and in exchange they altered his son's memories and placed him in a family. They also altered the memories of the rest of the group so they wouldn't remember anything about him.”

“Wait. Angel has a son?”

“Apparently.”

“And he made a deal with an evil law firm to do what? Protect him?”
“Looks that way.”

“Okay. Lets say we believe all this. Is there any way out of it?”

Spike looked back down at the document on the table. “It looks like it would be easy enough to disrupt the spell. There's no reason anyone would ask questions about a son they knew nothing about so there was no reason to make it complicated. Getting Angel to tell the truth should do the trick.”

“So we just have to convince Deadboy he should come clean and then poof everything goes back to normal?”

“Pretty much. Not sure how happy the Senior Partners will be though.”

“Senior Partners?”

“The higher ups.”
“Right. Big with the not caring here but I better check in with Giles and see what he wants me to do.”

They gathered up the paperwork, replaced the files back in the drawers and crept back out into the hallway. Xander breathed a sigh of relief when the lift deposited them back in the lobby. The late afternoon sun was just starting to turn a pretty shade of orange as it gave way to the deeper shades of night. They were nearing the doors when they heard footsteps hurrying behind them.

“Wait! I need to talk to you!”

Xander's heart started beating faster as adrenalin rushed through his system. He was debating if he should make a run for it when he spotted the guards near the door. Deciding they had no choice they turned and faced whoever it was behind them.

Lorne rushed over with a huge smile on his face. “I'm so glad I caught you. I wanted to talk to you
about something. Can we go to my office?”

Xander closed his eye and gathered himself back together. “Sure. We can spare a few minutes.”

As they followed the green skinned demon up a flight of stairs, Xander wondered what he could possibly have to talk to them about.

Part Nine

Lorne led them to a nicely appointed area with a comfortable looking couch and a handsome young man seated at a stylish metal and glass desk near a door which Xander presumed led to Lorne's office.

“Can I have Todd get you anything?” Lorne asked, then narrowed his eyes and seemed to change his mind. “No forget I asked. I have just the thing for both of you.” Lorne's smile was dazzling when he turned to address Todd. “A
caramel macchiato for the handsome brunette, a mocha cappuccino for the delectable blonde and I'll have the usual.”

Lorne led them through to his office and indicated the sumptuous, padded couch with matching chairs. “Please have a seat while we wait for Todd.”

Xander looked curiously around the office while he and Spike, by unspoken agreement, made their way to the couch. The room was tastefully decorated in neutral shades. A wooden desk with curving, sleek lines took up the other part of the room and Xander spotted several photos of celebrities decorating the surface. Framed film posters, awards, and pictures of attractive models, both male and female, hung on the walls.

“I wanted to talk to you privately,” Lorne said taking a seat in one of the two chairs. “When I do readings I can sometimes get more than a simple general feeling or tone.”
“More?” Xander asked, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his thighs.

“An idea of the future. If a person is heading in the right direction. I tend to be able to get a better sense of things if the person is under some kind of emotional stress.”

Xander felt Spike stiffen beside him. He blindly reached out a hand and felt Spike's fingers entwine with his own. “And you got that from us?”

“Yes,” Lorne responded looking between them. “I thought you might want to know.”

“I appreciate that but will it uh ...” Xander paused while he considered his choice of words. He didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings but he also felt he had reasonable cause for concern. “Will it actually help to know or ..?”

“I understand Sweetness. I never would have bothered either one of you with this if I didn't think it was important.”
“And Angel?”

“What I read about a person is private unless they tell me otherwise.”

“You didn't tell him?” Spike asked, surprised.

“No,” Lorne said, shaking his head. “It's your business Precious. Not his.”

A quick rap on the closed door interrupted Spike's no doubt scathing comment regarding the hated pet name and preceded Lorne's personal assistant entering the room. Todd handed out the drinks and placed a tray filled with small sandwiches and another stacked with small, bite sized cakes on the low table in front of the couch.

Lorne smiled when the young man turned his way. “Thank you Todd. We have some important things to discuss and don't want to be disturbed.”
“Of course,” Todd replied. “Is there anything else?”

“No Cupcake not just now,” Lorne said by way of dismissal. Xander grinned as he watched the demon admire the pert backside as it made its way out the door. Lorne grinned back when he saw Xander watching. “Lovely isn't he?”

Xander started when he realised the implications of Lorne's question. Did he think Todd was handsome? Yes. Okay. He could see the attraction. And Spike. He'd enjoyed watching the vampire and had gotten hard simply watching him on more than one occasion recently. Was he suddenly gay now? Xander felt Spike's scrutinising gaze and his skin heated with embarrassment. What the hell. In for a penny.

“Yeah,” Xander agreed, boldly.

He dared a peek to his left and saw Spike give him a measuring look. He forced himself to remain still and not fidget but he couldn't resist the urge to return Spike's stare. When he turned
his head, Spike gave him a knowing smirk and Xander wanted to sink through the floor figuring the vampire must have figured out he'd been ogling his ass. Xander quickly looked away and studied the floor between his feet. He felt Spike's fingers gently squeeze his and realised their fingers were still entwined. He studied the slim fingers as they gently caressed his rougher calloused skin. He briefly wondered if Spike had ever played the piano before his mind wandered off into naughty territory and considered how they would feel gliding over the flesh of his back or curling into fists as he – and he derailed that thought immediately. Xander finally abandoned his study of the lower half of the room when Lorne spoke.

“Nothing wrong with appreciating a lovely view.” Lorne fixed Spike with a pointed look. “Is there Precious?”

Spike surprised Xander with a low throaty chuckle. “Nope. Nothing wrong with it at all. Been known to admire a good view meself.”
Xander's mind spun. He'd never really considered Spike's sexual preferences before. He'd had no reason to and, he could freely admit, it probably would have totally freaked him out not too long ago. He liked to think he'd grown up since Sunnydale though and the only reactions to Spike's declaration was a spark of interest in getting to know Spike in a whole new way and a twitch from little Xan as if to say 'Hey there. I'm interested too.'

Xander contemplated the green skinned demon relaxing in his chair and sipping his drink. “So... ah, how are we gonna do this? I mean, should I leave or...?”

Lorne seemed to consider the question for a moment before he smiled his big toothy smile. “Why don't you visit with Todd for a few minutes and ask him to get you another machiatto?”

Xander wondered how Spike would feel being left alone. Although he seemed more together than when he first appeared, Spike could still go
into what Xander was referring to as quiet, shy mode. “Are you all right with that. I'll just be outside.”

Spike gave him an incredulous look complete with raised eyebrow. “Yes Mum. I think I can manage a few minutes alone with the totally unscary demon.”

Okay. So not shy, quiet mode but snarky, patronising mode. In other words, business as usual. “Fine,” Xander said sharply as he pulled his hand from Spike's, stood and made his way to the door. “I'll just wait out here then.”

Xander's small spurt of irritation lasted about as long as it took him to reach the waiting area and then it ran out of steam. He supposed Spike deserved to be a little moody considering what he'd been through. Of course, no one could be as irritating or knew how to push someone's buttons like Spike did which he shamelessly took full of advantage of whenever possible.

Todd was talking on the phone and Xander gave
him a smile as he flopped on the couch with one of the glossy magazines which were scattered on the nearby table. He idly flipped through the pages half listening to Todd's pleasant voice. He looked at the pictures not really paying much attention to the articles. He stopped and admired a picture of a pretty model with some rather impressive assets and wondered if maybe the guy ogling had only been a tiny blip on the gaydar of his life. A few pages further in was an extremely attractive blonde with striking blue eyes and sculpted abs Xander wanted to run his tongue all over. Well, maybe not so much a blip as a full on sighting then. So large breasts? Yes, please. Nicely sculpted male body? Xander casually crossed his legs to hide his reaction. Definitely. Huh. Looked like he was an equal opportunity kinda guy. He was pondering what Willow would say when the door to the office opened and Spike came out looking paler than normal. The vampire was obviously upset about whatever had been said in the office. Xander jumped up and took a step in Spike’s direction about to ask if he was okay when Spike scowled at him.
“My turn then?” Xander asked instead.

“Right this way Sweetness,” Lorne said, holding the door open.

Xander hesitated in the doorway and took a last peek over his shoulder. He let out a sigh of relief as he watched Spike sprawl comfortably on the couch and lift his discarded magazine. Xander wasn't sure what he'd been expecting but seeing Spike doing something so ordinary and knowing he would still be there when he came out was reassuring.

Xander sat on the couch wishing he'd been able to ask Todd for that drink so he would have something to do with his hands. His fingers kept trying to twist together and he reached for a one of the small cakes instead even though he wasn't really hungry. He took a bite and frowned over the tasteless lump in his mouth.

“There's no reason to be nervous,” Lorne said, soothingly.
Xander snorted in response. “If you had my track record with demons and magic and hellmouthy things? Believe me, you'd be more than a little nervous too.”

Lorne nodded like he understood and smiled again. “You are both so much alike.”


Lorne's laugh filled the room. “You both need to be needed but are so unsure. That pretty blonde out there? He desperately wants, no, needs someone to care back but he won't even admit it to himself.”

Xander nodded along remembering the desperate, naked need on Spike’s face when he looked at Buffy. “And me?”

“It's okay to move on Sweetness. She understands.”
Xander sucked in a sharp breath which felt cold and painful in his chest. “I – How do you know?”

“I told you before. I can see some of the paths a life will take. With you two...,” Lorne nodded toward the closed door. “Your paths came together. It's the way it should be. I got a definite sense of rightness. I can't tell you what I told him because it's private but be careful. He's not really coping as well as he's pretending and he might come crashing down and hard. Watch him and don't let him push you away. He needs you. Life goes on Xander. You've been given a purpose, a mission by the higher powers and she's been given her reward.”

Xander let his head hang and his hands dangle from his wrists which were resting on his splayed thighs. His heart felt lighter. It was like a weight he hadn't even realised he'd been carrying had slipped off his shoulders. He stood and reached out to shake Lorne's hand. “Thanks.”

“It's what I do,” Lorne said, returning the
gesture. “You'll make a great ... ,” he hesitated over the word for a moment. “Team,” Lorne finished with a knowing smile.

“Are you sure about this? Spike being a champion I can sorta understand but me? I'm not anything special, ya know? Just ordinary ol' Xander.”

Lorne affectionately clasped Xander's shoulder as he escorted him to the door. “Sweetness, you are far from ordinary and yes, I'm very sure.”

The ride back to the hotel was quiet. Spike stared moodily out the window and Xander left him to it as he tried to figure out what he was going to say to Giles. He also needed to figure out how to get Spike to agree to letting them know he was back but with the vampire being so prickly he was afraid to bring it up.

When they arrived back at their room, Xander still wasn't any closer to figuring out what he was going to say to either one of them and he sat on the end of his bed with his phone in his
hand. He sighed while he spun the device around and around in his hands.

“You plannin' on using that?”

Xander started, nearly dropping his phone mid-spin. “Ah, yeah. Just not sure what to say yet.”

“To who?”

“Giles.”

“Yeah, well. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to hear I'm back,” Spike snarled.

Xander perked up a bit when he realised Spike fully expected him to tell Giles he was here. At least it was half the problem solved. He wondered if it made him a bad person for hoping he could maybe get Willow to tell Giles about Spike.

He heard the springs on the next bed squeak in protest as Spike flung himself down with his arms and legs spread across the expanse and his
head on the pillow. Xander scooted up on his own bed and turned his head so he could watch the vampire as he frowned at the ceiling. Xander glanced up himself but didn't see anything of interest.

“It might not be so bad. I'm sure Giles will be happy to have another hand to help train the slayers. There's so many of them. It's worse than when we were all living at casa Summers. At least this time I have my own place.”

“Who says I'm going to England?”

Xander rolled over and propped his head on his hand and studied Spike's face carefully. “Sorry. I just figured you'd want to see Buffy.”

Spike's face looked pained for a moment. He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. “Kinda ruins the big hero exit scene though, doesn't it?”

“Spike, I don't think Buffy will care. She'll be thrilled to see you.”
“I'll think about it.”

“What about Dawn?” Xander continued. “She's missed you so much. She felt awful about how she left things with you. She cried for weeks Spike.”

“Said I'll think about it,” Spike growled.

Xander dropped the subject deciding it might be better not to push too much after his conversation with Lorne. “I'm gonna call Willow. You wanna talk to her this time?”

Spike shook his head and closed his eyes as if he was going to sleep. Xander shrugged and concentrated on making his big fingers press the right miniature buttons. You'd think they would make these things bigger he thought as he waited for the familiar voice to pick up.


Xander moved the phone away and gave it a
puzzled look before returning it carefully to his ear. “I'm fine and what have you done?”

“What?! What makes you think I've done anything?”

“Because we've been best friends forever and you only do that high squeaky voice thing when you haven't had a chance to make enough cookies to make up for whatever it is you've done.”

“Oh. Well. It really isn't that bad. Honest! And I did make cookies. Lots of them.”

Xander laughed. “I'm sure you did Wills now spill.”

“I was in the library researching the spell and he started asking me things and I know we agreed to not say anything but he caught me off guard and I didn't know what to say ya know. But it worked out fine anyway because now we know what happened although Buffy wasn't really all that happy.”
“Who? What? Huh?”

“Does that bint ever breathe?

“Was that Spike? Tell him I said hi.”

Spike made a rude gesture with his hand.

“He says hi back,” Xander told her and grinned when Spike sent him a dirty look. “Okay. Let me see if I got this straight. You were researching the spell when Giles came in and asked for an update. You told him everything about the Coven, the spell and Spike. He helped you research and you guys figured out what happened which made you happy but not Buffy.”

“Yep. I am sorry Xan. I know we agreed to keep it between us and I promise lots of cookies -”

“And brownies?”

“And brownies-”
“The ones with those little chocolate chips?”

“Yes! The ones with the chocolate chips. Am I forgiven?”

Xander only felt slightly guilty for blackmailing his friend when she had done exactly what he wanted her to do in the first place. Maybe hanging around Spike was corrupting him. It was chocolate after all though and if he managed this just right, he could have home-baked goodness for months. “I'll think about it,” Xander teased.

Willow laughed and Spike scowled. “You're both insane,” the vampire accused.

“So what did you guys find out and why wasn't Buffy happy?” Xander asked, ignoring him.

“This is it Xan. You were right. There are no more new slayers being called.”

“Shit,” Xander breathed, almost wishing he'd
been wrong.

“*It's all about balance and we tipped it a bit too far. Now the Powers That Be are trying to get that balance back.*”

“With their new champions.”

“Yeah.”

“So what about the spell?”

“*With Giles helping I was able to confirm our suspicions. The spell to release the power of the scythe transformed all the potentials into slayers by merging their human halves with their slayer halves. There was nothing in the spell to make it only work on slayers though so it affected anyone not entirely human and merged their halves or parts as well. Fortunately it was pretty short range so it would have only affected anyone in the area of the school.*”

“So that would have been Spike with his vampire demon and me with...,” Xander trailed
off tentatively, not sure if she had figured it out.

“The hyena!”


“Dawn!” Spike shouted as he snatched the phone from Xander's hand. “Red?”

“Spike?”

“Dawn? Is Dawn okay?”

“Oh my goddess. I never thought. I mean she's fine. I saw her just five minutes ago but I'll check it out. It might be a good thing. We've been wondering about the energy the monks used to power the spell but if she's merged with it somehow. I'll check into it right away.”

“See that you do.”

“Promise.”
“But she was all right, yeah?”

“She's fine. Spike?”

“Yeah?”

“I'm glad you're back.”

“Yeah...well...” Xander smiled as he watched Spike blush in the waning light of the room. “While I gotcha on the phone I need to ask you about a spell.”

Xander relaxed on the bed and watched tiredly while Spike talked to Willow about the contracts and the spell. He never even noticed when he drifted off to sleep.

Part Ten

Xander ran through the dark, dreary streets, his arms pumping and air wheezing its way in and out of his lungs. His heart hammered crazily in his chest but stopping now wasn't an option. As if to remind him of the why, a loud roar echoed
off the brick walls of the narrow alley. He pushed himself harder, squinting against the wind and rain obscuring his vision and making each faltering step a dangerous game of avoid the obstacle. He flailed his arms wildly trying to stop his headlong rush when he rounded the corner and encountered a brick wall.

He turned when he heard the heavy tread of feet behind him. The red eyes seemed to pierce right through him and filled him with terror. The high pitched scream left his lips as sharp claws parted the soft flesh of his belly.

Xander sat up with a start and blinked his eyes in the darkened room. “Shit.”

“You all right?” Spike asked quietly as if talking to a frightened child.

Xander wanted to say yes but the vivid, gory details were still all too clear in his mind. His body trembled slightly and he nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a tentative touch to his shoulder.
“Sorry. Didn't mean to startle ya. You need anything?”

“I-it's,” Xander croaked weakly. His throat felt dry and sore, like he'd been screaming for hours. He tried again. “It's okay.”

“Daft git,” Spike muttered with no real heat.

Xander saw the small light flick on in the small kitchen area of the room and heard Spike moving around before he returned to sit on the edge of Xander's bed. “Here. Drink,” Spike ordered, holding out a glass of water.

Xander took it gratefully and nodded his thanks before letting the cool fluid quench the fire in his throat. Water had never tasted quite so good before. He reached past Spike to place the empty glass on the small table between the beds before scooting back and resting against the headboard with his knees drawn up and his arms loosely encircling his shins. He watched in the soft, muted light as Spike picked idly at the
ugly putrid green bed cover. His hair was sticking up in all directions indicating he'd been sleeping as well. Xander thought he looked rumpled and tired and terribly adorable but wouldn't dare voice his opinion out loud. “What time is it?” He asked instead.

“Not too late. About ten.” Spike seemed to carefully consider his words before speaking again. “Was it one of those vision things?”

Xander scrubbed his hands over his face as if he could wash away the the sight of all that blood gushing out over fingers frantically trying to keep intestines and organs inside. He shuddered and wondered if it would get any easier. “’Fraid so.”

“Something that needs killing?” Spike asked, sounding hopeful.

Xander grunted and looked over in surprise. He'd almost forgotten the whole purpose of having the visions in the first place. He'd have to learn to control how much he fell inside them.
He needed to disassociate himself or he would never be any use to anyone. He concentrated on remembering the details of where and when. “Actually, yeah and in about two hours.”

“Great,” Spike said with way too much enthusiasm for the time of night. Xander watched as he hopped up and headed for the bathroom. When the door shut he groaned and let his head fall back to bang lightly against the wall. Between the strange new powers, the visions and the feelings for Spike, which he still didn't understand, he felt drained. He shrugged. Maybe Spike had the right idea. A good fight might be just the way to work out a few issues and a chance to see what he could do against a demon or two.

Spike came back out scrubbing at his wet hair with a towel and wearing a pair of new denims they'd picked up earlier. Xander found Spike's bare feet oddly attractive and gave himself a mental slap. Following the vampire's example he took a quick shower of his own before they both headed off on foot in the direction of Mason
They tracked the attractive young woman Xander recognised from his vision as she travelled along, blissfully unaware of any danger. They followed at a safe distance through the darkened streets until Spike grasped his arm and pointed out the large, scaly demon on the other side of the street.

Spike leaned in to whisper in his ear making Xander shiver as his warm breath tickled Xander's ear. “Stay with the girl. I'm gonna circle around behind big and ugly over there.”

Xander nodded as Spike slipped away and blended into the shadows. Xander continued behind the oblivious woman and noticed the area looked very familiar. A roar broke the silence just as the rain started to pour from the dark clouds overhead. Xander saw the woman’s wide frightened eyes before she did the sensible thing and started to run. He kept pace easily and tried to keep watch for both Spike and the demon.
Xander found himself turning into the same alley as the one in his vision and saw the woman crouched near the battered brick wall at the end. He turned when he heard the demon coming up behind him. He stepped backwards being careful not to trip over the bits of trash and debris littering the ground around his feet. The demon was larger than he remembered and covered with iridescent green scales. Red eyes pinned him with a glare and it revealed sharp teeth when it bellowed out a roar which echoed in the small space.

Xander was trying to ready himself for the inevitable confrontation when two things seemed to happen at once. The demon charged forward and a black blur with white hair came leaping out of the shadows and attached itself to the demon's back. The demon swiped angrily at Spike and Xander winced as sharp claws sliced through the cloth and skin over Spike's back. Spike split the night with a roar of his own and slipped a knife between the hard scales. The demon toppled and Spike rode it to the ground.
Xander started when he felt a hand on his arm. He'd been so engrossed watching the fight he'd forgotten all about the girl.

“What is that thing?” She asked in a quiet voice.

“It- it's...,” Xander trailed off not really sure how to answer.

She clutched his arm tighter as Spike used his knife to slit the demon's throat and then stood back to watch as it began to disintegrate into a large puddle of green goo. Xander almost laughed out loud when he noticed it was the same ugly green as the quilts in their hotel room.

“I wanna go home,” the frightened girl said. “Please?”

The wide scared eyes and shaking form immediately had Xander feeling protective. “It's gonna be okay. I'm Xander and that's Spike. What's your name?”
“Rachel,” she answered, eyeing the rapidly spreading puddle.

“Okay Rachel. Why don't we get out of here and Spike and I will make sure you get home safe. All right?”

She nodded and allowed Xander to lead her away from the alley although she eyed Spike suspiciously and gave him a wide berth. A quick check showed Spike's wounds to be superficial and nothing a pint of blood wouldn't fix right up, so they set out for Rachel's apartment. They arrived at the small apartment block without incident and although Xander was glad she was home safe, he was disappointed he hadn't gotten a chance to find out what he could do. He knew he was faster and his hearing and sense of smell was better but were there other new things to discover?

“Spike?”

“Yeah?” Spike looked over as they ambled companionably back in the direction of the
hotel.

“Do you know anything about hyenas?”

Spike stopped walking. “You wondering what you can do?”

Xander stopped as well, shrugged and nodded. “More or less.”

They both started walking again. “Be happy to spar with ya. See what you got. Teach ya too if you fancy.”

Xander felt a small thrill of excitement thinking of all the possibilities. Being able to defend himself, to make a real, tangible difference. Xander knew he had a big goofy grin on his face but couldn't seem to get it to go away and wasn't entirely sure he wanted to. “That would be great. Thanks.”

Spike grinned back and Xander recognised a glint in his eyes which meant trouble. “O'course right now we could see how fast ya are.” And
with that, he took off in a blur of speed.

“Hey! Not fair!” Xander protested. Xander could hear Spike's laughter over the wind and rain and he decided he liked the sound of it very much. He let out a laugh of his own as he put on his own burst of speed and chased the vampire through the dark, wet streets.

Spike won the race but Xander wasn't very far behind. They dried off with some of the the large fluffy towels and tumbled into bed.

~*~

Xander shook his head in frustration and wondered what on earth Buffy ever saw in the big ape. Xander thought he was stubborn and narrow-minded. He was beginning to question why he had bothered to drag a reluctant Spike to Wolfram and Hart to try to talk to someone who obviously thought anyone else’s opinion was automatically wrong just because it wasn't their own. Xander grit his teeth and tried again.
“Look. All I'm saying is you came here for a reason and you need to remember what that reason was.”

“Xander,” Angel said in a voice which made Xander want to smack him and his condescending attitude across the room. “I've told you. We are fighting evil from the inside.”

Xander couldn't believe his ears. That old argument again. “From the inside?” Xander questioned pushing himself off the chair he'd been leaning against. “All I can see is that you've gotten yourself sucked into the evil you were trying to prevent. The problem with trying to fight evil from the inside?” He pointed a finger in Angel's direction. “It can eat you up. Twist you so much that when you think you're doing the right thing, you're not. Think about it. Since when is it okay to sacrifice people, children, babies for the greater good?” Xander asked, dropping his hand and pacing around the room. Hands gesturing in annoyance and frustration. “It's one thing when they make the choice for themselves but who are you do decide who
should live and who should die? Who's dimension should be sacrificed and who's should be saved? No Angel. The good guys? We try to save them all and if we don't? Well, that's okay too because at least we tried.”

Angel glared angrily. “You're sounding pretty judgemental yourself. What are you two still doing here anyway?” Angel made a show of sniffing the air around Xander. “Oh I get it. You're so mixed up in wanting some evil thing yourself, you have no idea what you're talking about. You've got an itch that needs scratching but you're too afraid to admit it, boy.”

Xander took a step back in shock. “What the fuck?! You guys really need to stop with the sniffing thing. It's creepy and gross and ... just stop it. And Spike,” he said gesturing to the other vampire, “is not an evil thing and I'm not wanting to – to scratch anything with him.”

“Protecting his virtue too now?” Angel asked with a nasty laugh. “I'm afraid you're way more than a decade late and a penny short.”
Xander felt his body vibrate with anger and his hands curled into fists at his sides. He took a furious step in Angel's direction but Spike's smaller form was suddenly in the way.

“He's not worth it pet,” Spike said with a small, sad little smile. “And you,” he continued, rounding on Angel. “You are trying to change the subject by picking on the boy and I won't have it.”

“I don't have time for this,” Angel growled, waving them away. He turned and leaned heavily on his desk. He looked like someone who had the weight of the world on their shoulders and was finding it an almost impossibly heavy burden to carry.

Xander sighed and tried again. “Angel-”

“You don't understand,” Angel pleaded, looking between them, beseeching them to understand and let it go. “There were contracts.”
Spike stepped forward and spoke with a softness Xander only recalled hearing him use with Buffy or Dawn. If Xander didn't know any better, he would think Spike actually cared.

“Angel. I do understand. Not all the details mind but I get it. The spell they used was a simple one. No reason to make it complicated. Nobody is gonna ask after someone they don't even remember are they?”

Angel shook his head. “I- I can't.”

Spike closed his eyes and hung his head for a moment before looking back up. “C'mon Angel. Always running away. It's like your M.O. isn't it. Don't you think it's time you stopped running?”

“I can't – won't promise anything but I- I'll think about it,” Angel offered.

“Fair enough.”

“Angel,” Xander said, getting the vampire's attention. “Just don't take too long.”
Xander faded out as a dank room filled his vision. Tall figures dressed in dark brown robes stood in a loose circle around a man strapped tightly to a metal table. The hoods were pulled up obscuring their faces so Xander wasn't sure if they were humans or demons. The man moaned in fear behind the gag in his mouth and tears streaked his dirty face. Xander felt something grasp his arm and he yanked it back and spun in one smooth motion.

“Hey,” Spike said, taking a step back with his arms raised in surrender. “You back with us?”

Xander let out a shaky breath but at least he was more of an observer this time. “Yeah. Yeah, sorry.”

“Demon?”

“Not sure but we gotta go,” he said and then a simple thought occurred to him. If they couldn't talk sense into Angel, maybe they could show him instead. “We could use a hand. There's a lot of them. Angel?”
Spike seemed to pick up on the idea and played along. “What d'ya say? Not too afraid to get your hands dirty or mess up that fancy suit o' yours?”

“Will you two leave me in peace if I agree.” Angel paused while they both nodded. “Fine then.”

Wesley and Gunn joined them and Harmony brought blood and food. It sorta felt like old times to Xander. The people may have been a little different but researching the bad guys while sipping a coke and munching on pizza was almost like going home again. Thinking of home made Xander actually miss England. Well maybe not England so much as the people who lived there.

Pizza eaten and plans made, the group headed out. Xander hoped this worked and they could save the day and get through to Angel at the same time. By this time tomorrow, he and Spike
could be on their way back to merry old. Xander smiled as he sat beside Spike in the back of Angel's flashy car.

“What's got you so happy?” Spike asked.

Xander's grin only got bigger. “Nothing Spike. Nothing at all.”

Part Eleven

Xander kept close to Spike as they circled around behind the large warehouse while Angel, Wesley and Gunn checked out the front. He stopped and cocked his head as he heard the muted sounds of chanting. He reached out and tugged gently on Spike's shirt sleeve. He wondered if he'd ever get used to not seeing the leather duster. He pointed up at the window which had been left slightly ajar. He could tell when Spike heard the chanting too. Spike signalled for Xander to stay put and he quickly climbed up on the nearby dumpster for a better
view. Xander joined him, wrinkling his nose a bit at the smells coming from the closed lid, when Spike waved a hand in his direction.

They stood shoulder to shoulder peering through the large, grimy window. Large hooded figures surrounded the bound man from Xander's vision. They swayed side to side as they chanted. Xander jumped slightly, his heart catching in his throat when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Sorry,” Spike mouthed with a grin which didn't make him seem sorry at all. Spike made a downwards motion with his hand before crouching down beneath the window.

Xander joined him and watched as Spike pulled out the phone Wesley had pressed into his hand earlier. Spike spoke rapidly in hushed tones when the former watcher answered. He quickly relayed what they had discovered and went on to quickly formulate a coordinated plan of attack. Xander felt a bit of surprise at how easily Spike and Wesley worked together and how well
Spike could actually come up with a decent plan. But then, Xander was discovering there were all sorts of things he never knew about Spike. And himself, he realised as he admitted to the burst of jealousy that swept over him when Spike was talking to Wes. Spike's hand on his shoulder brought back his focus and Xander leaned into the touch.

Their heads almost touching, Spike relayed the hastily made plans. “Angel and his group are going to take the direct approach,” Spike whispered, his breath tickling Xander's ear. “When they have their attention, we're gonna come in through the window and free their prisoner. You think you can handle the bindings while I watch your back?” Xander nodded, pleased to be given an important role. “Good. You'll get a chance to get more hands on as soon as we can get ya some trainin'.”

Xander smiled and shook his head. “It's ok,” he whispered back. “It's important to get the guy out safe and you trust me with that.”
“You're right I do. Know you won't let anything happen to him if ya can help it. We-” Spike broke off whatever else he was going to say at the sounds of crashing coming from inside.

They both stood and peered back through the window. The fight was already under way inside and with their hoods thrown back, Xander could see they were demons but he wasn't sure what kind. In his mind he immediately dubbed them Rat Demons because of their furry pointed faces, beady eyes, big teeth and ears. One last demon remained near the metal table standing guard over the sacrifice. Xander was looking for the latch to open the window when he heard Spike's voice come from beside him.

“Let's go,” Spike said right before he crashed through the glass.

Xander shrugged. That worked too. He jumped through the broken window after the vampire being careful of the sharp, jagged edges and hurried to catch up. The demons were concentrating on the fight and the demon left
standing guard didn't notice their approach until Spike was already on him. Xander ignored the noises of the small battle going on around him and concentrated on the bands holding the prostrate and frightened form to the table.

His fingers felt fat and he fumbled with the buckles on the wide straps. Xander growled in frustration. He stopped, closed his eye and took a deep calming breath. When he opened his eyes he felt calmer and quickly had the strap around the man's legs undone. The other straps quickly followed and Xander helped the shaky man to sit up. Xander gently removed the gag when the man's hands wouldn't stop trembling and the knot proved too difficult.

“Thanks,” he whispered hoarsely.

Xander gave him a curt nod. “No problem. We gotta get you outta here. Can you walk?”

“Think so.”
Xander slid an arm under his shoulders and keeping to the outside walls and as far from the fighting as possible, they made their way to the exit. He handed the man off to Fred, who was waiting by the vehicles with a medikit in hand. He felt a hand on his arm when he turned to head back inside.

“Don't know who you guys are... but thank you.”

Xander put his hand over the one on his arm and squeezed briefly before removing it. “It's okay. I gotta go,” Xander said, gesturing to the building with a tilt of his head. He had seen a lot of demons still standing as they made their way out and he itched to get back inside to help. “Fred will look after you.”

Xander lifted an axe and rushed back inside. Without stopping his momentum he bowled over one of the robed rats who was trying to sneak up on an unsuspecting Gunn, who gave him a quick nod of thanks before turning to engage another of the demons.
Xander scanned the warehouse looking for the familiar shock of radioactive blonde. He finally spotted the vampire on the far side of the enormous room, surrounded and laughing while he spun and kicked out with his feet. The demon numbers were dwindling and Xander swung his axe taking off the head of another one as he passed. He took up a position near the swirling figure in black and let swing. Xander steadfastly and without grace took out any demons which came near him. He knew his efforts weren't anywhere near as fluent as Spike's or Angel's nor as tactically motivated as Gunn's or Wesley's but he felt a pride in his ability to hold his own. There had been too many times in his past when Buffy, or even Spike, had to come to his rescue. He looked forward to sparring with Spike and learning some moves.

Hearing a noise behind him, Xander whipped around, the dim overhead lighting glinting off the sharp, deadly blade in his hands. “Take that Ratboy!” He shouted with glee as another fell at his feet.
He suddenly understood Buffy's need for witty puns and remarks while fighting. He smiled again as he looked around. Robed demons were strewn across the cement floor and none appeared to moving. Angel was checking over Gunn and Wesley for injuries near the large door which led outside. A refreshing breeze of cool night air wafted in through the open doors. Angel caught their attention and indicated he and the others were heading outside. Xander nodded in acknowledgement and went to collect his champion.

As he got closer he noticed the side of Spike's black shirt was dark with blood. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Spike looked up from where he was gingerly peeling the soaked garment from his side. “One of the little buggers got me with his sword.” He hissed in pain and pressed a hand to his side. “Don't think it's too bad. Nothing a bit o' blood and rest won't cure at any rate.”

“Are you sure?” Xander asked with concern. He
tried to lift Spike's shirt to look but the vampire slapped at his hands.

“Leave off will ya. I'll be fine.” Spike's eyes softened as Xander pouted up at him. “Could use a hand getting outside to the cars though. You mind?”

Xander shook his head at his own foolishness in thinking Spike would accept being fussed over but was secretly pleased the puppy eyes had had the desired effect. “C'mon then,” he said, going around to the uninjured side and slinging Spike's arm over his shoulder.

They slowly made their way across the floor, carefully stepping around puddles of gore and bodies. Xander breathed deeply of the fresh, clean air when they finally emerged from the dingy warehouse. The cars and Fred's well equipped van were on the far side of the car park.

Xander grunted when Spike suddenly sagged against his side. Looking down he tightened his
grip as he saw Spike's eyes flutter closed. He gently lifted the unconscious vampire in his arms and joined the others near Fred's medivan. Xander frowned in concern as he realised the vampire weighed even less than when Xander helped him walk across Angel's office just a few short days ago. Angel's look of concern surprised Xander but he gratefully accepted his help in easing Spike down onto one of the small cots in the back of the van.

Fred's brow creased with worry. “What happened?”

“Not sure,” Xander replied, his concern clear in his tone and in the worry lines creasing his face. “One of the demons got him in the side with a blade but he said it wasn't bad. I was helping him back to the cars when he collapsed. Is he gonna be okay?”

Fred carefully lifted Spike's shirt and sucked in a breath at the angry looking wound on his side.

“Looks nasty but Spike was right. It isn't that bad
and he hasn't lost enough blood to cause this type of reaction,” Angel reasoned. “Could the blade have been poisoned?

“Maybe. We should get him back to Medical,” Fred suggested.

Xander frowned not liking the sound of that at all. “You mean Wolfram and Hart?

“Where do you suggest we take him? To the nearest hospital?” Angel asked.

“I see your point,” Xander conceded unhappily. “But I stay with him.”

Fred placed a gentle, comforting hand on his shoulder. “Not a problem and they are the best at this sort of thing. If he's been poisoned they're his best chance.”

Xander was grateful for Fred's reassurance but he didn't trust the law firm. He didn't see any way around it though so he made himself comfortable on the floor of the van next to
Spike's cot and held the too cold hand between his own. He stared stonily out the back doors at the waiting group, daring anyone to say anything. Fred gave him a gentle pat of support as she passed him on her way to the vacant front passenger seat.

“Right then,” Wesley finally said, breaking the stony silence. He shooed the others away as he closed the back doors.

Xander vaguely heard Fred give directions to the driver but his attention was on the still form lying so quietly nearby. He closed his eye and let out a breath he hadn't even realised he'd been holding when the vehicle started to move. Worry gnawed at his thoughts and he kept trying to push them away. Spike was gonna be fine. The Powers wouldn't go through all this trouble to bring him back as a champion only to have this happen after a few short days. Xander wondered how he'd become so attached to Spike in such a short time but then dismissed the thought just as quickly. It didn't matter. Spike was important to him and he was gonna
make damn sure nothing bad happened to him in the house of horrors Angel called work.

~*~

Xander stretched the kinks out of his back as he paced the small room listening to Spike snap and growl at the nurse. Fred had been true to her word and Xander had been allowed to stay with Spike the entire time. Even when the doctors and nurses were swarming around the bed, he hadn't been asked to leave. Xander got to watch from a distance with Fred at his side explaining all the things Xander didn't understand. Turns out that was a lot of things and he was glad she had offered to stay.

Xander had been relieved to find out Spike hadn't been poisoned after all. It turned out the blood loss, although not that significant, had been enough to render the vampire unconscious since he hadn't been eating properly since his reappearance in Angel's office.

The nurse handed Xander a sheet of paper
which Spike had resolutely refused to accept. It was the recommended diet for someone of Spike's height and weight. Xander felt a twinge of guilt when he thought back over the last few days and realised he really should have noticed. He'd been sitting right there when Spike had drank some coke or water but only pushed bits of food around on his plate or idly picked off bits of a sandwich. Xander couldn't recall the vampire actually eating anything other than some of the pizza that first night. No wonder he collapsed after the adrenalin rush of the fight was over.

He turned to where Spike sat with his arms folded and a stubborn look on his face. “Look, I said piss off. 'M over a hundred years old for fuck's sake. I don't need you tellin' me when and what to eat!”

Xander sighed when the nurse shook her head and said, “You talk to him.” She stormed out of the room with a last shake of her head.

“Spike,” Xander said. “You want outta here,
right?”

Spike snorted. “’S not like they can keep me here.”

“Maybe not but I can,” Angel said from the doorway.

Spike glowered at the elder vampire. “Try it.”

“Woah,” Xander said, stepping between them with his hands held up. “Not really the time or the place.

Xander watched in shocked silence as Angel backed down. “You're right Xander. I'm sorry. I'm just worried about him.”

“Oh yeah. Right. Pull the other one Peaches.”

Xander gave Spike a warning glare over his shoulder. “You're not helping.”

“Didn't know I was supposed to,” Spike mumbled like a scolded child. “Just want to get
Xander crossed the room to stand by the bed. “Then let me help you and stop fighting with everyone.”

Spike rolled his eyes, nodded and waved his hand in an 'on you go then' gesture.

“You were right about something else too. You both were,” Angel said stepping farther into the room. “I've gotten so involved in running things around here that I forgot what I was supposed to be fighting for. It felt good to get back out into the field. To help someone.”

“You gonna come clean then?” Spike asked, causing Xander to look at him in astonishment at the gentleness in his voice. Spike shrugged at Xander's enquiring, puzzled look.

“I've called a meeting in my office. They're waiting for me right now but I wanted to tell you first and make sure you were okay. I'm not sure how the Senior Partners are going to react. You
should probably both be gone before the meeting starts.”

“What about you guys?” Xander asked, thinking of Fred and the others. “Is it safe?”

“Safe enough. It's not like we can hide from them anyway but I don't really think they'll make a move against all of us. And I've always had a plan in place just in case. Never thought I might actually need it though.”

“Are you sure?” Xander asked.

“Yes. Now go and take him with you,” Angel said, pointing at Spike who wasted no time in getting up and heading for the door. “Oh and Xander,” Angel added just as Spike's hand closed around the doorknob. The voice was strong and held more than a hint of threat behind the brogue. “I expect ya to take better care o' my boy or I'll be taking it outta ya hide. Do ya understand?”

A shiver ran up Xander's spine and he nodded
wordlessly. Spike stiffened and turned slowly to face the other vampire. “Don't threaten him like that.”

Angel's eyes softened with affection and Xander wondered about the relationship between the two vampires. “Ya don't exactly leave me with any other choice lad,” Angel said softly, sadly. “Ya always were fightin' me every step o' the way.”

Spike grinned and relaxed his stance. “You wouldn't have wanted it any other way.”

“Yer right,” Angel agreed. “Do as I say now and let the boy take care of ya.”

Spike glanced over but Xander, already feeling like an intruder on something deeply personal, had no idea what to say so kept quiet and looked away in embarrassment. It was like watching an intimate moment between family members and Xander supposed maybe that was exactly what this was after all.
Spike's voice finally broke the tense atmosphere of the room. “Fine but you be careful. Who will I bother if somethin' happens to you?”

Angel laughed and shook his head. “You still have the phone Wes gave you?”

“Oh.” Spike pulled the phone out of his trouser pocket and held it out.

Angel waved it away. “Keep it. Now go. I'll be in touch.”

Part Twelve

Xander followed the still scowling vampire through the door of the room letting it swing closed behind him. “Look Spike,” he said, continuing their argument which had started in the car. “All I'm saying is that you do need to eat. I'm not trying to tell you when or what just that you need to, okay?”
Spike rolled his eyes for what seemed like the thousandth time before flopping into one of the chairs at the small table and running his hands over its top in a restless gesture. “Not like I did it on purpose,” he grouched with a long suffering put upon pout.

“I know,” Xander said, putting as much sympathy as he could into the two words without crossing the line into pity. He knew better than to travel the pity road with Spike. It never ended well and was always sure to be loud and rather messy. Xander really didn't want messy right now. He was far too hungry and tired.

“Could maybe have a bit,” Spike mumbled, looking down at the smooth surface under his fingers.

Xander was careful to wipe the triumphant grin off his face before Spike looked up but couldn't resist getting him to admit it again. “What was that?”
Spike squinted his eyes at him but Xander remained impassive. Spike finally grunted and shrugged his shoulders. “Said I could have something.”

“Great,” Xander replied, snagging the menu off the counter. “I'll ring room service and have them send something up.”

Spike pointed a stern finger in his direction. “Only doing this because I'm a bit peckish mind. Not because you lot say I have to.”

Xander nodded along. “Right. I mean all that fighting. I'm starving,” Xander said, turning his attention to the hotel menu. “Oh, how about a nice juicy steak?” Xander bit his lip to keep from laughing when he heard Spike's stomach rumble in response.

For his part, Spike pretended to find the carpet fascinating while his skin took on a distinctly rosy hue. “It'll do I guess.”

They took turns in the shower while waiting for
the food to arrive. Xander felt a whole better after letting the heat of the water ease his aching muscles. Who knew wielding an axe could be so strenuous?

When he came back out dinner had arrived. A nice thick, juicy steak, baked potato with an unhealthy dollop of butter, and broccoli. Yes the Xan-man would eat the broccoli and set a good example for the iron deficient vampire. Huh. A vampire with an iron deficiency. Xander grinned around a mouthful of steak.

He made sure Spike ate at least half his meal while pretending not to and making idle chit chat. He decided his Oscar nomination would be well deserved.

“So how come?” Xander asked suddenly.

Spike looked up from his plate with a frown. “Come again?”

“The starving artist impersonation,” Xander elaborated giving the bit of broccoli on the end
of his fork a twirl for emphasis. “Thought you'd be enjoying all the wonders of Twinkies and Ho Hos.”

Spike did the adorable head tilt thing and Xander wondered when Spike's idiosyncrasies had become adorable. Spike shrugged and took a sip from his bottle of beer. “Don't rightly know. Didn't really think about it. Besides I've always eaten food. A bit here and there.”

“Yeah well. A bit here and there won't cut it any more.”

Spike rolled his eyes which Xander was relieved to discover was just as annoying as ever and most definitely not in the adorable column. “No more lectures okay. Had enough of those from that nurse and Angel. Don't need them from you too.”

Xander shivered at the reminder of Angel's threat. “What was up with him anyway?”

“Who Angel?”
“Yeah. The powers already assigned me to look after you.”

Spike's beer bottle landed on the table with a loud clink. “'M not a dog or some kinda pet.”

“I know, I know,” Xander placated, waving his hands in surrender. “I didn't mean it like that. I just meant he didn't have to get all growly and threaten me.”

Spike shrugged indifferently. “He wasn't actually threatening you.”

Now Xander was really and truly confused. “Kinda sounded like it from where I was standing.”

“It's the way he operates,” Spike explained, pushing away his plate and leaning back in his chair. “Finds a person's weakness then exploits it.”

Xander barked out a laugh of disbelief. “What?
So you're saying me?” He asked, pointing to himself. “I'm your weakness? Sorry Spike but I sorta find that hard to believe. I mean you don't even really like me.” He thought about that for second before asking, “do you?”


Xander grinned back and pushed away his own plate. “Spike. You are such an ass.”

“Ah but you love me anyway.”

“Oh you wish fang-face.”

Spike found something to watch on the TV while Xander cleaned up the remains of their meal. Finished, he scooped up his phone and stretched out on his bed. He looked over at a very relaxed Spike. “I'm gonna check in with Giles. Don't suppose you wanna talk to him?”

Spike didn't bother to lift his head from where it
was propped on the pillow. He just kinda rolled it in Xander's direction. “Think the watcher and I have already said everything that needed sayin' a long time ago.”

Xander only nodded, deciding to choose his battles with Spike wisely. Getting Spike to eat most of his dinner was a good enough victory for one night and Xander was happy with it. Spike had already turned back to whatever he was watching and Xander scrolled through his contact list. He tried to figure the time difference while his finger hovered between the number for the watcher's office and home. He finally hit the button for the office figuring Giles was anal enough to have any important calls forwarded to his house.

Xander watched a car transform into a robot and take out another robot in an explosion of metal and flames while listening to the ring.

“Hello.”

“G-m Giles. It's Xander.”
“Yes I presumed as much. How are things progressing in LA?”

“Good actually. Angel hasn't turned all evil law firm on us after all. There was some kind of contract that he signed so they would protect his son—”

“What? I don't think I heard you correctly. Did you say Angel has a son?”

“Boggles the mind doesn't it? I don't have all the details but apparently a human Darla was involved and a prophecy.”

“Fascinating. You didn't happen to get the name of this prophecy did you?”

“Sorry no but Wesley is going to be in touch after the meeting.”

“The meeting? Perhaps you should start at the beginning?”
Xander sighed. If nosy watchers wouldn't constantly interrupt. “Sure. Angel and Darla had a son. In order to protect him, Angel signed a contract with Wolfram and Hart and he convinced the others to sign one too. The contracts were linked to a spell which made everyone forget the kid existed. Angel agreed because he thought he could fight evil from the inside. Spike and I showed him the error of his ways and he held a meeting earlier today to tell everyone the truth and breaking the spell.”

“It all sounds terribly fascinating. It's a shame you don't have any more details.”

“Like I said, Wesley will be in touch. I think they were planning to go back to that big hotel if things got too hot at the law firm.”

“Very good. It sounds like you've handled things very nicely.”

“Thanks G-ma- iles.”

“I'll still expect a full report upon your return
Xander. And speaking of returning, I'll contact accounting and have tickets purchased and waiting at the front desk by tomorrow morning.”

“Tickets? As in more than one?” Xander asked in a strangled, squeaky voice. His good mood started to quickly evaporate and he slid a nervous glance in Spike's direction wondering exactly how good vamp hearing was.

“I assumed you would be bringing Spike along with you or was that assumption incorrect?”

“No, no. That's fine.” Xander replied ignoring the warning growl from Spike and getting an answer to his vamp hearing question all at the same time. “Thanks. I better go.”

“Yes. Very well then. See you soon. Goodbye Xander.”

“Right. Soon. Bye.” Xander quickly disconnected the call, dumped his phone on the bed and turned to sit on the edge facing the annoyed vampire who was still growling.
“I told you I didn't want to go back there.”

“Spike. Can't you be reasonable for once?”

“Reasonable?” Spike asked pushing himself up and beginning to pace between the bed and the table. “I didn't ask for this. I'm not like Angel lookin' for some kind of soddin' redemption.”

Xander stood and crossed the room, annoyance making his movements stiff and jerky. “Well what the hell do you want then?” He asked, flinging his arms up in exasperation.

Spike stopped and pinned him with a sharp, penetrating look. “I want to be left alone. I didn't ask for any of this. Didn't ask for you to be chasin' after me with all yer high ideals.”

“Jesus do you have to be such a selfish fuck all the time?”

“Go on! Go back to yer girl and leave me the hell alone.”

Any semblance of control Xander had snapped and before he even knew what he was going to do, he'd swung and caught Spike in the side of the head with his fist. The vampire went down and landed next to his bed, cracking his head on the small bedside table on the way down. Propelled by anger, Xander stormed over and got in his face. “She's dead you asshole!”

The looks of shock, remorse and grief which flitted over Spike's face speedily defused Xander's anger leaving him feeling a bit sick.

“Liked the demon bint. I'm sorry.” Spike's voice was small and sad and Xander could swear there were tears pooled in his eyes. It made him feel even worse.

“You didn't know,” Xander pointed out while leaning in to check the back of Spike's head where it connected with the table.
“Still,” Spike objected softly.

Xander frowned over the lump on the back of Spike's head but was relieved to see there was no blood on his fingers. “Still nothing.”

Xander's hands were resting on Spike's shoulders and they were sitting so very close to each other. Close enough for Xander to see the regret in those oh so very wet and very blue eyes. Xander sniffled a bit himself before leaning just that fraction of an inch closer to press his lips to Spike's. The kiss was gentle and sweet and far too innocent for two people who have seen so much.

Xander jerked away with a gasp. “What the hell am I doing? First hitting you then hitting on you.”

Spike offered a small self deprecating little smile. “Not the first time you've hit me and probably won't be the last.”

Xander felt a wash of shame as he remembered
all the other times he'd struck out at the vampire. The guilt slumped his shoulders.

“Hey it's okay. Vampire here. Didn't exactly hurt. Well... much at any rate.”

Xander tried futilely to get his mind around the fact that the person or vampire he'd just hit was trying to make him feel better. “Doesn't make the way I treated you right though does it?”

Spike shrugged. “You got your cues from Buffy is all. Got it down real well now what with the kissing an' all.”

Xander peered closely at the vampire. “What? What does that even mean Spike?”

“Way it always was between us. Buffy and me. A few rounds of kick the Spike was just a bit of foreplay.”

“You mean?” Xander didn't sit so much as let his ass hit the floor and stop his downward fall. “No! I don't wanna hear this. That is. That is just
so wrong on so many levels.”

Spike's smile was crooked and wistful. “Was Buffy though wasn't it,” he said it as if it explained everything and made it all right.

Xander reached across and laid a hand on Spike's arm. He tried to convey his sorrow not only for the way he had treated Spike but for the obviously doomed and violent relationship between the vampire and the slayer as well. “No Spike. It doesn't make it all right. It doesn't make it right at all. Buffy should never have treated you like that. You weren't a punching bag for her to use whenever she got angry and needed to work off some steam. And I was wrong too. At the time I was angry and it doesn't make what you did right but I never should have hit you when you couldn't even defend yourself and I shouldn't have hit you tonight.”

Spike did that adorable head tilt again. “Who are you and what have you done with Xander?”

Xander grunted out a small laugh at that. “I like
to think I've grown up a bit.”

“So,” Spike began, “you're sorry for hitting me?”
Xander nodded. “But you're not sorry for kissing me?”

Xander's face suddenly felt hot and he quickly jumped to his feet. “Wow. Is that the time? Bed! I think I'm gonna go to bed.” He fled back to the other side of the room. He could hear Spike chuckling behind him but was too embarrassed to look. He climbed under the covers and prayed for sleep. He could hear Spike moving about the room, turning off the television and the lights and then climbing into bed. He nearly jumped out of his skin when Spike spoke.

“Night Xander.”


He could hear Spike snickering in the darkness. He was never gonna get any sleep. His mind swirled, refusing to rest. Spike! He'd kissed
Spike. God! He'd actually kissed Spike. And liked it. A happy sigh escaped his lips. His Spike kissed lips. Oh god! He was doomed.

Part Thirteen

Xander blinked his eye and began a full body stretch but the movement was aborted by a twinge from his abused muscles. A hiss of pain escaped as he carefully moved his arms which had stiffened noticeably while he slept.

“Feeling a bit sore?”

Xander turned his head and squinted at the vampire who was sitting by the window. “You could say that,” Xander allowed as he sat up with a groan. “But I'm thinking it would be a huge understatement. I feel like I've been folded, spindled and mutilated.” Maybe jumping into the fight all at once had been a mistake.

Spike nodded at him knowingly. “'T's the adrenalin that does it.”
“Huh?”

“Wading into a fight like that gets the blood pumping and the adrenalin rushing through your system. Great feeling that. Makes you think you could take on the world,” Spike said with a grin.

Xander remembered feeling terrified and yet at the same time he had felt like he was riding an incredible high and nothing could stop him. “Yeah,” he agreed.

“You never get that before? You know, when you were patrolling with Buffy and such.”

Xander thought about the question for a minute but he honestly couldn't recall anything other than hysteria and a determination not to fail. He shook his head. “Nope. This is a first for me.” Spike tilted his head and pinned him with a look which made Xander feel like a bug under a microscope. “What?” He asked the staring vampire.

“Trying to figure out if you're incredibly brave or
just incredibly stupid. You're tellin' me you went out there night after night even though you were scared silly?"

Xander shrugged. It was just the way it was, the way it had always been. Buffy, Willow, and Giles needed and counted on him and he did his best not let them down. Xander realised the list could even include Spike now too. They were his family. More of a family than his real one. No. Those people he left behind a long time ago weren't his real family just the one he was born into. Who says you can't choose your family. Xander grinned but didn't know what to say so he only nodded a bit.

A look of surprise flitted across Spike's face before being replaced by something Xander could only describe as respect. If Xander hadn't already been lying down, he thought he very probably would have fainted. “You really are the slayer's white knight, aren't ya?”

Xander looked down at his feet in embarrassment. “Whatever,” he said with a
wave of his hand. Because it had happened so rarely, he had never actually learned how to handle a compliment and combine it with having come from Spike and it was almost overwhelming. He escaped to the bathroom for a shower and left Spike perusing the breakfast menu. If anything he hoped it would encourage the vampire to eat a bit more. Spike had always been on the lean side but Xander remembered how light Spike felt when he'd carried him to Fred's van. He didn't like it and swore he'd make sure Spike put on at least ten pounds.

The hot water did a lot to loosen up Xander's stiff muscles and he felt a whole lot better when he came back out to join Spike at the table. He inhaled the delicious aroma of hot pancakes while he sat and reached for the sweet maple syrup. He cut himself a bite using the side of his fork, stabbed it and popped it in his mouth. Closing his eye, he moaned in orgasmic delight as the delicious, sweet taste burst across his tongue.

Getting the prickly feeling of being watched, he
looked over at Spike, who raised an eyebrow in question. “You two wanna be alone?”

Xander nearly choked on his pancake. “NO!” He shouted, shaking his head and laughing. “No. It's just so good.”

“Right,” Spike agreed but in a tone which clearly meant he didn't agree at all.

Deciding he'd been embarrassed enough for one morning, Xander changed the subject. “What do you want to do today?”

Spike looked up from his plate in surprise. “Thought you were heading back?”

“Eventually but I figure the Council owes me a good bit of time off with pay. So what do you say? Wanna play tourist?”

Spike looked longingly out the window at the bright rays of sunshine before turning back with a neutral expression. “Could do. Yeah. Sure. Why not?” He said it as if it didn't matter but
Xander knew better.

What must it be like to have been denied all that heat and light for so long and suddenly have it given back? Xander knew if it had been him, he would want to spend the whole day outside. He didn't know why exactly but he wanted to be the one to give this to Spike.

“Great as soon as we finish we can head down to the waterfront. There's some great shops and the beach. Oh and there's this really fantastic place I know of that makes the most delicious onion rings.”

“You always think with your stomach?”

“Hey. After what happened I would've thought you’d learned the importance of a balanced diet.”

Spike snorted. “Onion rings and Twinkies?”

Xander brushed off the good natured criticism with a grin. “Whatever. You ready?”
They cleaned up, grabbed what they needed and headed out with the Council credit card.

Spike had always looked beautiful and even Xander had acknowledged that before his more recently discovered feelings. But nothing had prepared him for the sight of Spike standing in the light of day. Xander knew he was staring as Spike made his way across the car park to the rental car but he couldn't help it. Spike looked ethereal and otherworldly with the bright rays of sunshine reflecting off his pale skin and hair. Bright blue eyes twinkled and sparkled and Xander noticed there were tiny little lines at the corners because Spike was smiling. Xander smiled too.

They headed to the board-walk first and browsed their way through the shops. They inhaled the salty, tangy scent of the ocean which drifted in with the soft breeze through the open doors while they looked at beach wear and trinkets designed to attract the money from a traveller's pockets. Xander grinned as he
selected a key chain with the original Enterprise dangling on the end. Spike shook his head and wandered off to a display of designer sunglasses. When Xander joined him and saw him in a pair of classic Ray-Bans, he thought the hell with it and bought them despite the price. They bought presents for the girls and Giles and even though Spike said he wasn't going back, he helped select each and every one.

Locking the bags in the car, they went to the Crab Shack and ate onion rings and drank root beer which Spike said tasted like mouthwash. Xander only laughed at the face Spike made and laughed harder when the vampire scowled at him. Then they had used one of those little huts to change into their new swimwear before dancing their way across the hot sand because they'd already locked their shoes in the car and had forgotten to buy anything else. Xander had insisted on practically drowning Spike in sunscreen, afraid the pale skin would burn under the hot sun, before they went to run along the waters edge. They swam and splashed each other and were asked to join a game of
volleyball. Their side won the game but by unspoken mutual agreement they begged off playing another and went and flopped in an exhausted sprawl on their towels instead.

Xander couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so content and happy and he marvelled that it was in part because of who he was with. He turned his head and watched Spike as he lay basking in the heat of the sun. He finally examined the feelings he'd run away from last night. He still felt a sense of shame for hitting Spike when he was angry, even if the vampire had said it didn't matter. Xander had sworn to never become like his parents, his father, and it was one of the major reasons for his break up with Anya.

Xander sighed. Anya. Lorne had said she wanted him to move on and hinted about a possible relationship between himself and Spike. What did it mean though? Was it the right thing to do? What would Buffy think? Did it matter?

Xander was surprised to feel a hand on his
shoulder and was even more surprised to realise he must have fallen asleep. He opened his eye and couldn't help but grin back at the handsome blonde hovering above him. “We both fall asleep?” he asked pushing up on his elbows and looking around. The crowd had thinned considerably and the wind coming off the water was much cooler signalling the oncoming evening.

“Yeah,” Spike agreed. “All that heat. It just felt so damn good.”

Xander's eye widened in concern when he took a good look at Spike. His skin was taking on a distinct reddish hue and Xander kicked himself for not remembering the need to reapply the sunscreen. “C'mon Blondie. Lets get you back to the hotel and we'll pick up some aloe on the way.”

Spike's brow crinkled in puzzlement. “Aloe?”

Xander gently stroked his fingers across the reddened skin and frowned at the heat he felt.
“You've gotten a burn.”

Spike looked down and pressed a hand to his chest before yanking it away with a small noise of pain. “Wonder if I can tan?”

Xander thought about the question but didn't have an answer. “I have no idea but it looks like you're gonna find out.”

After shaking the sand out of the towels, they trudged their way back to the car through the sand. It seemed harder going than when they first arrived but at least it was much cooler. They made a quick stop at the small store on the corner where Xander purchased some aloe, snacks, and beer thinking a nice night watching a movie would be the perfect ending to the day. Spike agreed, but only if he could pick the film, and he helped Xander carry everything back up to their room.

Xander shooed Spike off for a shower warning the vampire to keep the temperature down while he got things set up. He grinned and shook
his head when he heard the yelp even through the closed door. Silly vamp! Spike obviously hadn't listened to the advice. Xander studied the two beds thoughtfully for a few minutes. He finally threw up his hands and thought the hell with it before sliding them together. It looked much better without the gap between them. The door opened behind him and he dared a peek at Spike's reaction to his redecorating.

Spike stared at the beds and then nodded in acceptance. He climbed up on his bed and winced as his back came in contact with the pillows.

“Sore?” Xander asked.

Spike moved a bit and grimaced as his red skin brushed across the material. “Yeah,” he confirmed with a small pout.

“Here,” Xander said, grabbing the bottle of aloe and climbing up next to Spike. “Lie on your stomach.”
Spike gingerly rolled over while Xander squeezed a generous dollop into the palm of his hand. He smoothed the gel over the heated skin as gently as he could not wanting to cause any more pain. Spike sucked in a small, sharp breath through his teeth and then let out a soft sigh as the gel began to have a cooling effect.

“Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Spike mumbled.

Xander let himself get lost in the feel of the smooth skin under his hands. The feel of the muscles and the hairs so small and light they couldn't be seen but only felt. He continued down over the large muscles in Spike's thighs which hinted at a nicely shaped ass. Xander wished the swimsuit he'd purchased for the vampire had been smaller and he could imagine rubbing his hands over the firm globes. He shook himself out of his fantasy and asked Spike to roll over and applied the gel to his chest and legs even though Spike could probably manage the front himself. Spike didn't object and gave
Xander's arm a tug when he finished. The motion brought them face to face. Xander studied the languid blue eyes unsure of what to do.

“Thank you,” Spike whispered as he leaned closer and pressed their lips gently together.

Xander's toes curled and his stomach fluttered as soft lips slid over his. He sighed and a warm, wet tongue licked along his bottom lip. He boldly licked back and slipped his tongue inside when Spike obliged by opening his mouth. He felt Spike's hands playing with the hair at the nape of his neck and he grasped the slim body to pull Spike closer. A squeak of pain broke the moment and Xander jumped off the bed almost falling on his arse in his haste.

“Sorry. I forgot.”

“'T's okay,” Spike said with a happy contented smile. “I'm fine. Not used to it is all.”

Xander nodded and jerked a thumb over his
shoulder. “I'm gonna go take a quick shower. Why don't you pick a movie?”

“On ya go,” Spike said with a wave of his hand.

Xander wandered off to the bathroom in a blissful haze, rubbing his fingers back and forth over his lips. Spike kissed me. He nearly poked himself in his remaining eye when he walked into the door and knocked his elbow up. He shut the door on Spike's laughter. Stupid vampire and his stupid, daze inducing vampire lips.

By the time Xander reappeared, Spike was happily engrossed in a Doctor Who marathon. Xander thought the Doctor was okay and a much better choice than some of the other things Spike had forced him to watch over the years so he was content join him without complaint. Xander grabbed a couple of beers from the small fridge and climbed up on his own bed. He passed a beer to Spike and snagged some chips out of the bag near Spike's hip.

Xander looked up at the screen. “Oh! Daleks. I
like them.”

“That Davros bloke isn't too bad,” Spike observed.

They watched the show with the occasional comment and although they had already slept for several hours that afternoon, they were both soon nodding off to sleep. Blonde strands mixed with darker brown as they instinctively sought each other out and cuddled together. Spike's contented features however, were a contrast to Xander's creased brow as a vision intruded on his dreams.

Xander found himself standing outside at night in what looked like a graveyard. He could see a large stone crypt over on his left but the rest of the nearby structures and gravestones were indistinct shapes in the swirling fog. He shivered with the cold and rubbed his hands briskly over his arms to create some heat. He stilled when he thought he heard a sound from inside the crypt. He crept closer and along the side until he came to a dirty, arched window. It was difficult to see
through but he could make out the forms of about a half dozen of what looked like a mixture of people and demons. He recognised some of the species but not all and tried to commit the distinctive features to memory. He leaned his ear closer to the cracked glass to see if he could hear any more sounds from inside. The words were muffled and he had to strain to hear what was being said.

“What is it you hope to accomplish by all this?”

“You dare to question me?”

“I beg your pardon my liege but these simple beings do not understand your true importance.”

“I don't ask for excuses and I don't expect to be questioned.”

“Look Alvaro, if you want our help finding the key then you'll answer my questions.”

Xander sucked in a sharp breath at the word key
and pulled away from the window. He struggled to see the room more clearly and almost growled in frustration when it didn't help. He gave up trying to see and listened once more.

“...dimension and world domination.”

“Are you talking hegemony?”

“The worlds will be ours. Starting with this one. I will be the leader and humans will be our slaves. Now find me that key!”

Xander woke with a start dislodging Spike who'd been snuggling against his shoulder.

“Wha?” Spike asked sleepily.

Xander shivered even though the room was hot, almost stifling. “Dawn. I think someone is gonna hurt Dawn.”
Xander followed Spike through the doors of the hotel peering over the blonde's shoulder at the large lobby. He took in the grand surroundings noting the large reception desk on one side, the comfortable looking round couch in the middle and the sweeping staircase. Overall it was an impressive place and he vaguely wondered if perhaps Angel would allow visitors from the Council to stay here. It would certainly save some money and make things easier considering most of their trips consisted of things they would rather the general public not be aware. He'd need to remember to ask before they left to catch their flight.

“Well hello there you two,” Lorne greeted them as he exited one of the many doors and came around the desk. “Angel said you'd be dropping by. Oh my aren't we looking good, Precious. A little colour suits you.”

Lorne gave them each a hug as if greeting long
lost family. Xander returned his with a grin which got even bigger as he watched Spike scowling in annoyance but still allowing the green demon to wrap him in his arms. Wesley and Angel joined them as Lorne led them to a seat on the couch.

“Nice to see you again,” Wesley said with a nod as he went to stand next to Lorne. “Why don't we get our guests some refreshments, Lorne?” he asked before turning back to the couch. “Can we get you anything? Tea? Blood, perhaps?”

Xander barely kept in a snort of laughter. When had it become normal to offer a guest blood? He could never claim his life was dull. “Got any coke?”

“I believe we do,” Wesley responded. “Angel? Spike?”

“Don't suppose there's any of the good stuff around here?” Spike asked hopefully. “Got a long flight ahead of us and I'm not sure I'm looking forward to it.”
Xander frowned at this but didn't say anything. He knew Spike had agreed to return to England because of the possible threat to Dawn but a part of him had hoped that maybe, just maybe, Spike wanted to come back so they could spend more time together. Not that there was anything happening. A few snuggles and kisses didn't really amount to a relationship but Xander was kinda hoping that perhaps it was the start of something more. Dismissing his own foolishness, he tuned back into the conversation when he heard his name. “Sorry. What was that?”

Angel looked at him fondly which was so odd it made him squirm a bit. “I asked if there was anything I could do to help?”

Xander shook his head and shrugged. “Thanks for the offer but until we do some research, we're not even sure what the threat is.”

Wesley and Lorne returned from the kitchen and passed out drinks. Xander took his coke
with a nod before opening the can. It gave a hiss when he popped the tab and he slurped at the liquid around the rim.

“Are you sure everything's gonna be okay here?” Spike asked from beside him.

“As sure as we can be,” Angel said. “I think if the senior partners were going to make a move they would have done it before now.”

“I believe they have more important concerns,” Wesley concurred. “Compared to the countless others, demons and otherwise, with whom they have dealings, I would presume we are of little consequence. A minor irritant at best.”

“I've also had them work the pipes for me and we all have a future full of sparkling possibilities,” Lorne added. “I also have a strong suspicion we will be seeing you two again,” he finished with a wink.

“Spike?” Wesley asked, getting the vampire's attention. “I have some things which might be of
use if you could join me in the library?”

Spike rolled his eyes and leaned in to whisper in Xander's ear. “I think the great Poof is wanting an audience with ya pet. You all right with that?”

Xander pulled back and glanced over at Angel who shifted around uncomfortably. “I only want to talk,” Angel said to Spike.

“Are you all right with that?” Spike asked again, ignoring Angel.

Xander looked between them wondering if he would ever understand their strange relationship and not entirely sure he wanted to when it came right down to it. “I'll be fine,” Xander reassured the concerned vampire seated next to him almost vibrating with tension. Xander felt a tiny twinge of pleasure at this small sign that Spike cared. Spike crossed the room and cast a last look over his shoulder before following Wesley through a doorway. Xander turned back to the vampire left in the
room. “So. You...ah, you wanted to talk?”

Angel nodded and joined Xander on the couch taking the seat Spike had so recently vacated. “I noticed you and Spike had become closer and..." Angel trailed off waving a hand in the air between them.

Xander's forehead scrunches up in confusion but quickly cleared when he remembered an earlier conversation. “It's the sniffing thing again isn't it?” Xander accused. “I told you guys to stop doing that. How many different ways do I have to tell you how gross that is not to mention the invasion of privacy?”

Angel looked like he was trying to hold back a smile. “Uh, sorry?”

Xander felt the heat of a blush creep slowly across his skin and decided to let it go. Embarrassing himself once a day fulfilled his quota, there was no need to add to it. “Whatever.”
“I am sorry. I didn't mean to pry. I couldn't really help but notice and I know I gave Spike's care over to you.”

“About that. I mean why? Why me? I'm not exactly your greatest fan and I didn't think you were mine either.”

“You're right. We've never been what you would call friends but I do trust you and that includes trusting you with something which is very important to me.”

“And that's Spike? I'm sorry Angel but I'm finding all this kinda hard to believe.”

“You don't have to believe me Xander just do as I ask.”

Xander had heard enough double talk. “No.”

Angel's jaw nearly hit the floor. “What?”

“You heard me,” Xander replied, holding his ground. He wanted some answers for a change.
“I said no. You want me to do this then I wanna know why?"

Angel seemed to wage an internal war before heaving a sigh and running his hands through his hair messing up his normally perfect style. “Fine,” he said in exasperation. “You want answers? All right then. It all comes down to family and he's the only real family I have left. We may fight and argue but what family doesn't? Spike is annoying and aggravating and funny and smart and annoyingly reliable. He tends to jump into things without thinking things through. He's always felt far too much than was good for him and he needs looking after.” Angel's voice had started out strong and tapered off to a nostalgic, distracted whisper at the end of his tirade.

Xander had a sudden revelation like a light clicking on in a dark room followed by a stab of jealousy. “You? You love him, don't you?”

“Yes,” Angel confirmed before shaking his head. “No, it's not what you think. He's like my very
own childe. I raised him when Drusilla couldn't. Taught him everything he knows.”

“So you're what? Like his Dad?”

Angel shrugged. “If it makes it easier for you to understand then yes.”

“I'm not sure I'll ever understand,” Xander sighed.

“But you'll do it. You'll watch out for him?”

“Yeah Angel,” Xander agreed, sounding reluctant even though he had fully intended to agree all along. It wasn't exactly a hardship for him to look after Spike after all.

“Thank you,” Angel said with a sincerity Xander found disturbing as it made him almost like the vampire.

“Thank you for what?” Spike asked, coming back into the room with Wesley.
Angel waved away Spike's concerns and made an excuse of asking Xander to deliver some things to Giles and Buffy. Spike raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Xander figured it was easier to go along than risk causing a scene. Telling Spike could wait until they were away from the Hyperion and he could ask Spike to confirm what Angel had told him. He only hoped he could do it without making Spike upset or angry. Spike seemed to be adjusting to his new status fairly well but he was still a little volatile and even though he didn't say anything, Xander knew Spike was still experiencing nightmares.

They said their goodbyes and Angel even shook his hand and gave Spike a hug which made Xander even more determined to ask Spike about his relationship with the vampire. They returned the rental car and took a cab to the airport. On the ride over Xander handed Spike some paperwork which had been sent over special delivery. He grinned when Spike gaped at the British passport and driver's licence inside.
"Surprise! How did you think you were gonna get on the plane?"

"Hadn't actually thought about it." Spike stared again at the papers in his hands. "How did you..."

“How did I what?” Xander asked leaning closer to see Spike running his finger back and forth over the shiny surface where the name had been printed. “Oh the name?” Xander asked remembering a long ago night in the graveyard when a headstone bearing the name Bradley had helped save his life. “Someone with that name helped saved my life one night. Thought it was kinda fitting in a strange sorta way.” Xander worried over Spike's continued silence, thinking maybe he'd done something wrong. “If you don't like it we can change it when we get back?”

“No! No, it's fine. Just surprised is all.”

“You sure?”
Spike only nodded and put the papers away for safekeeping. The taxi pulled up outside the airport and they went inside to wait in lines and then for their flight to be called. It was all a bit surreal and Xander was torn between being happy to be going back to what was now his home to not wanting to go back and have to share Spike with anyone else. Up until now he'd had Spike all to himself and he wondered at all these new feelings of jealousy which Angel had awakened and insecurity at the thought of Spike seeing Buffy again. Xander shook off his thoughts when a voice announced their flight was ready for boarding. Looked like he didn't have a choice any more.

“C'mon Spike,” he said, tugging gently at Spike's sleeve to get his attention. “Let's go home.”
“First class love?” Spike asked in surprise.

Xander smiled, pleased at the happy grin on Spike's face. “Yeah, well. Thought we'd be more comfortable and the Council can afford it.”

Spike paused with his bag half in the overhead compartment and looked at Xander with a trademark raised eyebrow. “Stuffy, anal retentive men in tweed rolling in dough? Well colour me surprised,” he said sarcastically.

Xander laughed and shrugged good naturedly. They both settled into the plush, comfortable seats, Xander allowing Spike to precede him and have the window seat. He'd already seen plenty of fluffy white and endless blue and figured Spike would probably enjoy it more anyway.

Spike immediately started exploring the pamphlets and glossy magazines while trying to take in all the action going on outside the small window at the same time. His eyes followed the many vehicles which zoomed about between planes carrying luggage and food and the men in
reflective vests carrying brightly coloured signal batons and communicating in their odd waving catch-as-catch-can code while his fingers moved restlessly over unread pages.

The plane took off without incident and the view changed from an airport bustling with activity to a city which looked deceptively small from their ever reaching height before levelling off and heading for their ultimate destination. Both men turned from the view outside when a familiar voice spoke up near Xander's ear.

“Xander! It's so nice to see you again.”

Xander turned and his face lit up with recognition and delight at seeing the pretty air hostess again. “Elaine, hi. It's nice to be here.”

She leaned closer and placed a hand on his arm, delicate fingers stroking softly over his shirt sleeve. “Would you like me to bring you one of those beers you like so much?”

Xander frowned when he heard a soft growl
coming from beside him and shot Spike a quizzical look. The blonde reached over and tugged on Xander's hand breaking his contact with the pretty young woman. “Sounds good. Be a love and toddle off 'n fetch us both one,” Spike announced with a wave of his free hand.

Elaine looked a bit taken aback at first but quickly composed herself. “Of course,” she said giving them an understanding smile. “I didn't realise. I'll be right back.” She tipped them a wink over her shoulder before she disappeared behind the dark blue curtains.

Xander wanted to ask her what she meant but Spike was still holding his hand. Instead, he decided to simply bask in the time he had left to spend alone with the vampire. The soft, almost warm skin brushing against his own felt good and was sending tingles all up and down his arm. If someone had told Xander that he would not only willingly want to spend time with Spike but actually enjoy it this much, he never would have believed it. Nope. Not for all the money in the Council coffers.
And now? Xander was dreading the possibility of losing the closeness which was forming between them. He thought, maybe, it might be a good idea to remind Spike of his promise to spar and train with him. Spending time rolling around together all hot and sweaty suddenly sounded like an extremely good idea and not just because he wanted to test out the limits of his merging with the hyena.

“So...uhm...when we get back do you think we could maybe set up a schedule or something?” 'Real smooth Xan-man' Xander thought giving himself a mental head slap. “For sparring and training,” he added when Spike gave him a blank look.

“With everything going on we never did get around to checking out exactly what you can do, did we?”

“Nope,” Xander confirmed. “The Academy has an awesome training room. You're gonna love it.”
Spike squirmed in his seat. “Not sure I fancy working out in a room full of slayers.”

Xander gave the hand in his a reassuring squeeze. “No worries. I know all the best times to go when it'll be pretty much deserted and then there's the grounds we can use.”

“Sounds like you've got it all worked out, pet,” Spike observed with a small smile playing about his lips.

Xander blushed and wondered if he'd overstepped some imaginary line he hadn't even known existed. He'd never been in a relationship – if what they had could be called a relationship – with another man before. Were there rules? And stages? Like with girls. Xander's mind swirled with questions until he felt the jab of a pointy elbow to the ribs. “Sorry.”

“'S okay. What ya thinking about? Could practically see the gears turning.”
Knowing he couldn't possibly tell Spike exactly what he'd been thinking he decided on what he hoped, possibly and with fingers crossed, would be a safer topic. “I'm sure you know Angel didn't really ask me to deliver any messages or anything to Giles and Buffy, right?”

Spike snorted. “Angel never has been exactly subtle which is odd considering the games Angelus used to play and how bloody good he was at them. So what did he want then?”

Xander breathed a sigh of relief at Spike's apparent willingness to talk about Angel. “He asked me to look after you again.”

Spike only grunted and looked out the window.

“He said you're important to him. That you're family.”

Spike turned back, eyes sparking with anger, hand holding so tight to Xander's it was bordering on painful but whatever he was going to say was interrupted when Elaine returned
with their drinks. Xander wasn't sure if he'd ever been happier to see a beer in all his life. They both nodded their thanks and Xander took a large refreshing sip.

"'M sorry," Spike offered, rubbing his fingers soothingly over Xander's hand and wrist. “The big Poof always manages to get me riled up. Especially when he starts talking about family, ya know? If family was so important then why the hell did he abandon me and Dru all those years ago? Left us to fend for ourselves he did. Maybe he thought Darla would look after us but I don't rightly see how. Always was a grade A bitch. Anyway, that's neither here nor there. I doubt he was all that concerned.”

“When he said it,” Xander objected, “If you could have seen him. He meant it, ya know? I believed him. He...he loves you in a weird vampire kinda way.” Xander bit his lip and waited, hoping he still had a chance with this totally amazing person he was only starting to get to know. He looked everywhere except at Spike, the feeling of butterflies dancing in his
stomach making him feel slightly ill.

Spike studied him carefully, cold blue eyes softening and warming with affection. “I suppose in his own way maybe he does. He was more like a sire to me than Dru most of the time. Taught me everything and there was a time I wanted nothing more than for him to be proud of me.”

Xander had never been able to understand what the books and Giles said about vampire lore but this? This he understood. Having grown up with a father who was constantly disappointed with whatever he did, he knew exactly how Spike felt and his heart ached for the vampire. “I think I understand. My Dad wasn't exactly easy to please. More like impossible.”

Spike set aside his drink and Xander closed his eye as gentle fingers caressed the skin of his cheek. “I believe you do pet and I'm sorry for that.”

Xander opened his eye and gave Spike a small,
sad smile. “Doesn't matter. They're gone and I...I'd like to think I'm not that person any more. The scared little boy who struggled along and lost a string of odd jobs he took just to pay for the privilege of living in a basement.”

“You're right. You've grown up but you were always better than that. Always worth somethin' Xan and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Xander felt an odd mixture of embarrassment, pride and happiness when he heard those words and he hid himself and his smile behind his beer. The inflight movie started and by silent agreement they settled in to watch, still holding hands and leaning towards each other. Halfway through the movie Xander noticed Spike had fallen asleep and Elaine was kind enough to bring some pillows and a soft, warm blanket the same shade of blue as the curtains. After making sure Spike was comfortable, Xander snuggled underneath and promptly fell asleep with Spike firmly tucked against his side.

They both woke up when the wheels of the
plane bounced and squeaked as they came in contact with the tarmac. Xander watched as Spike tried to smooth the curls which had sprung loose while he slept. Xander was secretly pleased to note that after mentioning he preferred the curls, Spike had been using far less gel and the result was a much softer looser look. Xander thought it suited him very nicely. Xander ran a hand through his own hair, finger combing it into submission. A few bumps, a yawn and an announcement later and they were ready to disembark.

As they waited beside the conveyor for their luggage to appear, Xander had a moment of panic as he realised he had no idea who was picking them up. He turned when he felt a hand on his arm.

“What's wrong?” Spike asked with concern. “Look like you've seen a ghost.”

“No,” Xander answered although he wondered if maybe he had. A ghost of a love past. How could he have forgotten about Buffy? Would she have
insisted on coming to the airport? He clearly remembered the declaration she'd made to Spike as they stood in the hellmouth, their fingers entwined. “I'm fine. Just realised I'd forgotten to ask who was meeting us. Don't want one of the newbies getting stake happy.”

Spike looked like he didn't entirely believe it but Xander was saved by the arrival of their bags. Xander sighed and led the way through the milling crowds of people. As they neared the glass doors a large smile spread across his face as he spotted a head of familiar red hair. Willow waved an arm when she saw them and skipped easily through the crowd. She flung her arms around his neck.

“Xander! Welcome home! I've missed you.”

Xander squeezed her back. “Missed you too Wills.”

She stepped back and took in an oddly nervous Spike who was standing awkwardly beside him.
“Red,” Spike said softly.

She smiled and pulled the shocked vampire into a hug. “I've missed you too,” she said into his neck. “And I'm not the only one.”

Xander caught the pleased smile on Spike's face before the vampire hid it in the long tresses of her hair. The butterflies were banging away and his feet wanted to drag as they made their way to the car park. Willow kept up a string of chatter all the way out of the city and Xander tried to give all the right answers in all the right places. All too soon they were pulling up outside the Watcher Academy. They had no sooner gotten out of the car and retrieved their bags when the front door flew open and Dawn came running down the steps her brown hair flying out behind her.

“Spike!” She squealed, jumping up and wrapping her arms about his neck. “I thought... and then...I'm so, so sorry,” she sobbed.

Spike wrapped his arms around her and crooned
nonsense words of comfort into her hair. Xander's heart warmed to see them reunited. The two always seemed to get each other and Dawn had been heartbroken when Buffy had told her Spike hadn't made it out of the hellmouth. The warmth in Xander's heart suddenly turned cold when he heard a step on the gravel drive behind him. He didn't need to turn around to know it was Buffy. The look on Spike's face was proof enough.

He watched quietly as bright, blue eyes met green and a lone tear slowly made its way down Buffy's cheek. Spike reached up a hand and brushed away the wetness with his thumb.

“For me?” Spike asked quietly.

Buffy smiled and nuzzled into his hand. “Stupid vampire.”

Xander looked away with a tear in his eye and vowed to do his best to be happy for them.
Xander caught Willow giving him one of her concerned little frowns. He shrugged and made some excuse about long flights as he grabbed for their discarded luggage which was still sitting next to the open boot of the car. When he looked back up, Dawn was dragging everyone inside and shouting for him to hurry up. Spike joined him and took some of the bags from his hands. Their fingers brushed together lightly and caused small shivers of pleasure to run down his spine.

“Apparently the Niblet has organised a small dinner party,” Spike said with a lopsided grin. “She assures me it's for Scoobies only.”

No wonder Spike was grinning. He'd always wanted to be included and now, finally, he was. And why did that make Xander sad and happy all at the same time? Xander straightened with his share of the bags in his hands and shook off his growing melancholy. He had a party to go to.

“C'mon before all those little slayers smell the food and decide to crash,” Xander teased.
Spike's eyes went wide. “They wouldn't?!”

Xander laughed. “No but the look on your face.” Xander laughed again and ducked when Spike made a half-hearted attempt to swat him with one of the many bags dangling from his hands.

Xander invited Spike inside when they got to the door and they made their way to the small parlour the Scoobies had claimed for their own personal use saying they needed some space away from all those slayers. Giles had, after surprisingly little argument, given in to their demands for a private space. Xander thought the poor, overwrought watcher needed a place to hide from all those giggling girls too but would never admit it.

It was a cosy room with an old fireplace against one wall flanked by built in book shelves stuffed with what Giles lovingly referred to as many of the classics. There was a stereo in one corner and an old fashioned bar in another. Small tables were interspersed among the couches
and chairs with their big, fluffy cushions. It should have seemed crowded but it wasn't. The tables, which normally held books, drinks and cd cases, were now topped with trays of various types of food. There were trays of small sandwiches, and one of crackers baked in exotic shapes with pretty looking toppings and one with some strange fruit Xander didn't recognise. There was some soft, rock music playing in the background but not so loud as to make talking difficult.

Xander was impressed by Dawn's arrangements and her cleverness in making it a small Scooby only type affair. Spike for his part looked relieved at not having to face a lot of curious stares and questions. The vampire was still a bit withdrawn and quiet since his return. Xander wondered if it was because of what he experienced while he was gone or if maybe it was because of the soul. Perhaps it is both.

Leaving their luggage by the door, they carried the bags with the gifts they had purchased for everyone over to the couch. They handed out
each gift in turn to lots of ohh and ahhs. Dawn was ecstatic to receive a pretty, handmade necklace made of shells and beads and Buffy frowned over the bit of driftwood in her hands until Xander explained how he wanted to carve her a new Mr Pointy since she'd lost the original back in Sunnydale. Willow received a bracelet of yellow beads with a willow tree charm which dangled over the curve of her wrist and brushed against the back of her hand. She flashed them both a happy smile before running her fingers over the flowing branches of the delicate charm. Giles added his present to his collection of classics with a heartfelt thank you and a sincere welcome back for Spike. Spike nodded in return and Xander hoped that meant there were no hard feelings on either side. Presents opened, they milled about nibbling at food and sipping drinks between talking and catching up.

Xander saw Willow approaching with her concerned, little frown firmly in place once again and Xander was reminded that while he had been watching the painful sight of Buffy and Spike reuniting, Willow had been watching him.
She no doubt had noticed the tears pooled in his eye and had some questions.

“Hey,” she said rubbing a hand soothingly up and down his arm. “It's nice to have you home.”

He offered her a small smile in return. “It's nice to be here.”

A small line appeared between her brows and her eyes searched his curiously. “Is it? Because you didn't look all that happy when we were outside earlier.”

He squirmed and wanted to make excuses and he really hated being the cause of that worry line. He looked over to see where Spike was and the answer must have been plain for her to see because she sucked in a shocked breath and said, “Oh Xander! No!”

“I know, I know. Stupid right? I mean if you had a choice between me and Buff? Not exactly a tough choice is it? Kinda a no brainer really.”
“Xander, that's not true. You have plenty to offer. I'm just not sure that Spike is ... he's been through a lot Xan.”

“It's kinda funny. All those years when Giles kept telling us that vampires and demons can't love and Spike telling us he could. I mean, I was always firmly on the side of not and now? Now that I've seen for myself and know that it wasn't just obsession. That it was something truer. Demons really can love Willow. And so now that I finally believe what Spike had been saying all these years... well, let's just say it's pretty bad timing on my part.” Xander turned away not wanting Willow to see the pain in his eye.

“How do you know?” She asked pulling on his arm until he faced her again.

He looked at her in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“How do you know it's bad timing? I agree with you. A demon can feel things even love. But, Xander, how can you be so sure he still loves
Buffy?”

Xander shook his head. “I appreciate the effort Wills but you saw them yourself. The look in Buffy's eyes when she saw him again and the way he touched her. That's not something you can fake. Do you really think a love like that will simply go away overnight?”

“No, not overnight but over time...maybe. I don't deny that they love each other but couldn't it be the same way you feel about me? Or the way you love Buffy? Yes Spike did love Buffy once but people change and grow and sometimes they find their feelings about other people change too. If I remember correctly there was a time you despised and hated Spike. When you thought he was the biggest pain in the ass and you couldn't wait to get away from him. I'm thinking you've changed your mind about that.”

“Oh no,” Xander said, pulling on his well worn suit of armour. Humour had always served him well over the years. “I still think he's a huge pain
in my ass.”

Willow giggled a little. “Okay. But you don't hate him any more?”

“Not so much,” Xander agreed with a little sigh.

“It'll be okay.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“If this,” she said, gesturing between himself and Spike. “Is meant to be? It will and nothing and no one can change that. It's something Tara tried to teach me a long time ago but I was too arrogant and stubborn to realise it at the time. I always thought I could direct the course of my life and everyone around me with magic. I'm happy to say I've changed and grown too.”

“And if it's not meant to be?”

“Then it won't.”

Xander winced. “I don't mean to hurt your
feelings or anything but I don't really see how that is very helpful Wills.”

“I'm trying to tell you to stop worrying about what you should or shouldn't be doing because in the end, it won't change the outcome. What is meant to be will be.”

An understanding washed over Xander and while he felt grateful for the advice, he wasn't sure he'd be able to follow it but he appreciated it all the same. He pulled Willow into a hug to show his thanks. He locked eyes with Spike over her shoulder. The vampire's soft blue eyes were filled with a vulnerability Xander had become adept at spotting. He was almost positive that unlike the gaze sent his way the one Giles received was full of scorn and self confidence. It warmed him a bit to know that Spike trusted him. It almost made up for the horrible, sinking feelings of rejection which had begun the moment Spike and Buffy saw each other again.

Poor Spike. These watcher types were always asking questions and wanting all sorts of minute
details and Giles was no exception. It looked like he currently had Spike cornered by the finger sandwiches. So being a good friend he worked his way over and easily entered the conversation slash interrogation with the skill of a perpetual babbler. A friend? Xander wasn't exactly sure what he and Spike were to each other but it was more than friends.

It was late by the time Xander pried a grateful and tired Spike from Giles' clutches. Buffy wandered over to the pair with a small smile on her face.

“So, Spike,” she began awkwardly, “did you want to uhm...” She trailed off with an embarrassed smile and a wave of her hand.

Xander groaned inside and stood by silently while Spike fidgeted.

“Buffy,” Spike said softly and as much as Xander felt he was intruding on a private moment, he couldn't bring himself to look away. “I can't.” Spike threw an arm over Xander's shoulders and
said more loudly, “I was kinda hoping Xander here would be willing to share a room one more time?”

Xander simultaneously felt a sense of elation and a sense of shame for being happy about something which was sure to cause Buffy pain. To her credit, Buffy didn't cause a scene. She only smiled and brushed it off as something she'd been expecting all along and who knows? Maybe she had.

“Well,” she said, smile firmly in place. “You have lived with him often enough. I'll talk to you later then.”

“Sure,” Spike replied with a small nod.

Buffy wrapped her arms around Spike's neck and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Goodnight.”

The air whooshed out of his lungs when she gave him a slayer hug too. He hugged and kissed her back. “Night Buff.”
They left among a chorus of goodbyes as they gathered their luggage and headed for the back door.

“We've got our own little cottages,” Xander explained as he led the way out the back door and across the grounds. “Mine used to belong to the gardener.”

Xander dug his keys out of his pocket, unlocked the door and gestured Spike ahead of him. Spike cocked an eyebrow but otherwise didn't move.

“Humour me?” Xander asked. “With all the changes I was wondering if you still needed an invite.”

“Good idea,” Spike said, moving slowly towards the door with a hand raised in the air. He paused when he reached the threshold and straightened his arm as if expecting to encounter the invisible barrier at any moment. A wicked grin crept slowly across his face when his arm passed through easily. “This could be right useful. Bet I could give ol' Rupe a few more grey
hairs.”

Xander laughed and shook his head. “Not tonight, okay? I'm way too tired to deal with a pissed off watcher.”

Spike gave him a who me look which didn't fool either one of them. “'M tired too.”

Xander showed him around the small cottage with its small, efficient kitchen with a table for eating located just off the main room and then there were the two bedrooms along the hall which shared a roomy bathroom. He helped Spike make up the bed in the smaller of the two which up until now had been his unused guest room. They chatted about what Xander considered safe, neutral topics while they worked and neither one mentioned Buffy at all.

Xander talked about all the work he'd done on the little houses on the property and how his place had needed the most work but he'd liked it best of all. They all had one. Giles had one all to himself and since he was the head of the
Council they'd insisted he take the largest. Buffy and Willow chose to share for now but Xander thought Willow might be looking for something of her own before long.

Spike agreed. He too had obviously noticed the way Willow's eyes lit up when she was talking about Lynn. Lynn was a tall, slender, dark haired witch from the coven where Willow spent a lot of her time studying and training. Lynn's quiet, gentle nature reminded Xander of Tara and he thought she would be good for Willow. Better than Kennedy anyway. The bed was made and with nothing left to do but say goodnight, Xander made his way to the door.

“Xan,” Spike said softly as they both stood at the open door to the room.

“Night Spike.”

“Xan,” Spike said again before leaning closer. Xander let his eye drift shut when Spike's lips pressed gently against his own. For a few minutes he let all the warm feelings drift over
his body. The feel of Spike's clever fingers in his hair soothed away the small tension headache which had formed earlier that evening. Spike's agile tongue sweeping through his mouth stole his breath away and swept his worries aside. He barely held back a whimper when Spike pulled away.

“Goodnight Xan.”

Xander smiled and ducked his head. “Night Spike.”

Xander made his way to his room with a lighter step than he'd had all night. He'd been worried he wouldn't be able to sleep even though he was incredibly tired but now he wasn't worried at all.
Xander watched, fascinated, as each step on the dew covered grass sent little droplets of water through the air in tiny rainbow coloured arcs not unlike small chips of pretty patterned glass. An early morning meeting had been called and they had both been asked to attend. Spike was, predictably, reluctant at first but Xander had finally convinced him to come along by pointing out it was to help keep Dawn safe.

Now, they chatted companionably as they made their way to the Academy building and by the time they reached the conference room door, a schedule for testing Xander's limits had been laid out. Xander was definitely looking forward to an afternoon and night spent in Spike's company. But first he had to sit through the torture of stuffy watchers and their boring chatter. Why had he convinced Spike to come again? Oh yeah. Dawnie.

As soon as Xander got the door open, he was nearly bowled over by Buffy's small form as she pushed by him to grab Spike by the hand.
“It's about time you got here,” she lectured, dragging Spike over to the two chairs near the head of the table. “Sit here next to me.”

Spike looked over with an apology in his eyes as he sat next to Buffy who immediately leaned over to whisper in his ear. Xander looked around the table with a small frown. Buffy's impromptu seating arrangements had moved everyone down one seat meaning Xander's usual place was occupied by Willow and there were no empty seats left at all. When he met Giles' eyes, he shrugged and gave the man a small, crooked grin.

Giles lifted a hand to gesture to the junior watcher near the door. “Fetch another seat please, Nathan, and try to be more aware of any changes to the number of attendees in the future.”

Xander's grin grew bigger as the poor boy, who couldn't be any more than sixteen, scurried out the door and back in record time all the while apologising profusely to a highly amused
Xander. Nathan, puffing and out of breath, finally wrestled the chair into place on Giles' left which placed Xander opposite Buffy and Spike. Xander couldn't decide whether to happy or annoyed but took the seat anyway.

“Now that we have finally managed to get everyone situated, shall we proceed?” Giles questioned, looking around the table and settling his teacup on the saucer with a small scrape of the fine porcelain china. “Unfortunately a new threat has presented itself. A group, whose identity is as of yet unknown, are searching for a dimensional key. If they are able to obtain this key, they will be able to open the doorways between dimensions. I feel it is safe to assume their intentions are not benevolent and it is of the utmost importance that the dimensional key remain safe.”

“Do we know the location of the key?” Lauren asked from her place on Xander's left.

“Yes,” Giles responded with a nod. “And I am happy to say it is safe for the moment. Our
objective is to see it remains that way.”

Xander allowed the voices to wash over him as he observed the pair sitting across from him. He had to admit, the two striking blondes made an extremely attractive couple. He watched Buffy's fingers gently stroke over the back of Spike's hand. Xander's eyes narrowed. He knew exactly how soft that skin was and how soothing that motion could be. He felt a tightness in his chest and a flare of annoyance as he continued to watch the intimate gesture. He immediately wondered if he had any right to feel that way. After all, Buffy and Spike had once been in a relationship while what he and Spike shared was only something based on hope and want. Not even knowing how Spike felt meant the whole thing could also be entirely one sided as well. Xander wondered how he managed to get himself into these types of situations on, what he felt, was a regular basis.

“Xander,” Giles' annoyed voice finally filtered through the thoughts rushing through his brain.
Heat suffused Xander's face as he returned the curious gazes. “Sorry, sorry. What was that?”

“Really, Xander,” Giles said. “This situation is of extreme importance and it is most certainly not the time for daydreaming.”

Xander's mind scrambled for a suitable response.

“Have another vision there, pet?” Spike asked, coming to the rescue and reaching a friendly hand across the table.

Xander was pleased to note it was the hand Buffy had been holding up until a moment ago. “Uh...yeah. Sorry,” he agreed. “They seem to happen at the most inconvenient times.”

“Did it have any bearing on our current predicament?” Giles asked.

Xander shook his head. “No. It was ah...only a coupla demons causing some trouble later tonight.”
“Oh great,” Buffy said with a bounce. “Me and Spike can do a patrol together and take them out no problem. It'll be like old times.”

Spike turned in his seat to face the excited slayer. “Already have plans to patrol with Xander tonight and this would be a good test to see exactly what the boy can do.”

Xander bristled a bit at the term boy but refrained from complaining. After all, it would've been kinda stupid to object when Spike was trying to keep him from looking stupid so he bit his lip and remained quiet.

“Buffy,” Willow added, “Don't you think it would be better if you stayed here. We need to make sure the key is safe.”

Xander sent a grateful smile her way.

“In this particular instance, I feel I must agree with Willow. Besides, if I recall correctly you are scheduled for a training session with some of
the new slayers later this evening.”

Buffy pouted and sighed dramatically. “I thought having all these slayers around would help. It just seems like I have even more responsibilities than before,” she complained.

Well used to her complaints, Giles merely smiled. “Yes, well, you are The Slayer and with that title comes certain obligations.”

“Plan on being around a while,” Spike offered, “we'll have plenty of chances to beat up on some poor unsuspecting fledges.”

Buffy still didn't look happy but she finally agreed to remain behind. Giles declared the meeting adjourned and Xander wondered what he'd missed. Someone bumped his shoulder as he made his way out the door and he looked over to see Spike grinning back.

He leaned closer and whispered in Xander's ear. “Fill you in when we get outside.”
Part Eighteen

Spike and Xander sped along the well worn trail which weaved through the wooded area behind the Academy. Xander knew Spike wasn't running full out but he was setting a rapid pace. A pace Xander was extremely pleased to find he was able to match without straining. Spike flashed him a quick mischievous grin over his shoulder and turned up the speed a notch. Xander kept up with the vampire for a good few yards before he lost sight of him among the trees. He came around the corner at top speed, burst out of the tree line into the grassy open area before pulling up short.

Xander looked around the empty grounds curiously, wondering where Spike could have gone. He considered calling out but then remembered Spike saying he wanted to test Xander's senses. Was this part of that test?
Remembering the tingling sensation when he had fought some fledges on patrol, Xander stood quietly and simply let himself feel. A low level, barely noticeable prickling feeling skimmed across his skin. It was like a weak electrical current in the air. Xander walked slowly across the open lawn, heading in a diagonal for his own small cottage. He mounted the steps to the small porch and his hand hovered in the air just shy of touching the partially open door. Something niggled and tickled at the back of his mind. Deciding to trust his instincts, Xander let his hand drop and headed around the house to the kitchen door instead.

He swiped his sweaty palms over his loose workout trousers to dry them before grasping the knob. He opened the door a crack and peeped his head around the corner. Spike was sprawled on one of the kitchen chairs with a beer in his hand and a smirk on his face. Xander blushed and joined him at the table. He snagged the other open beer as he sat in the empty chair.
“So, pet. Why'd ya come in that way?”

“Dunno,” Xander replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “Something, some...sense told me not to use the front door.”

Spike studied him with piercing blue eyes, head tilted slightly to the left. “Good instincts,” he finally said, nodding.

Xander leaned precariously far back in his chair and eyed the hastily erected booby trap in the other room. He let out a laugh when he saw the bucket shakily perched on the top of the door. “I see you went with a classic.”

Spike ducked his head a bit and rubbed at an imaginary stain on the table before looking back up with a small self-deprecating little grin firmly in place. “Yeah well. Been told my own plans don't turn out so well most of the time.”

Xander laughed and let the legs of his chair settle back down on the wooden floor. “Not that
I'm arguing with what you just said but I can truly appreciate a good classic. Simple yet effective.”

It was Spike's turn to laugh. “You've done it yerself haven't ya?”

Xander pointed a single finger in Spike's direction. “Got it in one.”

“Who?” Spike asked, leaning forward with his elbows propped on the table between them.

“Most everyone I know,” Xander reminisced. He paused and took a sip of his beer. “I decided to put it into retirement after Anya's less than enthusiastic reaction.”

“You didn't?”

“I did,” Xander confirmed.

Spike actually winced a bit. “Ouch.”

“Understatement.”
“Took balls that. Surprised you still have any actually.”

Xander grinned, feeling pleased at the raised eyebrow and the sound of admiration in Spike's voice. He raised his beer in salute. “Me too, Spike. Me too,” he said, smiling. “So what did I miss this morning?”

Spike rolled his eyes dramatically. “Boring watcher shite, mostly. They're wantin' us and the Niblet to head over to the Coven tomorrow.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. They wanna take a look and see if they agree with Fred about the merging an' all.”

“You don't look too happy about that.”

“Been poked and prodded enough. Not to mention I'm not all that keen on magic. Tricky stuff that.”
“The Coven knows what they're doing Spike,” Xander offered, trying to reassure the vampire. “Really, they do,” he added when Spike gave him a sour look.

“Maybe. I admit it can be right handy but I still don't like it. Don't think I ever will. Always seem to be consequences.”

Xander knew enough to let this one go. It was an old argument and one he knew he had little chance of winning. “C'mon,” he said instead, looking up at the Babylon Five collector's clock which hung proudly on his kitchen wall. It had been a house-warming gift from Willow and was one of the coolest presents he'd ever gotten. It still made him smile. “Lets head over to the Academy. All the slayers should be in class for the next two hours and we can have the training room all to ourselves. So what do ya say? You wanna get down with it?”

Xander groaned inwardly and thought his mouth was probably the reason he didn't date much.
Spike sat and stared at him like he'd lost his mind.

“Only if you promise to never say that in my presence again.” Xander nodded, happy to agree. “Ever,” Spike added. Xander blushed, grinned and nodded again.

They finished their beers and dismantled Spike's makeshift trap before heading back to the Academy. It was easy to slip in the back door and down the hall to the large training room. Xander was pleased to see Spike admiring some of the weapons hanging on the walls. His pale fingers drifting over intricate metalwork and sliding over smooth, well worn handles.

They spent the next two hours putting Xander through various forms of torture. Oh, Spike claimed he was only testing Xander's strength and agility. But Xander was positive you didn't have to throw somebody halfway across the the room a dozen times to find out you could. Once was more than enough. They played with some of the simpler weapons and although Xander
had increased intuition, speed and strength, his skill with a weapon, other than a big axe and maybe a stake, was still sorely lacking. Spike promised to teach him the basics of each weapon until they hit upon the one he was actually good at. Spike assured him, despite Xander's doubts and protests to the contrary, that he would have a natural affinity for one of them.

~*~

Xander bounced happily around the grave-markers, waving his arms about as he told the story of how he'd managed to dust three vampires all by himself. Spike listened indulgently and walked along far more serenely than his hyperactive patrol partner.

Xander stopped near a particular gravestone and smiled widely. “I may have had a small, tiny, barely noticeable hand from my pal William here.”

Spike stopped and looked long and hard at the
the stones inscribed with the names of the Bradley family.

“It's why I chose the name. The one on your passport and stuff.” Xander moved to stand beside the vampire who was still looking at the old stone markers. “I wonder what William was like when he was alive.”

Spike snorted and shook his head. “Probably some poncy git not even worth knowing.”

Xander studied Spike for a moment before asking, “are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Spike said, waving away Xander's concerns. “Just a little distracted is all.”

Xander wasn't so sure about that but he let it go. “I've always thought of this place as my graveyard, ya know? It's my favourite place to patrol. I even come here during the day sometimes. It's so peaceful. So quiet.”

Spike looked around and shrugged a bit. “'T's
nice enough.”

“Why don't we head home?” Xander suggested, picking up on Spike's continued change of mood. They walked along, side by side, heading back to the main gates of the old cemetery. “Speaking of home. You're from London, right?”

“Yeah,” Spike said, nodding a little at the question.

“Did you live anywhere around here?”

Spike surprised Xander by laughing. “Right around the corner, mate.”

Xander looked over at the laughing Spike in disbelief. He wasn't exactly sure of what was going on and it was difficult trying to keep up with the vampire's changing moods. He was, however, very glad to see Spike smiling again though. “You're joking!?” Xander asked with a grin.

Spike grinned back cheekily and slung his arm
over Xander's shoulders. “If only I was.”

~*~

The shrill ring of the phone pulled Xander out of a sound sleep. He squinted at the clock and groaned when the red numbers showed it was way too early for him to be awake after yesterday’s activities. He reached out with a hand and batted ineffectually at all the objects on the table beside the bed. Just as his flailing hand finally settled over the handset the ringing stopped. He let out a loud groan and rolled over, thinking his early morning caller had given up on anyone answering. He realised his mistake when he heard Spike's muffled voice coming through the door. He groaned again and swung his legs gingerly over the side of the bed. To say he was feeling a bit stiff from yesterday's workout would have been a huge, enormous understatement. He recalled Spike's warnings and how he had waved them away. He totally regretted his foolishness now. Xander pushed himself up and slowly stood. He swore when his calf threatened to cramp and he quickly ran a
hand briskly up and down the quivering muscle.

“Shit,” he said aloud, “next time listen to the nice vampire. A massage, a bath and painkillers before bed.”

Xander shook his head trying to figure out why he'd foolishly said no to Spike's offer of a massage the night before. Just the thought of those smooth hands with their slender, clever fingers brushing intimately over his skin caused his cock to twitch and start to fill. He looked down at his rising erection and scowled as he remembered this was exactly why he had refused. He knew the moment Spike touched his skin his traitorous cock would give him away.

He limped into the adjoining bath willing his cock to deflate so he could manage a morning piss. Mission accomplished he meandered out to the living area of the house. Spike waved with the hand not holding the phone to his ear. Xander waved back on his way to the kitchen. He started the coffee maker going and managed his morning feat of snagging a cup before it
finished without burning himself or making a mess. He left the pot bubbling and gurgling and joined Spike on the couch.

Xander flopped back spinelessly against the cushions and unashamedly listened in to the conversation while he sipped at his coffee. He figured if Spike had wanted to talk in private he would have gone to his room. He smiled happily to himself when he realised his guest room had been promoted to Spike's room. He waited quietly while Spike rang off, not liking the look of worry on his face. Spike dropped the phone onto the cushions between them with a heavy sigh.

“Who decided to wake us up at such an ungodly hour?” Xander asked, unwilling to wait any longer.

Spike rubbed a hand tiredly over his eyes. “Angel.”

“Is everything okay?” Xander frowned, worried the Senior Partners had decided Angel and his
group were worth bothering with after all.

“Angel found out why Wolfram and Hart let them all go so easily. Apparently they're far too busy with other plans.”

“Other plans? Why do I have a feeling this is gonna be bad news?”

“Well, you'd be right mate. It is bad news. They're lookin' for a key. A very special key which would give them a far greater reach and the potential to tap into new power sources and what not.”

Xander made the obvious connection Spike had left unspoken. He set his empty cup on the table near his leg and scrubbed his hands over his face. “Shit!”

**Part Nineteen**

Xander had always liked the serene calmness of the Coven. The buildings, with their muted colours in beige and brown with the occasional
A splash of bright red, purple or yellow, blended almost seamlessly into the surrounding landscape. The splashes of colour were not unlike the ones nature dotted upon her canvas of green and brown using fragrant, bright flowers.

Willow had explained how the Coven was trying to teach the importance of the earth in magic and how it was all connected. He didn't really understand it all but he loved coming here all the same even if the High Priestess scared the hell out of him. He remembered the first time he'd met her. It was shortly after their move to England, after they'd set up the new Academy. She'd found him covered in sweat and dirt, and not smelling particularly fresh while rooting around in the soil at the base of the brand new stairs he was making. Willow had enlisted his aid with promises of a fresh baked apple pie to take home for his dessert later that night.

The High Priestess had stopped, taken in his dishevelled, filthy appearance, narrowed her eyes and frowned slightly. Xander had babbled
out an explanation of sagging, rotting wood and apple pie before eventually grinding to a long, overdue halt. He hadn't moved an inch, eye wide, hardly breathing, waiting for her to do something, anything while the sweat slowly, maddeningly trickled down his back to pool at the base of his spine. Xander had felt like a bug pinned to a board just waiting to be dissected. The dark piercing eyes and knowing gaze had reminded him of someone but he'd never been able to figure out who.

After what had felt like at least an hour, but had in fact been less than a minute, she'd told him to 'carry on' and with a careless wave of her hand, she'd turned away. Xander had been avoiding her ever since. There was something oddly, strangely intimidating about her.

Xander's eye wandered aimlessly over to his travelling companions as they made their way along the wooded trail between the Academy grounds and the sprawling patch of land the Coven had claimed as their own. Willow led the way with a spring in her step and Xander smiled,
knowing Lynn was going to be there. Dawn chattered away beside the excited witch, her long legs easily keeping pace and her long brown hair swishing back and forth across her back with each stride. When Xander's gaze slid to the side and settled on the familiar profile with its sharp cheekbones and luscious lips which never ceased to make his breath catch and his heart pound, it all suddenly clicked. The High Priestess of the Coven reminded him of Drusilla, who also made him feel distinctly bug-like and uncomfortable. He laughed out loud and waved away the concerned looks suddenly turned his way.

Fortunately for him, they had just reached the part of the well worn path which opened up onto the outskirts of their destination saving him from having to explain his sudden fit of humour.

Willow led them around a garden bursting with large, red tomatoes whose delicious flavour was by far the best Xander had ever tasted. Xander pointed out another plot to Dawn, which he'd
helped turn that very spring. It contained various herbs used in spells and potions and some even made their way to the kitchen for cooking.

They entered a long sprawling building and passing through some open glass doors, they stepped back out into the open. The large courtyard was used as a regular meeting place by the Coven. Willow said the proximity to all the trees and plants made it the perfect place for casting and prayer. Xander just thought it was pretty with all the flowers and the greenery. There were some surprisingly comfortable wooden benches scattered about and a few small, attractive sculptures decoratively placed among the flowering bushes and trees.

Xander took a deep, cleansing breath of air delicately scented with roses and jasmine and felt the familiar calm of the place settle around his shoulders like a warm, comforting hug. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Spike's arms twitch with the need to wrap themselves around his slim torso in a gesture of self
comfort. Obviously Spike wasn't finding the Coven serene or calming and Xander found himself taking an unconscious, supportive step closer to the nervous vampire.

Lynn came through another set of glass doors with a large smile on her face and quickly made her way to their small group.

“Willow,” she greeted, hugging the redhead briefly before smiling at the rest of them. “It's nice to see you again and to meet you, Spike. I've heard so much about you.” She reached out a small, delicate hand towards Spike who grasped it gently, raised it to his lips and brushed a chaste kiss across the back.

“My pleasure,” Spike said, releasing her hand.

Lynn blushed prettily and turned back to Willow. “You're right, he is a charmer,” she teased with a sparkle in her eyes and small smile playing about her lips.

Several other members made their way over
and Xander took another step closer to a fidgeting Spike. “You okay?” Xander asked, keeping his voice low so the others wouldn't overhear.

Spike shrugged a shoulder. “I'm fine.”

“Sure but I'm right here.”

“I know,” Spike whispered back, a small grin on his face. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Xander replied, a tiny ball of happiness pooling in his chest and radiating a tingling warmth throughout his body. Yeah he could get to like all these new feelings. He couldn't remember feeling this way with anyone else. With Faith, it had started and been over so fast that you couldn't actually call it a relationship. He still wasn't sure if she had ever even liked him. Cordelia pretty much ran the whole show. She told him how to feel and when but she'd been great in some ways. And then there was Anya. Wonderful, straight to the point Anya. Yeah. At least they had a relationship of
sorts but there had been no build up there either. It was straight to bed but at least she stuck around after the fact, unlike Faith who'd kicked him out of bed first chance she got.

They were each paired off with one of the Coven members and Xander wanted to give Willow a hug when she suggested rather strongly that Lynn accompany Spike. Willow had obviously noticed Spike's unease as well. Although to be honest, Spike wasn't really trying to hide it. In fact, the vampire usually took every opportunity to point out how dangerous magic could be.

Xander grasped Spike's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze before he followed Angela to one of the small meditation rooms off the central courtyard. She gave him a warm friendly smile and gestured to one of the wooden chairs. “Have a seat. Each of us is going to do a small reveal spell. It will give us an idea of the various components which make up your physical form. This way we can piece together if the data discovered in LA is correct.”
Xander made himself comfortable while Angela sat in the seat opposite. “So if I **have** merged with something, you'll be able to see it?”

“That's the idea. Yes.”

“Sounds good. What do I have to do?”

“Nothing really. I'm going to place some herbs into this bowl,” she explained lifting a wooden bowl from the floor and placing it on the low table between them. She sprinkled some fragrant smelling herbs in the bowl and poured some clear water from a pitcher on her other side over the top. The reflective surface of the water acted as a mirror as the herbs sank slowly to the bottom. She looked up and smiled. “There that should do it. Close your eye, relax and let your mind drift.”

Xander did as she asked and felt himself sink a bit further into that serene, calmness. After what seemed like a few seconds, he felt a hand on his arm and he opened his eye. He looked around with a puzzled frown when he noticed it
was considerably darker than it had been earlier. “What? When?”

“It's perfectly normal to feel a bit disoriented at first.”

“How long have we been here?”

“About two hours,” she answered patiently.

“Two? Really? It didn't feel like any time had...” Xander trailed off and shook his head in disbelief. “Two as in one, two?”

Angela laughed and nodded.

“Right. Well. Did you find out what you needed to know?”

“Yes. The others should be finished now as well. We'll make our reports to the High Priestess and then she will join you in the courtyard.” Xander's stomach clenched painfully at the thought of having to see her again. “There's some food and drinks,” Angela continued, leading the way back
outside and totally unaware of his inner panic. “I'm sure you must be hungry.”

I doubt it, Xander thought, but kept his mouth closed and an uncomfortable, plastic-like smile firmly in place as he rejoined the others. Dawn and Willow were talking excitedly about spells and training and Spike looked unharmed but not quite his normally unruffled self. Xander felt a tiny bit better knowing he wasn't the only one feeling disoriented. A wooden picnic table with matching benches on either side was laden with sandwiches and large pitchers of lemonade. Small droplets of condensation had trickled down the sides to leave dark patches in the wood around the bases and ice swirled happily among bobbing slices of lemon.

Xander was sure the food tasted delicious as always but he honestly couldn't tell. Everything tasted like so much sawdust and he couldn't seem to stop the nervous tapping of his fingers on the surface of the table no matter how many times Willow glared at him. Even the good news that Dawn was safe and had merged completely
with the energy of the key, couldn't bring back his appetite. For her part Dawn bounced and giggled in delight. Apparently all that energy was now at her disposal, she only needed to learn how to tap into it and use it without putting herself, or anyone else, in danger. The first order of business was going to be teaching her a few spells to keep her safely under the radar of Wolfram and Hart until a more permanent solution could be found.

Xander was relieved and happy for her. He really was, but he was so relieved when Willow and Lynn led the hyperactive teen away to set up a training schedule.

“I feel like...” Xander began before trailing off not knowing how to explain the odd, crawling sensation he'd been feeling under his skin ever since the spell.

“S'okay,” Spike said. “It's the magic. It gets under your skin like a living thing.”

Xander shuddered. “Yeah. Doesn't help that
she's coming either.”

“Who?”

“I think the young man is referring to me.”

They both turned and saw a woman considerably older than the other members of the Coven and yet she carried herself with grace and elegance. Xander groaned inwardly and pasted his plastic smile back on his face.

“Hi...err...High Priestess.” Xander groaned again and restrained himself from banging his head repeatedly on the table. Barely. He could swear he could hear Spike struggling to keep the laughter inside. Stupid vampire.

“So William the Bloody, the vampire known as Spike, the Slayer of Slayers, you're the one.”

Xander's eyebrows rose in curiosity. “The one?”

“Yes. The one chosen by the Powers to be their Champion,” she replied before turning her
attention to Spike. “I suppose it does make sense considering your history and education.”

That's not why we're here,” Spike growled, nearly vibrating with annoyance and yet blushing an attractive shade of pink. Xander's nervousness eased a bit and he grinned, remembering the vague reference to Spike's knowledge of law and his ease when it came to reading the fine print of the contracts at Wolfram and Hart. So, Spike had a brain under all that bleached hair after all.

“Of course,” she said smoothly, completely unmoved by the vampire's snarkiness. She turned to address Xander. “And you must be his Guide, Alexander Harris.”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Interesting choice. Hmm, you are much more than you appear. An inner strength and a heart that's true. You are quiet William. Do you not trust me?”
“Trusting fools tend to get their fingers burned.”

“Perhaps but there is something more... what is it?”

“Magic.”

“You're right to respect it but you should not fear it.”

Xander felt and saw Spike bristle at the accusation. “Not afraid. Don't like the consequences is all.”

“Magic in the hands of the untrained can be a dangerous thing and its use should be considered carefully. The reason for our existence is to provide the proper training and education so that magic can be used safely.”

“And you can train Dawn so she'll be safe?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”
“If there's nothing else?” Spike asked rising from his seat.

Xander stood too, more than happy to get out of there.

She shook her head in that same tranquil manner. “Come back to see me when you are more settled. You are not quite ready for what the future holds but you will be soon.”

She turned and walked away leaving them standing in the courtyard sharing wary glances and wondering what the hell they'd gotten themselves into now.

Part Twenty

The remnants of the small welcome home party had been long since cleaned away and the tables which had once held platters of food and
drink, were now crammed with books and papers, yellowed and made delicate with age. The small group was spread out on the comfortable furniture in the parlour reminding Xander of long ago nights spent researching the latest big bad of the week. The room may have changed but the people were the same and he glanced around with fondness at the familiar faces which have come to mean so much to him over the years. His contemplative eye settled lastly on his on again, off again room mate.

Spike had always been good looking, Hell, if Xander was honest with himself which he might as well be since no one else could hear his thoughts, Spike was more than good looking. The vampire was, and always will be, drop dead gorgeous. Oozing an almost otherworldly sexuality. Each movement of that lithe, lean body like a choreographed sensual dance meant to entice and enthral. And Xander was most definitely enthralled. One look and Xander's breathing would quicken, his heart beat faster and his legs would turn rubbery, threatening to tumble him to the ground.
He'd always been interested but Spike's acerbic tongue and big bad persona had kept Xander at arms length. Until fate had her way and decided to meddle in their lives. The first small crack in Spike's armour had appeared right after he'd escaped from the Initiative and had allowed Xander to see a glimpse of something more. Something other than the take, want, have attitude he'd normally associated with vampires. It made Xander pause and over the years, and the time Spike had spent living with him, he'd had the unique opportunity to gradually, very gradually, get to know Spike. To discover, to his surprise, what a complex creature Spike was when Xander had thought all vampires were simple, unfeeling, monsters to be killed on sight.

Feeling the intense scrutiny, Spike looked up, crystal blue eyes twinkling with mischief and Xander's heart skipped a beat. A warm, shy, and who would have ever thought Spike could be shy, smile lifted the corners of those soft lips. Xander smiled back, a warm feeling inside
because he knew, personally, just how soft and talented those lips actually were.

Spike tilted his head in that way he had and then snickered quietly like he knew exactly what Xander had been thinking.

Xander felt the heat of a blush on his skin and peeked around to see if anyone else had noticed. He sent a scowl Spike's way when the vampire's snicker got even louder but there was no real heat in it.

Xander shook his head and focused his eye back on the book in his lap. They needed to find out more information on these demons who were looking for Dawn. It was the reason for this particular research meeting to be Scooobies only. They couldn't risk anyone outside of their group, and the few members of the Coven who already knew, from finding out the true identity of the key.

Over the past week Xander had spent a lot of hours training with Spike and had tumbled into
bed exhausted each night, hoping for a dreamless, vision less sleep. But it wasn't to be, and instead, he'd had the same vision each and every night. It was almost an exact repeat of the one he'd had when he was in LA. The one which had prompted Spike to change his mind and be the first vampire in history to be welcomed by the Council of Watchers.

He'd been more prepared for it this time though and had been able to gather more details. Xander had given a description of the crypt and the surrounding graveyard to Christian, one of the junior watchers in the research department. Christian was supposed to be a pretty good artist and Xander thought he'd had done more than a passable job of putting what Xander had seen in his mind down on paper. Of course, he couldn't tell the guy the real reason he needed the drawings, and remembering something Spike had once told him about keeping it simple, he'd pretty much stuck to the truth. He simply omitted anything that would give the game away. For his part, Christian was happy to help and spent most of his time looking at Xander in
a state of hero worship. The look had bugged Xander at first but it had its uses and Xander had taken full advantage of it earlier that day. Afterwards he'd come armed with the precious likenesses hoping to answer the burning questions of who, when and where.

Buffy had taken care of the where almost as soon as he'd entered the room. A quick look at the drawing of the graveyard was all it took for Buffy to come up with the exact location, right down to the name carved into the weathered stone blocks above the door. Now they just needed to find out more details on the who. They already knew the why and judging by the sense of urgency Xander was beginning to feel, he was guessing the when wasn't very far in the future.

“Oh! Oh!” Xander looked up to see Willow bouncing excitedly in her seat. “I think I found them.”

Giles left his seat in the leather wing backed
chair to come around the back of the couch and peer over her shoulder. Willow looked up and studied his face hopefully. He gave her an indulgent smile and a nod. “I do believe you have. If I may?” he asked, hands outstretched. Willow passed the book to the head watcher, careful not to lose the relevant page.

“Hmm. Of course,” Giles murmured distractedly as he made his way back to his chair. He looked up after retaking his seat. “Spike, could you look at this?”

Spike's eyes widened when he saw the page. “Shoulda known it was a Plait Demon. Nasty fuckers.”

“Yes,” Giles readily agreed. “They do have a rather undesirable reputation.”

“They normally don't go about hatching schemes of their own though. More of the mercenary type.”

“True which would make sense if they were
indeed working for Wolfram and Hart as Angel suspects.”

“Who cares,” Buffy interjected, rather impatiently. “All I need to know is how do I kill them? No one threatens my family.”

Xander really couldn't blame her for being anxious. The sooner this was done, the better. The Plaits might not know who or what the key was at the moment, but they were far too close to the target for his liking.

“According to this text, the Plait demons are so named because of their armoured shell which is woven over a softer under-skin like a braid or plait.” Giles took a moment to read further while the others waited anxiously. “Larger weapons such as an axe would prove useless against them as the blade simply bounces off the armour. The finer tip of a sword or similar blade is needed to slip between the plaits to pierce one of the soft organs such as the heart.”
“Great. Sounds easy enough. We'll just -”

Giles held up a hand to forestall anything further. “Not quite so fast.”

“What? Giles, it's my sister whose life is at stake here. I'm not going to just sit around. We've done too much of that already. It's time for some action.”


Willow lifted a hand and placed it gently on Buffy's arm in a soothing gesture. “It would be better to have a plan.”

“Gotta agree there Buff,” Xander chimed in. "Going in without a battle plan really isn't a good idea.”

Buffy raised her hands in defeat and reseated herself on the couch next to Willow. “Fine, fine. It's just after all this time we finally have something and ... and I need to do something. I can't keep just sitting around and waiting for
something to happen.”

Spike went over, crouched down next the distraught slayer and spoke softly. “Ya need to listen to the watcher and your friends. It isn't as easy as it sounds. Plaits have got a sharp set of claws on 'em and a good reach. Better to make a plan. I bet Red here could come up with a trick or two to distract 'em. Make it easier for the rest of us to get close enough to get a blade into 'em.”

“Excellent idea,” Giles approved with a curt nod.

Buffy's eyes softened and she grasped one of Spike's hands. “I know,” she said softly. “You're right. It's all this waiting around. It's getting on my nerves.”

“I get that. Might not be able to take out the Plaits just now but that doesn't mean we can't see if we can find a good skirmish or two. What d'ya say, love? Fancy a patrol?”
Buffy smiled happily at the thought of being able to let off some steam. “I thought you'd never ask,” she replied with a flip of her hair.

Xander bit his lip and tried to ignore the nasty part of himself that hoped Buffy ran into a Stink Demon that spewed irremovable green slime. He should be happy to get left behind with the others to do more research. It wasn't like he had his own super powers now. Sarcasm, you are my friend.

Xander sighed and his lower lip slid out into a small pout as his eye tracked Buffy and Spike making their way to the door. Spike suddenly stopped and looked around as if he'd forgotten something. “You comin' Xan?”


They decided to patrol in one of the busier cemeteries nearby and had only arrived when a small group of young slayers joined them. They
had been sent to take out a small nest of Hortaks, which had proved to be much larger than reports had suggested, and were heading back to the Academy for re-enforcements. Xander nearly gave a squeal of delight Andrew would have been proud of when Buffy decided to join them leaving him paired with Spike.

Xander and Spike fell into their normal, comfortable routine. Xander would try to look cool while kicking demon and vampire ass while Spike commented on his technique and helped out when Xander got in over his head. Xander was pleased to note that the times he needed help were getting fewer and fewer as time went on.

Things were decidedly looking brighter for Xander. His merging was definitely with the hyena spirit, his skills were getting better and the visions weren't so intrusive. The only problem was Spike. Not that Spike was a problem. It was more of a what to do about his feelings for Spike that was the problem.
Xander watched while Spike showed him how to do a sweep kick on some poor fledge who'd had the misfortune to arise as they were walking by. Xander knew he should be paying attention to the move but boy, Spike had some moves.

And there was that Spike problem again. Xander shifted slightly trying to gain a bit of room in his denims. He really, really needed to do something before working himself to exhaustion did him in or he wore his right hand and cock out from all the self relieving he'd been doing lately. Unfortunately, he had no idea of what, exactly, to do. No wonder all his exes were so pushy. Xander sighed and made a mental note to pick up a new tube of lubricant from the chemists in the morning before he threw himself into the fray.

Part Twenty-One
Xander crouched with the others among the bushes near the Watson crypt, his knees starting to feel numb where they rested against the cold ground. Feeling a sharp jab in the hand holding back a bit of shrubbery, Xander snatched it back with a curse and sucked at the small wound left by the prickly foliage. Not bothering to take his finger out of his mouth, he glared at the snickering vampire crouched next to him.

“I shupposhe you fhinds thish funny.”

“I don't know what's more disturbing, the fact that I understood that or that you're making me hungry.”

Xander's eye went round with alarm and his finger came out of his mouth with a loud pop.

“Would you please,” Giles hissed at them. “You do know the meaning of the word stealthy, don't you?”

They both put on their most innocent expressions until he'd turned away and then
leaned conspiratorially together and snorted with suppressed laughter like naughty school children. It felt good. Xander understood that what they were about to do was dangerous and important and they all needed to be on the alert and careful. But the truth of it was that the simple laughter acted as an escape valve for his pent up emotions and he knew he'd be all the better for it afterwards. Surely Giles must understand that on some level? The amused glance he got from Buffy told him she did and even Willow sent a wry grin their way.

Giles rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath, “That which does not kill us makes us old and cranky before our time.”

“Careful, Rupert,” Spike mock scolded the watcher, “your sense of humour is showing. Don't wanna hurt yourself.”

Giles glared, pursed his lips and jabbed a finger in the direction of the crypt they were supposed to be watching.
“Xander,” Buffy said quietly, giving him a poke in the arm to get his attention. “You sure this is the right night?”

Xander shivered and peered through the misty fog around them. This night felt as familiar to him as his own well worn trainers. “Yeah. I'm sure.” Feeling a bit bad for his earlier behaviour when Dawn was in danger, he reached across and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “We'll stop them. They'll never get anywhere near her.”

Buffy gave him a crooked little grin. “I know. And it's okay, I needed to laugh a bit too.”

“Hey,” Xander whispered back, spreading his hands out, “it's what I do.”

Willow bumped his shoulder with her own and giggled, and Spike leaned in to join them. “I still can't believe you guys actually managed to defeat The Master or anyone else for that matter with the way you carry on.”
“I concur,” Giles said dryly and shook his head at their shocked faces. Shining his torch on his wrist, he peered at his watch. “Now, if you are all quite finished, I suggest we all take up our assigned places.”

The mood suddenly became serious as each person went about the task of getting prepared to move. Xander checked his sword was secure at his side and ready to be drawn even though he'd already checked it at least twenty times. He felt a hand on his arm and looked up to see Spike studying him thoughtfully.

“You'll do fine. We've been practising and you've been gettin' better all the time. Just remember to relax and let it happen.”

Xander knew Spike was right and he had been improving steadily but he was so much more comfortable with his axe. Of course his trusty, reliable axe was no good against the Plaits. Still, Xander was grateful for the support.

He watched with a little ache in his heart as
Spike turned away and crept over to kneel next to Buffy. Xander couldn't hear what he said to her but Buffy nodded curtly and they both moved out from the cover of the bushes and into the relative openness of the grassy area in front of the crypt. Xander bit his lip and prayed their timing was right.

Buffy slid into position near the door where she waited for the first of the unsuspecting Plaits to come wandering outside. Spike waited on the other side.

Xander hung back with Giles to protect Willow and Lynn, who were preparing a spell, which would, hopefully, confuse the Plaits so Buffy and Spike could pick them off as they came out the door. It was a simple enough plan and if all went well, it should buy them enough time to effectively and permanently hide Dawn from Wolfram and Hart. Or anyone else who got it into their head it would be a good idea to use the key.

The scraping of wood on stone was loud and
almost seemed to bounce off the surrounding old gnarled trees and crumbling stones to echo in the chill, foggy air. Xander's full attention became riveted to the sliver of light which was ever so slowly becoming larger as the ancient wooden door to the crypt slowly crept open, bit by bit.

A Plait came lumbering out, paying more attention to whoever was behind him than where he was going, which was a huge mistake on his part. Buffy easily crept up and slipped a knife between its armour plates before skipping back out of range of its deadly claws. The Plait grunted in pain and swung its arms around in a futile attempt to remove the deadly blade. The noise brought several others to the doorway who, after quickly taking in the death throes of their unfortunate comrade, roared with rage and stormed outside to confront their unknown adversary.

In what looked to Xander like a choreographed dance, Spike and Buffy gracefully stepped in and out of the fray while ducking under arms and
avoiding sharp tipped claws. Xander knew they were each carrying ten razor sharp knives as well as long, thin swords. He hoped it would be enough as it seemed like the Plaits just kept coming. So far none had made it past the pair, but Xander had drawn his sword at the first sighting of the lizard-like creature and he still kept it raised and at the ready.

Willow and Lynn chanted in hushed voices over a bowl of foul smelling herbs while a small plume of smoke drifted slowly up from the centre to mix with the fog swirling about their heads. Xander sincerely hoped the smell would dissipate as soon as the spell was cast. Otherwise, they might all pass out from the fumes.

Xander winced as the inevitable happened and Spike dodged when he should have ducked and a quick swipe opened up three parallel lines of red on his left side along his rib cage. Xander winced but was relieved to note the blood flowing from the wounds was sluggish. He grinned when Spike swore and stabbed the Plait
before kicking it solidly in the head with a black booted foot when it fell.

The distraction, even though brief, allowed a Plait to get through and moving rather swiftly for such a large creature, it headed their way. Xander took a quick look over his shoulder at the chanting pair kneeling on the ground behind him.

“Better hurry up. Company's coming.”

Turning back, he raised his sword and, like Spike had told him to do during countless hours of training, he waited. His hands felt sweaty around the handle and his stomach clenched with adrenalin. The Plaits seemed so much larger here than in his dreams and visions. Snarling and swinging their deadly claws.

It felt like the Plait was suddenly standing right in front of him, its foul breath hot against his face. Xander ducked a swipe of its long limb and twisted while slipping his sword between the two plates high on its chest. Xander grit his
teeth as he felt the blade scrape along bone before plunging into the softer tissues and finally the heart. The Plait grunted in surprise and dropped to the ground pulling Xander's sword from his hands.

Using a foot for leverage, Xander yanked but the sword stayed firmly embedded. He heard a grunt from behind him and glancing over his shoulder he saw Giles attempting to fend off a set sharp claws while looking for an opening. He turned back and tugged harder. He risked a look over to where Buffy and Spike were still fighting and saw they were still holding their own but both bore several gashes on their arms and Spike had taken another swipe across that left side.

“Any time now would be good ladies!” Xander shouted and almost fell on his arse when his sword suddenly slipped free with a sickening squelch.

“Done!” Willow yelled in warning and they all averted their eyes from the glowing ball of
energy which hurtled toward the still open crypt
door. The blinding flash was over in seconds but
it left the extremely nocturnal Plaits dazed,
confused and easily overwhelmed. Giles and
Xander joined the battle near the crypt and the
four easily took out the remaining demons.

With the fight over, Xander rushed over to Spike
who was bent over at the waist with his right
hand firmly pressed against his injured side.
“Hey, you okay?”

Spike grimaced and peeked a look at his side.
“I'll live.” Xander winced and snorted at the
same time and Spike gave him an exasperated
eye roll. “You know what I mean.”

“I do. C'mon. Lets get you home and you can
have a nice hot soak while I warm up some
blood and order some take out.”

“Aren't you coming back to the Academy with
the rest of us?”

“Did ya TiVo the footie?” Spike asked.
Xander smirked in triumph. “Of course.”

“Right then,” Spike announced to the others. “You don't need us hangin' round so we'll just be on our way.”

Buffy pouted unhappily. “But-”

“Buffy,” Willow interrupted and Xander wanted to kiss her. “Could you help me with this.”

Buffy frowned and looked between Spike, Xander and Willow. “Yeah, sure Willow,” she finally relented.

Xander stooped and slid a supporting arm around Spike's back. “Lets go and get you patched up.”

Spike grunted and allowed Xander to take some of his weight. “Thanks.”

~*~
“Willow!” Xander called down the hallway to his friend.

Willow turned and waited for him to catch up. “Hi there,” she said, giving him a glowing smile. “What brings you over to modern magic one-oh-one?”

“What? You wound me!” Xander asked with an over the top dramatic flair, complete with a hand held over his wounded heart. “Can't a guy want to visit with his best friend?”

Willow laughed and punched him lightly on the arm. “Yes but we both know that isn't why you're really here is it?”

“Well, no but a guy can try, right?”

“Of course you can. Say, you wanna have lunch with me?”

“I would love to,” Xander said taking her hand and leading her through the hallway and out the doors. “Your place or mine?”
“Mine. I have a feeling you want to talk and although your roomie is probably home, mine will be in class right now.”

Xander stopped and gaped at her. “How do you always do that?”

“Because,” Willow said, gazing up at him fondly. “We've been friends forever and I know you. Almost better then I know myself and I can tell when there's something bothering you. You always get this little wrinkle right here on your forehead.” She reached up and rubbed gently at the bit of skin just above his eye patch.

Xander grasped her stroking hand and held it gently between his own. “You are amazing.”

“And you just want to have some of my home baked goodness for lunch.”

Xander laughed and Willow joined in as they made their way to the cottage she shared with Buffy. Willow whipped up some sandwiches in
the kitchen and slid some chocolate chip cookies on a plate while Xander got them some sodas from the fridge in the corner. They chatted about some of the slayers and Lynn while they ate and after they finished eating, Willow put the dirty dishes in the sink. They considered each other as they sat on opposite sides of the small round table in the quaint yellow kitchen.

“So, spill,” Willow said, finally breaking the spell. “What's wrong?”

Xander considered how to answer her question. How best to form his thoughts and fears into words and came up blank. “I don't know if there's anything wrong really.”

“You are worried though?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. About what?”

Xander took a deep breath and let the words come. If anyone could help him work this out, it
was Willow. “When I started having the visions about the Plaits I kept having the same one over and over.”

“Is that unusual? You kept having the same one about Spike, didn't you?”

“Exactly so no, it's kinda normal for a hyena guy who gets visions,” Xander joked half-heartedly. Willow gave him a small smile for his efforts. “Ever since we defeated the Plaits I've gotten a great big nothing. No new visions or dreams or anything. Why not? How are we supposed to fight evil if we don't know where to go? And then there's the High Priestess who said we weren't ready yet. What the hell? I found my champion and helped Angel like Cordelia said. What else is there? What am I supposed to do?”

“Oh Xander. I'm sorry but I-I don't know.” Xander let out a long sigh of frustration and swept his hands restlessly through his hair. “I think you should speak to her again.”

“Who? The High Priestess?” Xander asked,
trying to ignore how squeaky and high pitched his voice got at just the thought of speaking to her again.

"I know she makes you uncomfortable but seeing isn't really my thing when it comes to magic. I really think you should speak to her."

Xander gave Willow a resigned look and nodded his head. “Yeah. Okay. Will you set it up for me?”

Willow got up from her chair, came around the table and wrapped her arms around her friend. “Right away.”

~*~

Xander squirmed uncomfortably on the hard wooden bench. He was seated once again in the airy courtyard under the penetrating gaze of the High Priestess of the Coven.

“So why give me any visions at all if they were
just gonna take them away?"

"To get you started," she replied serenely. "There were things which couldn't wait and needed to be done immediately."

"So they used me?"

"We are all tools Alexander. You must understand these things were important and revolved around your champion. If he were to perish so soon, it would have been an inconvenience to the Powers."

Xander couldn't believe his ears and his anger spiked, erasing his earlier fear. "An inconvenience?! They play with peoples lives, our lives and if Spike had died, it would have been inconvenient? Somehow I don't think Spike would have felt that way and I sure as hell wouldn't."

The High Priestess merely smiled at his tirade. "Perhaps you should say these things to William."
“What?! “

“Trust me, Xander,” she said softly, taking his hand “Talk to your Spike.”


“I can say no more. Just talk to him.”

Xander watched as she walked away leaving him sitting alone with his thoughts.

Part Twenty-Two

Xander sat for some time considering the words of the High Priestess. Should he talk to Spike and risk a friendship which had become to mean so much to him. Then again, Spike had initiated several of the intimate moments between them himself. Xander sighed heavily, wishing he knew exactly why and what Spike was thinking. Of course, the only way to find out for sure was to ask Spike which brought him right back to the beginning again.
Looking at his watch, he figured Spike would be in the training room right about now. Although he had been feeling more comfortable around all the young slayers, Spike still preferred to train alone which proved convenient if Xander wanted to speak to the vampire alone. And Xander most certainly did. An audience for this was the last thing he needed.

He left The Coven and followed the winding, wooded trail back to The Academy, trying to figure out exactly what he wanted to say and how to say it. Over the last few months Xander had found himself talking to Spike about all sorts of things. Anything apart from their feelings for each other that is, that was something they both seemed to avoid. He really didn't want to risk ruining the surprisingly close friendship which had developed between them. He relished the caring, the closeness and hated the idea of losing any of it by speaking of things that might be better left unsaid. But if the reward of that risk was an even closer more intimate relationship that would mean so much more.
Xander slipped quietly through the rear door of The Academy and made it to the entrance of the training room without encountering anyone. He felt a sense of relief knowing if he'd had to stop to talk, he might have lost the nerve to do this. Hearing the distinct sounds which meant the room was in use, he dried his sweaty palms with a quick swipe along the legs of his jeans, and pushed on the swinging door. His body froze just inside the entrance as Spike's earlier words about his violent, destructive relationship with Buffy washed over him.

His feet remained glued in place, unable to tear his gaze away from the pair shoving against each other roughly. Buffy finally gained the upper hand and pinned Spike in place against the wall, her lips taking the vampire's in a searing, bruising kiss which lanced straight into Xander's heart. Xander's breath hitched and his eye prickled hotly with unshed tears.

He still couldn't bring himself to turn away as ever so slowly the scene in front of him took on
a darker more sinister quality. It seemed to take a long time for Xander to actually see what was happening in front of him. The way Spike's hands scrabbled at Buffy's arms, the way he tried to turn his face away and the rasping, pained plea to stop.

A flush of anger burned through Xander's body and he took a step closer before stopping once more when the door swung open to admit Giles just as Spike shoved hard, tumbling both himself and the slayer to the floor. Xander mutely watched the looks of horror and revulsion quickly pass over the watcher's face only to be rapidly replaced with a stony anger.

“Move away from her at once!” Giles shouted, covering the distance between himself and the tangled pair in a surprisingly short amount of time. “I should have known you could never be trusted,” he accused with a jabbing finger in Spike's direction.

Xander's horror at the mistaken accusation finally managed to get his feet moving again.
“Giles! No!” he yelled before reaching out a hand to help Spike to his feet.

“Xander, please don't interfere,” Giles said, motioning Xander away with his hand. “This is something I should have done a long time ago.”

Xander shook his head and protectively moved his body between the angry watcher and Spike. “Tell him,” he said, catching Buffy's horror-stricken gaze, “or I will.”

“Buffy?” Giles asked, his anger transforming to puzzlement.

Buffy shook her head, the tears pooled in her eyes reflected in the harsh overhead lighting. “It- it was nothing.”

Giles slid a supportive arm around her shoulders. “You shouldn't protect him like this. What if it had been one of the younger slayers he'd attacked?”

Xander's anger re-ignited with a vengeance at
the watcher's misplaced concern. “Protect him?! The only one she's protecting is herself! Why did you do it Buff?” He spat, getting in the slayer's face. “What was it, huh? What pushed you over the edge this time? Did you discover it wasn't exactly all that great not being The Slayer, the one girl in all the world? Or was it the Powers That Be choosing themselves some new champions? Whatever it was, you need to stop using Spike to make yourself feel better. It isn't fair. You need to learn to stand on your own. Buffy I love you, but right now I'm pretty fucking angry.”

“It was a mistake, Xander,” Buffy pleaded. “I didn't mean for this to happen.”

“Buffy?” Giles softly asked, his arm slipping from her shoulders, but his query went unnoticed.

“A mistake? I don't think so,” Xander said, trying hard not to shout. “You need to stop doing this to him. Every damn time something doesn't go your way or you get upset you go running to the one person, the one person, you know will
accept you no matter what. He's not that guy any more Buff. He's moved on and you don't love him. Let him go.”


Xander shook his head sadly, remembering the cavern beneath Sunnydale and those last intimate moments between Buffy and Spike. “Buffy, please, he said it himself. You don't. Deep inside you know you don't. You need him but you don't love him. Not like I do.”

Buffy's mouth dropped open and she stepped back as if struck. “Like you?!” She shouted her own anger rising. “Is that what this is all about? Are you jealous? Since when are you even interested in men anyway?”

Xander briefly wondered if maybe she was right. Then he shoved his doubts aside. Hard. He hadn't spent hours searching his feelings to deny them now. “This isn't about me and what I want, this is about Spike and what's best for him and
for you. But would that be such a bad thing though? If I loved Spike? We both know I can give him what he deserves. The one thing you can never give him. Please Buffy. You need to be honest with yourself. You know I'm right about this.” Xander held his breath and waited, watching as Buffy seemed to sag and deflate.

“I don't want you to be right though,” she finally said, sniffling and wiping at the tears which had started to slowly flow.

“I'm sorry,” Xander sympathised, taking the petite slayer in his arms. He'd always found it difficult to stay mad at his girls and although he was still upset, he knew Buffy had never meant to actually hurt Spike. “It'll be okay. You'll see.”

Buffy sniffled once more and then looked up at him oddly, her nose crinkling in that adorable way it did when she was confused about something. “You're really in love with Spike?”

“Well…” Xander hedged, peering over his shoulder to gauge Spike's reaction. He abruptly
released Buffy and stepped back when he saw the spot where Spike had been standing was empty. “Where did he go?”

Buffy looked stricken. “Oh god! This is all my fault. I need to go look for him.”

Xander grabbed her arm stopping her progress to the door. “I'll go.”

“But Xander I-”

“I hate to interrupt,” Giles said smoothly, “but, Buffy, I think you owe me an explanation and, although I'm not entirely sure what is going on here, I think it might be best if Xander is the one to go.”

Xander didn't wait to hear anything more and sprinted for the door.

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It was getting dark, a light rain had begun drizzling from the sky and Xander was beginning
to feel the cold through the light jacket he had slipped on that morning. He still hadn't found any sign of Spike and he was starting to worry. He could imagine how hurt Spike would have been by Giles' accusation and he could only guess how Buffy's treatment had affected the vampire. Spike had been doing so much better but Xander knew he was still trying to adjust to his new status as not only part human but as a Champion as well. Xander wondered if maybe he should go back to The Academy to find Willow. Xander had actually turned to go back when he paused in thought.

Xander remembered a night not that long ago when they had patrolled together in his favourite graveyard and what Spike had said when they were leaving. Following his hunch, Xander turned back around and sprinted through the night, hoping he was right and wishing he'd remembered to bring a stake.

Xander crept quietly through the headstones hoping not to attract any attention of the unwanted fangy variety. The tension slid from
his body when he saw the one vampire he'd wanted to see sitting in Xander's special spot.

“Spike,” he said softly, coming up behind the vampire and not wanting to startle him.

Spike scrubbed a hand jerkily across his face before looking up.

“Hey,” Xander said, folding his legs to join Spike on the damp grass. “I saw what happened, ya know and it wasn't your fault.” Spike didn't say anything. He only sat and rubbed his fingers back and forth over the name engraved on the cold stone which stood nearby. “And Giles knows too,” he added, hoping Spike would say something. Anything.

“Don't matter,” Spike muttered, lifelessly.

It was such a despondent sound it made Xander angry at Buffy all over again. It made him want to wrap his arms around Spike and take all the hurt away. “It does matter Spike. It matters to me.”
Spike's head jerked up and he stared at Xander long and hard. “Why's that then?”

“I'm ah...That is I.... uh...,” Xander hesitated and tripped over his words. Now that the time had come it felt like there was a huge lump in his throat trying to stop the words from coming out. Xander closed his eye and breathed deeply, attempting to calm his frantically beating heart. He looked back up and took in Spike's features. The lightly tanned face with a sprinkling of freckles across the nose and the wide, vulnerable blue eyes, and the damn broke, spilling the words he'd been afraid to say between them. “It matters because I love you.”

Spike's eyes went round and got impossibly wider and Xander's heart clenched in fear. He'd started to turn away when he felt Spike's hand on his arm. “Love you too,” Spike confessed. “I just wasn't sure and everything was happening so fast, ya know?”

“I know,” Xander agreed, smiling goofily. Spike's
whole demeanour softened and he reached over and grasped one of Xander's hands in his own. Spike rubbed gently, almost absently, back and forth over Xander's skin with his thumb while he seemed to consider something. Xander waited patiently for Spike to sort his thoughts, letting the happy feelings bounce merrily around his body until Spike was ready to talk.

“I used to come here every year on All Soul's Day,” Spike reminisced, looking fondly at the worn grave markers. “Would save up all year and sneak out after my Mum and the rest of the house was asleep. I would make my way here with flowers and shiny little things. Just sit and talk for hours.” Spike's free hand rubbed at the short, worn grass at the base of the marker bearing the name of the elder male of the Bradley family.

“Your dad?” Xander asked, making the obvious connection.

“Yeah,” Spike confirmed with a small, wistful smile.
Xander's stomach fluttered with happiness that Spike would share this with him. “Thanks,” he said and leaning forward he slipped an arm around Spike's shoulders, drawing him closer. He pressed his lips to Spike's, licking gently and slipping his tongue inside to tangle with Spike's when the vampire happily let him inside. Xander moaned at the slick feeling of Spike's tongue sliding along his own and sending tingles spreading out through his limbs and making his whole body feel light and airy. Heat pooled in his groin and his cock lengthened, pressing against the zipper of his trousers.

Xander reluctantly pulled back when he felt Spike shiver in his arms. “You're cold,” he whispered and Spike nodded. “We should get back. The others will be worried.”

“Sod the others,” Spike said with a grin. “Don't rightly fancy doing this here though.”

Xander looked over at the gravestones of Spike's former family, William's family, and had to
agree. “Shall we then?”

Spike stood and gave Xander a hand up, yanking him hard enough on the way up so Xander's body wound up flush against Spike's smaller form. “Not done with you yet,” Spike promised and it was Xander's turn to shiver.

Part Twenty-Three

They barged through the front door still arguing over the merits of stopping by the Academy rather than sneaking around the back and heading straight for Xander's house.

“Look, I know you would much rather be at my place doing all sorts of fun things I'd love to let you do but they'll be worried,” Xander reasoned, hoping Spike would listen. For once. “And I'm still angry as hell too but you didn't see the look on Buffy's face when she realised exactly what she'd done. And Giles was upset too.”
Spike had followed Xander inside but shook his head in disagreement. “Giles is an arse. A narrow minded watcher who can no longer think for himself and believes all the old crap the Council has spewed out for years.”

Xander supposed he could understand Spike's anger at Giles. He did try to kill him that one time. Of course Spike tried to kill them all once or twice too. He was evil then though and without a soul. Did it count? Xander's head spun with it all or maybe he was still feeling the effects of Spike's kisses. He shook his head to clear it and tried again to reason with the irate vampire. “Spike I -

“He's quite correct.” Giles cut in, coming down the hall from the lounge. “I am an arse. Spike, I apologise. I had always prided myself on being open minded and able to think outside of the Council doctrine. I'm ashamed to say I've let myself down and worse, you and Buffy.”

“Why, Rupert, are you actually apologising to
me? A vampire?” Spike asked, his voice liberally laced with sarcasm.

Giles surprised Xander by chuckling softly in response to the barb. “Yes, Spike. I believe I am. Even an old watcher like myself can learn.”

Spike studied him while Xander stood nearby holding his breath and waiting to see how Spike was going to react. With Spike it was always difficult to tell. Xander wondered if it made him a bad person to hope whatever Spike's reaction turned out to be, it didn't ruin what they had going on and they could continue to where he hoped they had been going.

“All I've ever asked for was a chance. You gave that to Angel without batting an eye and yet, and I find this very interesting, the only time you really tried to kill me was after I fought to regain my soul. What does that say about you Rupert?”

Giles looked extremely uncomfortable and flustered by this statement. Xander was surprised to realise that it was true. What did it
say about Giles? The man they had trusted for years to lead them and be their guiding moral compass had chosen to kill someone who had fought for something Giles had consistently claimed was so important.

“Again, I have to admit, you are quite correct. Under the circumstances I would understand if you chose to leave but, and I mean this sincerely, I would like you to stay. You have proved yourself, on numerous occasions, to be a valuable member of our team.”

“Might not be up to me,” Spike said quietly his anger having seemingly run out of steam. “There's also the Powers and their plans to consider.”

“Of course,” Giles agreed, “but I still think we could help each other and be stronger for it. The Powers That Be may very well agree. Perhaps we could give each other that chance you spoke about.”

“Perhaps...I'll think about it.” Spike turned,
effectively ending the discussion, and headed down the hallway to the rear of the building and its exit to the expansive grounds behind it.

“Thank you.” Giles paused for a moment, looking at Spike's retreating form. “And Spike.”

“Yeah?” Spike asked, looking back over his shoulder.

“For whatever it's worth and despite what you might think, I am pleased you are here.”

Spike nodded and continued on his way to the door. Xander thought it was a real shame he'd lost his coat. Spike had always looked so damn sexy with all that leather swirling around his legs as he made his dramatic exit. Suddenly realising he was being left behind, Xander bid Giles a hasty goodnight and scurried out after his vampire. They had some very important and unfinished business to attend to.

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Nimble fingers buried themselves in his hair while an agile tongue seemed intent on mapping out each and every crevice of his mouth. They bumped into furniture and collided with walls as they made their way to his bedroom like one of those little metal balls in a pinball machine. Despite all the obstacles in their path, they only broke apart for quick gasps of air before claiming each others lips once more.

Finally reaching their goal of the bedroom, they focused on a new goal of naked skin. Xander felt clumsy and it wasn't just the breathlessness from Spike's kisses which was making his heart pound heavily in his chest. His suddenly uncoordinated fingers fumbled over the buttons on his shirt until Spike brushed his hands away with a sexy grin. He watched as Spike deftly slid each button through its hole and then carefully parted the cloth exposing Xander's skin beneath. Long, elegant fingers caressed the tanned skin and slipped through the sparse sprinkling of hairs, followed by kisses so soft they could almost go unnoticed. A tremble shuddered
through Xander's legs and he reached out for the bed to keep himself from falling. Spike grinned that sexy grin again as he shed his own clothes before divesting Xander of his jeans.

Xander had seen Spike naked before but at this moment, the sight took his breath away. Hands stroked over skin and Xander inhaled a sharp breath when Spike's hand grazed against his cock which hung heavy and throbbing between his legs. Spike moved to claim his kiss swollen lips once more as he guided Xander down onto the bed behind him. Spike's body felt so damn good lying on top of his, their cocks slipping wetly against each other when Spike set up a slow glide up and down Xander's body.

Xander rolled them, taking charge when he became frustrated with the slow movements. Spike only laughed and leaned up for another kiss. Xander had never realised being with another man could feel so right, so good and he wondered if Spike was just as inexperienced.

“I've never done this before. Have you?” Spike's
cheeks flushed a light pink and an evil grin spread over Xander's face. “You have! With who?”

Spike raised an eyebrow and thrust his hips suggestively. “You really wanna talk about this now?”

Xander gasped. “Point. No I don't. I wanna do more of this.”

Spike happily obliged while Xander ground himself down on the smaller form beneath him. Just as Spike's cock slid against Xander's in an oh so delicious way, Xander had an epiphany. “Oh! My! God! Angel!” Spike stilled and his body stiffened in shock. Xander immediately realised his mistake. “Spike. It's not what you think.”

Spike shoved at Xander's shoulders. “Get off.”

Xander rested his weight on his forearms on either side of the body beneath him and looked in puzzlement at the blue eyes filled with hurt. “Hey c'mon.”
“Said get the fuck off!” Spike said angrily and when he shoved harder, Xander rolled off and to the side. Spike immediately sprung from the bed and began searching for his clothes.

Xander felt awful but was finding it difficult to organise his thoughts while his body was still sending all sorts of naughty thoughts through his head. “Spike. William. Can I call you Will?” Spike shot him a scathing look over his shoulder. “Okay, Spike it is. Look, I didn't mean that the way it sounded.”

“It sounded bloody typical to me,” Spike spat angrily, but at least he'd stopped trying to leave. “You're all the same,” he accused with a finger pointed at Xander. “First Dru then Buffy and now you.”

“Please listen to me, please,” Xander begged. “I remember back when I first met you and I hated you.”

Spike's mouth dropped open and his head tilted
in confusion. “Not really helping Xan.”

“Bear with me. I used to think I was jealous of you because of Drusilla, yeah I know how crazy that sounds but she's ...well you were with her for like a hundred years or so, so I'm thinking you get the attraction.” Spike nodded and made an impatient 'go on' gesture. “And then there was the whole thing with Buffy but I've had a chance to figure things out and I wasn't really entirely jealous of you, it was them. I hated you because deep down inside I wanted you. I was jealous because someone else always had your attention and the only way I could get it was to be ...be...”

“Mean? Nasty?” Spike suggested.

“I was kinda thinking more along the lines of my fantastic wit and my uncanny ability to pun in any pressure situation. But, yeah, okay. That works too. You weren't exactly known for your sparkling personality. You tried to kill me what? Two? Three times?”
“What the bloody hell did you expect?” Spike asked, flinging his hands in the air. “I was evil. Was supposed to try to kill you. What was your excuse?”

“Hey!” Xander exclaimed, getting a bit angry himself. “I was supposed to kill you too. Vampire slayer? Kinda goes with the title.”

“Weren't even a slayer though, were you? Just a stupid child who hung around and tripped over his own feet more often than not while running away screaming.”

“Oh yeah? Well you had stupid hair!” Xander snapped. “And...and... are we having our first lovers' tiff?”

“Lovers' tiff?” Spike taunted. “Could you be any more of a girl?”

“C'mon Spike, please, arguing with you is the last thing I want to be doing right now.”

“Well, I wasn't the one spouting the big poof's
name, was I?”

“'You never let anything go, do you? Christ, I said I was sorry. It didn't mean anything. I said his name because I figured he was the one you'd...ah...done it with.”

“'Oh,” Spike responded, suddenly embarrassed.

“'Yeah, oh,” Xander agreed, pulling Spike in for a hug. “And I'll have you know I never screamed like a girl. I was all about the manly bellowing while fleeing for my life, thank you very much.”

Spike laughed just as Xander had wanted and their argument was over as quickly as it had started.

“'Where were we?” Spike asked, sliding a hand around Xander's wilted erection and bringing it swiftly back to hardness once more.

“'I was hoping you were going to fuck me,” Xander declared and wasn't entirely sure who was more shocked by his boldness.
Spike shook his head and directed Xander back to the bed. “I don't think so, Tinkerbell, not for your first time with a man.”

“You mean...you want me to...to?” Xander squeaked, alarmed at the thought of being the one in charge.

Spike grinned at him sexily. “Oh yeah. I want very much. And don't worry, I can be a very pushy bottom,” he added as if he'd read Xander's mind and producing a tube of lube seemingly out of nowhere.

Xander's fingers were trembling as he followed Spike's instructions and gently probed at the puckered entrance. His stomach fluttered with excitement at the thought of being 'there' and he knelt up to hurriedly slick his cock. Spike chuckled and wiggled invitingly in response.

Sliding his length inside was like nothing Xander had ever imagined. For some reason, he'd though it would be like being with a girl but this
was nothing like that. Nothing like it at all. This was heaven. Bliss. Like being wrapped so tight in a grasp of iron and yet like being sheathed inside a cocoon of the softest velvet. Xander adjusted his position slightly so he could reach those delectable lips and Spike moaned happily.

“I take it that's the spot?” Xander ground out, trying hard not to have this all be over before it had hardly begun.

“Yeah,” Spike agreed before thrusting his hips up impatiently. “Now move. God, Xan, move.”

Xander pulled his hips back until only the tip of his cock was still inside and then thrust back in, hard and deep. He set up a hard, fast rhythm, so very grateful Spike wasn't a girl or human so he could free himself and not hold back. The hyena part of him resonated with contentment and he let himself go, growling and grinding himself deep inside. Spike met him thrust for thrust and it didn't take long before they were both moaning their completion. Xander deep inside Spike's grasping channel as Spike's cock spurted
long strands of come between them to mingle with their sweat.

“See?” Xander panted. “Told you, I'm not a girl.

“No,” Spike acknowledged with a snort of laughter. “Definitely not a girl, love.”

After a hasty swipe with Spike's discarded shirt. they clambered beneath the covers and drifted off to a contented sleep. Xander woke with a start in the middle of the night and poked at Spike's shoulder.

“Wha?” Spike grumbled sleepily.

“I got my sixth sense back,” Xander whispered happily, thinking of the vision which had woken him.

Spike rolled over and peered up at him through the gloom of the early morning light peering around the edges of the closed curtains. “Come again?”
“I had a vision!” Xander announced, bouncing with excitement.

Part Twenty-Four

Xander paced back and forth, back and forth over the carpet in the conference room. When he and Spike had arrived for the morning meeting Buffy had been waiting for them. She had said she wanted to talk with Spike, who had agreed, and now Xander was left to wait and wonder. And worry. Shit. He knew barely a minute had passed but it felt like hours. Why did he agree to this? He was making pass number ten around the room when he heard the sound of voices. He stopped and followed the sound to the wall near the door. Nearer the source, he was easily able to distinguish the voices as those of Buffy and Spike.

“I wanted to say...what happened,” Buffy was saying. “I thought and then. I well, I'm so sorry.” Good, Xander thought, you should be.
“It's okay. Was the way it went between us, wasn't it? A bit of the rough stuff and then... wasn't all hearts and flowers. No wonder you got confused.” Ah, Spike, always so forgiving.

“I'm not sure I deserve having you be so nice to me after what I did.” You're right. Spike shouldn't be so nice to you. Boyfriend stealer. Xander felt a small pang at that last insult. Technically Spike hadn't been his boyfriend at the time and, oh...

“Can't help it, can I? I do love you.” Xander's heart hurt when he heard those words coming out of Spike's mouth. He bit his lip and willed himself not to overreact.

“But not like that?” Buffy's voice questioned.

“No, not like that. But I do care Buffy. I expect I always will.” The breath Xander had been holding came out on a long sigh of relief and he was so glad he hadn't followed his initial instinct. Storming into the hall and slamming
Buffy up against a wall probably wouldn't have gone over very well.

“You are in my heart and always will be. Right there beside the rest of my family. Please don't look like that. Spike, you deserve to have people care about you. You need to start believing that.” Listen to the girl Spike. She's right.

“Thank you. And I think, maybe, I'm starting to believe it.”

“Oh huh, does a certain dark haired friend of mine have anything to do with that?” Oh, now this was getting interesting. Xander shuffled a bit closer to the wall.

“It just sorta happened. He was always there, taking care of me and making sure I was okay. He's smart and funny. He's got all these quirky little habits which should be annoying but aren't and – what?”

“Oh, Spike, you've got it bad. At first I thought you two together was kinda weird but now? Not
so much. You two seem to fit.” Xander launched into an abridged version of the Snoopy dance as the words 'Spike's got it bad' ran over and over in his head. Xander didn't think the huge grin on his face could get any bigger. He stopped suddenly, arms still in the air when he heard a new voice.

“Spike. Buffy. Shall we go inside and start the meeting?” Crap! That was Giles. Xander turned and sprinted for his chair before the others came in and caught him. He made it one step before his eyes widened in surprise, his arms pin-wheeling to keep himself from falling. “Uhm, hi,” he offered lamely to a very stern looking Willow.

“Xander,” Willow hissed, “were you eavesdropping?”

“Ahh, would you believe me if I said no?”

Willow folded her arms over her chest and her foot started tapping.
“I'll take that as a no. Buffy wanted to talk to Spike and after what happened, I was worried.” He peeked over her shoulder at the others taking their seats. “Please don't tell,” he begged.

Willow's expression softened and she rubbed a hand soothingly along one of his arms. “I think I understand.”

“Thanks. You're the best,” he said, ushering her to her seat before taking his own next to Spike, who gave him a cheeky grin and a wink. “What?”

Spike leaned over to whisper in his ear and Xander shivered as he felt the warmth of Spike's breath tickling over his skin. “Nice to know you cared enough to listen.”

Xander felt the heat of a blush. “Stupid vampire hearing.”

Spike chuckled softly. “It's okay. Your secret's safe with me.”
“Gee, remind me to thank you later,” Xander complained.

Spike's hand rubbed suggestively along Xander's thigh. “Oh, I plan on it.”

Xander felt his skin heat again but for an entirely different reason. The thought of Spike's cock breaching him made him nervous and excited all at the same time and he squirmed in his chair.

“It appears that everyone is here so why don't we get started,” Giles announced, taking his seat.

Xander looked around the room with a puzzled frown. “What about the rest of the Watcher types?”

“I felt this should be kept between us.”

Willow leaned forward. “Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all,” Giles replied, waving away their concerns. “Although the immediate threat to
the key has been eliminated, I still feel it is prudent to keep Dawn's identity a secret. There is also the matter of the research concerning the spell using the scythe and its unexpected results.”

“Have we learned anything new?” Buffy asked.

Giles shook his head. “More of a confirmation and clarification. I've spent a considerable amount of time discussing and researching the spell with the High Priestess of the coven.”

Dawn bounced in her seat, clearly excited to have been included. “Did you figure out why all this stuff happened?”

“As we suspected,” Giles explained. “When we cast the spell to turn all the potentials into slayers, we upset the delicate balance between good and evil. The Powers That Be took the opportunity to attempt to reset this balance.”

“By having a new champion?” Dawn guessed with a pleased smile.
“Yes. The powers needed a new champion but without the restrictions being a vampire would have imposed. This was the perfect opportunity to remove those restrictions.”

“What about me?” Xander wondered aloud. “And Dawn?”

“Again, a perfect opportunity. Xander, you would need the strength of the hyena in order to withstand the visions. It is unknown what would have happened to Dawn, however, under the circumstances, I think it is safe to assume it was in her best interests to have merged as well. It also, potentially, allows for the champion and his guide to travel faster and to other dimensions.”

“But why did they take the visions away if they wanted me to have them?”

“This is only conjecture but we think it was because they wanted their guide and the champion to form a connection. Since you told
me earlier the visions have returned, I assume a
collection of some sort has been made?”

Spike snorted but gave Xander's hand a
reassuring squeeze under the table. “You could
say that.”

“So that's it then,” Buffy sighed, sadly. “There'll
be no more slayers.”

Willow reached over and gave Buffy a hug. “I'm
sorry Buffy.”

She returned Willow's hug and gave the rest of
the room a small, smile. “No. It's all right. If this
was the price we had to pay to save the world
from The First then it was worth it.”

“A very admirable way of looking at it,” Giles
said with a pleased expression.

Buffy looked over at Xander and Spike. “I've
learned some things over the past few days.
Besides, it doesn't mean we can't still help.”
“You're quite right,” Giles agreed. “And in a similar spirit, I would like to make a proposition. I feel it would be extremely beneficial for all parties if we could work together.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Exactly which parties would you be referring to?”

“If you and Xander agree to remain here we could use this as a base of operations. We could also work with Angel's group in LA. We have vast resources at our disposal and although there is no longer a slayer line, there are still many slayers who can help. Not to mention all the research facilities at our disposal.”

“What do you say Xan? You wanna stay here with your friends and give it a go?”

Xander easily understood the most important question that had been asked without being voiced aloud. Did he want to give it a go? He didn't even need to take time to think about it. “Yeah. I'd like that.” Not caring about their audience, Xander tugged Spike into his arms.
With his friends cheering in the background, he kissed the surprised vampire. “I'd like that a lot.”

The End