Fandom: BtVS
Pairing: S/X
Rating: Touches of NC-17

Summary: When Valentine's Day arrives, Dru dips her finger in the brew and gives it a stir.

Note: The prologue started off as a character study of Spike during his wheelchair period. It sort of grew.

Word Count: 1,850

Betaed by sparrow2000 and DJ, with many thanks.
Comments: Are greatly appreciated, loved and cherished.

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Bewitched

by Maz
Prologue

Dru was late coming to help him out of bed and into his chair, leaving him lying for hours, or so it seemed, after he'd felt the sun set, impotent and furious about it. Three weeks since he'd broken his back and two days since Angelus came back. Dru hadn't slept with him since.

Using the power he still had in his arms, Spike managed to drag himself up enough to sit, leaning against the headboard, and coincidentally pulled himself free of the sheet. He looked down at his lower body with disgust. Arms, chest, head and neck all worked fine, but below the belt? He pinched his thigh. Nothing! Hips and legs were inert and unresponsive to even his determined will - truly dead weight. To avoid the sight, which appalled him as much as it disgusted him, he dragged the covers back up to his waist. A small voice, deep inside and far back in his past, was whispering that a person who couldn't look after himself didn't deserve to survive. He growled his defiance of that thought and offered Heinrich a virtual 'fuck off', snarling, 'who's the one who's still here, though, eh?' at his dead ancestor.

Looking around, he saw that his clothes were where Dru had left them, neatly folded on the hard backed chair
beside the bed The three feet of space between it and the bed were too far for him to reach. He was truly, fucking helpless. Unless... Allowing his upper body to tip sideways, he braced his left hand on the edge of the mattress and stretched out his right arm, reaching towards the chair. It was awkward and he couldn't sustain the stretch for long, his upper body slumping under its own weight after a moment, forcing him to lean on his right hand on the floor, as he gathered himself for another try.

On the third attempt, he managed to snag the hem of one leg of his jeans with his fingernail and carefully he began to pull it back towards him. The pile tottered, the t-shirt and shirt on top of his jeans threatening to fall in the wrong direction and he froze while the pile settled again. One more careful tug and the whole lot toppled to the floor between the chair and the bed.

Planting his right hand flat on the floor, he shifted his left hand down to join it. With the extra reach that gave him, he was able to drag the heap nearer, although the action brought him perilously close to falling out of bed. Grabbing the clothes, he shoved them up behind him, onto the mattress, and then paused as he assessed his position. He ran his right hand down his ribs to his waist
and discovered that his bloody hips had flopped over, dragging his useless legs with them and he was stuck, chest down, hanging over the edge of the bed.

Placing both hands on the floor again, he pushed against it with all his strength, relieved beyond measure to feel the touch of the mattress against his skin, when he eventually got his lower chest back up over the edge. Shifting his hands to the mattress, he managed to push himself further back so he was lying on his front with his head still hanging over the side. His arms were shaking from the effort and he rested for a moment, until the tremors passed.

It was a whole other operation to haul himself over onto his back again, using the slats of the headboard to pull against, and yet another to get back into his original sitting position. Cursing freely, he dragged his t-shirt out from under his arse and pulled the tangled sheet free of his legs, bundling it up and chucking it to the floor in disgust.

The t-shirt was easy to pull on, as was the red shirt that went over the top, but his jeans once again presented him with a problem. For a full minute he studied the logistics, then, leaning forward and using both hands, he
lifted his legs apart, one at a time, so that there was about a foot of mattress exposed between his knees. Holding the jeans by their waistband, he shook them out and gave them a flip, so they landed flat on the mattress between his legs. He pulled the fly wide to expose the inside and took hold of his left thigh with both hands, lifting his knee up to his chest and lowering it when his foot lined up with the opening in his jeans. Again, he paused, holding his knee vertical as he assessed his position. Shoving his knee away, forcing his leg to straighten, did nothing but push the jeans down the bed. He needed three hands. Or maybe he needed legs that bloody worked! Gritting his teeth, he tried again, holding the jeans in place with one hand and pushing his leg straight with the other. His foot slipped smoothly down, inside the leg of his jeans.

With one leg in, getting the other in place was easier. Pulling the waistband up past his hips was a different matter. He forced his left hand under his back and hooked two fingers though a belt loop. Bracing his right hand against the headboard, he did his best to bend his left arm and pull his jeans up his body, while simultaneously pushing his body down the bed by straightening the other arm.
When Dru finally deigned to appear, he was exhausted and still only half dressed.

She crossed the room to his side and looked down at him, titling her head to one side as she studied him, an amused smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. He glared back at her. "Bit of help here?" he snarled.

Dru grinned, grabbed his legs and swung them around so they flopped to the floor, guided his arms around her neck and stood up, pulling him with her. He hung from her as she pulled up his jeans and fastened them.

Scooping one arm under his knees, she picked him up and carried him over to his chair. As she settled him in place, she planted a light kiss behind his ear. "I'll make it all better for you, my love," she promised. She sounded gleeful, like she had before Prague and the part of his mind that he could spare from his own concerns was glad. "Things are stirring," she whispered. "Something new is worrying at the web. The air is shifting, because she's powerful, but unlearned. I smell jealousy and loneliness and pain."

Spike looked up at her. "Yeah, my pain," he growled. "Caused by you spending all your bloody time with his
nibs. If you can smell that, and it offends you so bloody much," he suggested, "you know the solution."

"Not you, silly." She tapped him on the tip of his nose with her forefinger. "The other. He's full of confusion. And it's going to get worse, come the Saint's day." She laughed, a wild, happy sound in the dead air of the room. "And he thinks she's going to help him." She smoothed a hand over his hair, as if he was a big cat. "I'll make it better for you, my poppet. You know I will. For all the affection and jealousy we share."

"It's called love, Dru."

Dru straightened up and looked at him down the length of her nose. He'd offended her. "That, too," she agreed. Her secretive smile bloomed and she bent stiffly at the waist, like a marionette, bringing her lips close to his ear. "I need some of your blood," she whispered. Reaching into her cleavage, she pulled out a silver perfume vial. "I'm going to dip my finger in the pot, stir it around, and we'll all have syllabub for tea."

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The knock on the front door dragged Amy's attention
away from her books and she carefully hid them under her homework before she went to answer it. Clattering down the stairs, she gave the hall clock a quick glance. It was too late for any of her friends to be calling. If her Dad had forgotten his keys again it could be him, although it was early for him to be coming home from evening shift at the plant.

It wasn't her Dad. The woman waiting on the porch was no one she'd met before. She would have remembered. "Yes?" she asked.

"Is your Mum in?" the woman replied. Her accent was as exotic as her clothes and she was studying Amy with an expression that Amy couldn't identify. It could have been sympathy, but it could equally have been amusement.

"No." Amy knew that she'd spoken more sharply than was polite, but there was something about the woman's gaze... something she couldn't put her finger on... something that caused the patch of skin between her shoulder blades to itch. It made her wary.

The woman's mouth pinched and her brow furrowed in thought. "Oh," she said. She sounded disappointed. Then her face cleared and she smiled slightly. "No, she
wouldn't be, would she, deary?" She took a step closer and leant forwards. "I heard, see?" she whispered. "She played with magic, but she didn't know the rules, so it bit her back and swallowed her up." Amy found that she had also taken a step forward, but she pulled away sharply when the woman continued, "Could happen to you, that could. So easy to take a misstep, when all you've got is books." She made a dismissive gesture with her hand and Amy found herself watching the way the light spilling out onto the porch seemed to flicker between her fingers. "But that wouldn't be right," the woman continued, "when with a bit of help, it would all be so easy. Want to know the secrets, don't you?"

Amy nodded and started to pull the door open wider, but the flicker of some new expression crossing the woman's face made her hesitate. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I've come to show you how it works." The woman smiled and it transformed her face, making her appear both younger and more ordinary. She was still beautiful, but her beauty was no longer so strange. "You want to know how to make the threads fall how you want them to, don't you, my dear? It's not hard, if you know what you're doing. Your mother got what she deserved. But you... you could do wonders." She reached her hand into
a velvet bag that hung from her wrist and pulled out a small silver flask. "I have potions to give you, so you won't make the mistakes your mother made."

With one more check of the hall clock, Amy opened the door and invited her visitor in.

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Three days later Xander watched as Cordy walked away across the floor of the Bronze with his silver heart pendant in her hand.

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In a warehouse across town Dru looked up from her cards, eyes unseeing. "There he is," she breathed.

Part One
Xander was still feeling depressed when he got to school, on the morning after the disaster of his Valentine's Day surprise for Cordy. The sniggers directed at him in the corridor did nothing to help lift his mood. Plus, Buffy was even more obsessed than usual with her evil ex-boyfriend and Willow was nowhere to be seen. The final straw was Harmony, with her snide but accurately placed barb: "Gee, Xander, maybe you should learn a second language so that even more girls can reject you," which was swell, coming from someone who hadn't even managed to master her first. He knew that Harmony was dumping on him because she'd lost her position, when the others let Cordy back into their clique, but the fact that they were in the main corridor when she vented her spite, with most of their class within earshot, meant that it hurt.

That was why he ambushed Amy after last period. He explained what he wanted, as he bundled her into an empty classroom.

"A true love spell?" she gasped. "That kind of thing is the hardest! I mean... to make someone love you for all eternity?"

Xander shook his head and waved his hands in front of
himself in a gesture of denial. "Whoa! Whoa, back up," he said, suiting his actions to his words. "Cordy's not my true love." He paused when he hit the wall behind him and tried to explain in words that she would understand. "I just want her to want me," he said, "desperately. So I can break up with her and subject her to the same hell she's been putting me through."

Amy didn't look convinced. "Oh, I don't know, Xander." She paced around the room, before coming back to stand in front of him. "Intent has to be pure with love spells."

"Right," he agreed. "I intend revenge. Pure as the driven snow." He allowed a hard smile to form, which he hoped would convince her of his determination. "Now, are you gonna play, or do we need to have another chat about invisible homework?"

It worked; her eyes widened and she crumpled. "There's one spell I saw in one of my mom's books," she admitted. "I think she cast it for a guy when she was at school. I'll need to check it out." She hefted her book bag onto her shoulder and gave a casual shrug, her voice turning airy. "And I'll need something to fix it, something of Cordelia's. My mom used the guy's jacket, but anything personal will do."
Xander nodded. "I know just the thing."

He left, with a promise from Amy that she'd have everything else ready by the next night, and went home to enjoy an anticipatory gloat.

Hanging around Cordy's locker the next morning, he was convinced half the school was waiting for her to appear, so they could watch him beg her to take him back. It was lucky that Wayne Balinski had fallen down the front steps, chasing after Kylie Williams, so the more obvious sniggers in the corridor were now directed at him, rather than at Xander. Thanking god for small mercies, Xander crossed his arms over his chest and tried to lean against the wall in an inconspicuous manner.

Getting the pendant back proved easy enough and Cordy's casual dismissal of it confirmed Xander in his belief that she'd been playing him, all along. It had cost him every cent he owned, but it obviously wasn't expensive enough for Miss Chase. Still burning from that realisation, it was with a renewed sense of determination that he joined Amy in the science lab at eleven that night.
Xander watched silently as Amy unpacked a bunch of candles, a book and various ordinary looking glass jars full of powders and liquids, from her bag. Following her instructions, he set up the Bunsen burner on the bench, lit it with the matches she'd brought and placed a beaker of distilled water on a stand above the flame. Then he stood back to give her room to work.

She began to add the contents of the jars, one by one, to the beaker. The first was a clear liquid, but the bottle it came in was too fancy for it to be simple water. This was followed by a red, treacle-like substance that she extracted from its jar with a large spoon, then pinches of different powders, which she sprinkled into the beaker from above. Some were obviously ground herbs, others looked like sand, but coloured like no sand Xander had ever seen. Finally, she picked up a small silver vial. "What's that?" He asked.

"It's the binder," she replied. "The ingredient that makes the whole spell work properly. Without it, the spell can go wrong." Looking up, she hesitated. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Xander smiled. "Oh yeah, I want the Hellmouth working for me, for once." He leaned forward to get a better
view, as she poured the entire contents into the mix and stirred it with a glass rod. "It looks like blood," he observed.

"It's not." There was more than a trace of irritation in her voice. "I just got it a few days ago and I'm wasting it all on you. But the spell won't work without it." She glanced down at the book that she'd opened and laid out on the bench. Xander couldn't read it from where he was standing, but he could see that it was printed in double columns of text, with hand scribbled notes in the margins. "I need some of your blood to add to the binding," Amy said. "Here." She picked up an Exacto knife and held it out to him. "Four drops. Prick your thumb just below the base of the nail. Then hold it over the beaker."

Carefully Xander took the knife and did as she bade him, squeezing his thumb to force out the last drop. It fell into the red liquid, already simmering gently over the heat, hardly making a ripple in the surface.

"Perfect." Amy took a deep breath and let it out again. "Now the personal object," she said, holding out her hand.

Reaching into his pocket, Xander pulled out the pendant
and passed it to her. She placed it on the bench. "Take off your clothes and stay over there, by the door, while I draw the circle on the floor."

“Take off my clothes?” he asked nervously. “All of them?” His voice was a little squeakier than he’d like.

Amy, on the other hand, just sounded impatient. “Yes, of course, all of them.” She looked at her watch. "Hurry up, we need to be ready by midnight and it's almost time. You have to be pure of appearance for the spell to work and I need to paint some symbols on your skin.”

“Uh, okay.” It wasn’t that he was deformed, or anything, but it was embarrassing, getting undressed in front of a girl. He pulled his shirt over his head and toed off his shoes and socks. One quick glance over his shoulder showed him that Amy was kneeling on the floor with her back to him. She looked like she was finger-painting. He quickly unfastened his jeans and stepped out of them, and then his boxers.

Turning back towards the room with his jeans clutched in front of his groin, Xander watched as Amy used the liquid in the beaker to finish marking out a circle, with a cross below it and an arrow coming out of the top right
quadrant. Standing back, she surveyed the results and gave a small nod of satisfaction. "Sit there," she said, pointing at the centre of the symbol.

Cautiously Xander took up position on the spot she indicated, folded his legs and sat down. She knelt in front of him and dipping two fingers in the beaker, drew three lines vertically down his chest. Her touch was impersonal, but it left a trail of tingles in its wake, as if the liquid was made from Pixy Stix.

There was a brief tug of war over his jeans, which Amy won with the threat that if they stayed in the circle, they would evaporate and he’d have to walk home naked. She handed him a black candle in exchange, with the words, "Hold that in front of you, instead. It’ll actually help with the spell." Putting the beaker down, she dug in her pocket and retrieved a yearbook photograph of Cordelia which she placed on the floor in front of him, and the box of matches. "I don't think the photo's necessary," she added, "as long as you keep Cordelia firmly in your mind, but it can't hurt."

Striking a match, she lit the candle, picked up the beaker and returned to the bench, placing it back on the stand above the Bunsen burner. She picked up the pendant,
allowing it to spin at the end of its chain. "It's pretty," she observed.

Xander nodded his agreement, but didn't say anything, being too busy worrying that someone would walk in on them, midnight or not. Amy shrugged. “Concentrate now,” she instructed.

Looking down at the spell book, she traced her finger across the page, her lips moving as if she was memorising what she read. She lowered the pendant into the brew as she spoke the words of the spell: "Diana... goddess of love and the hunt... I pray to thee. Heed my cries and bind the heart of Xander's love."

A burst of yellow sparks exploded out of the beaker and Amy took a step back. A ball of light rose into the air, darted towards Xander and circled him, like a crazy comet or an intelligent firework. It spun around his head, obscuring his view of the room. Silver sparks and gold stars flashed within it, teasing his eyes into trying to follow their dance. They shifted, forming patterns that mesmerised and enthralled him, taunting him with their promise. Placing the candle on the floor between his crossed legs, he lifted his arms, attempting to capture the light, certain it was both soft and warm, but it evaded
his efforts. It began to stretch and the trail of glitter sank towards his lap, weaving its way around his chest and neck; it was as comforting as he had hoped. He threw his head back, his lips parted on a sigh as he groaned into the seductive touch. The light tickled him and caressed him and he swayed after as he felt it leave him, veering towards Amy, where half of it concentrating into a single ball of swirling flame, while the rest continued to dance around the room. She reached out and seemed to gather the ball of light between her hands. It began to pulse and her arms started to shake, as if it took an effort to keep it contained within her grasp.

Xander couldn't look away; the cloud of light swirled, gathering and fading, it formed shapes that he almost felt he recognised as a face, but they kept shifting. All he got were flashes of what looked like an arched eyebrow, a straight nose, fine, curved lips, but each was gone before he could be sure.

He continued to watch, hypnotised, and the patterns dragged him out of his body so he swirled as one with the flame. In the distance, he could hear a voice. It sounded panicked as it recited words he could only just make out, "...submits to your will only," it said. "Diana, bring about this love and bless it."
Xander felt like he was flying, his body elongated with the speed of his movement, the light transformed into a rainbow of colours, swirling around him, through him, in him, and he wasn’t alone. Another body spun in the whirlpool with him. He reached out his hand, feeling it taken in a cool, strong grip and he knew that it wasn’t Cordy who danced through the fire with him.

Then the flames and colours and swirls were gone, and his dancer partner with them. The fire drew back into the beaker and Xander was once again sitting on the floor of the science lab. He shivered and blinked, trying to remember who he was, until Amy's urgent voice brought him back to himself, "Blow out the candle now!" she cried.

Xander did as she said and in the sudden dark he felt a prickling tingle on his skin, along the stripes Amy had drawn down his chest, and his head swam with dizziness. When the fluorescents in the ceiling snapped on, revealing Amy leaning against the door jam, her hand still on the light switch, he looked down at his chest. The marks she had painted there were gone.

Amy followed his gaze. "Looks like it worked," she
Taking a deep breath, Xander nodded. "Something did," he agreed.

Getting stiffly to his feet, he hurried to get dressed, feeling more like himself with each item of clothing and each passing minute. He helped Amy tidy up the mess, then he went home and slept the peaceful sleep of the vindicated.

Part Two

The next day was hell. By lunch time Xander was kicking himself for not turning tail and running at the first weirdness – Harmony Kendal actually simpering at him as she asked him for help with her math homework. But fool that he was, he ignored that first sign of the apocalypse and by the middle of the day, not just Harmony, but the entire female population of the school seemed to have gone crazy and decided that Xander
Harris was the stuff of their dreams. The entire female population with one important exception - Cordelia Chase appeared to be immune. What a surprise!

Xander went in search of Amy, hoping for an explanation, but she'd apparently decided that because he had asked her to do one measly spell, it was a sign that they were meant to get married, settle down and have kids, before he'd decided to stop being one, himself. She didn’t care that the spell had gone disastrously wrong.

The only sensible action was to run away, so he did. Then Willow ambushed him in his bedroom and he only just escaped from there with his virtue intact. Bumping into his Aunt Kate, immediately after, was too horrible for words. He reckoned he'd be trying to scrub that memory from his brain for weeks. After spending three hours hiding in the park, wondering if he should take up smoking, he spent the rest of the evening locked in his room, terrified that his mother might come to check what he was doing. He knew that if the spell didn’t wear off by the next day, there was only one person who might be able to help him.

It didn’t wear off.
Playing hooky, his first plan, was a failure. After being chased out of the mall, the comic shop and the children’s play area in the park, he finally faced up to the fact that he would have to meet his doom. Screwing up his courage, he crept into school and went to find Giles, trusting that he would know enough about magic to tell Xander how to put the whole mess right.

Unfortunately, he'd hardly managed to begin his confession before Ms Calendar came in. And Buffy! Dimly, Xander could remember a time when Buffy offering to unwrap herself for him would have been the stuff of fantasies. But as she stalked towards him, all he felt was panic, backed up by a nauseous feeling of distaste. His life was a total disaster. When Amy arrived, too, it got even worse. He couldn't blame Giles for yelling, or Oz for the punch.

Having been banished from the library and realising that the search for Buffy-rat was going to occupy Giles for some time, Xander decided that fleeing was his last option. Get out of his sight, Giles had said. Xander thought it was a good idea to get out of everyone's sight, maybe by hiding in the alley behind Willy's bar, next to his back door. Keeping his head down and his shoulders hunched up to his ears, he scurried along the corridor.
The door to the courtyard was in sight when he thought he heard Cordelia's voice raised in angry protest. Turning to look down the hall, he saw a confused mass of colour which resolved itself into separate bodies, all with their backs to him. It was only when Cordelia gave another cry, this time edged with fear, that he realised the crowd was a group of girls involved in a mass catfight.

Harmony's voice rose above the mob. "You thought you'd do better, is that it? We'll knock that snotty attitude right out of you!"

Briefly, a gap opened, as they shoved and pushed at each other, and Xander saw Cordelia on the floor in the middle of the pack. Self-preservation warred with instinct and instinct won. Without pausing to allow his common sense to talk him out of it, he ran toward them, not too clear about what he was going to do, but certain that it was his fault that she was there.

He'd begun to force his way through, when one girl, pushed to the edge of the mass, spotted him and screamed his name. The entire mob turned. It was like being caught in a breaker whilst swimming along a shoreline. The wave crashed around him. A couple of
girls managed to grab his shirt, before they were pushed away by their comrades and Xander took advantage of the general shoving to fight his way through to Cordelia. Adrenalin coming to his aid, he picked her up in his arms and, tearing himself free from the clutching hands of the crazies, ran down the hall.

He barged through the doors at the end and out into the courtyard, only then allowing Cordelia down onto her feet. "I think we lost..." he trailed off as he looked up and saw a new crowd of girls waiting for them.

Willow stood at their head with a large fire axe in her hands. "I should've known I'd find you with her," she snarled.

‘What the hell,’ he wondered. Only a few hours ago she was trying to seduce him. Now she had an axe? "Will," he pleaded. "Come on, you don't wanna hurt me."

Willow's face screwed up into an expression of utter despair and fury. "I love you so much!" she gritted out between clenched teeth, "But I'd rather see you dead than with that bitch!" Raising the axe, she advanced toward him. The others, who had appeared to wait as she made her declaration, charged forwards as well.
Xander backed away in the face of the advance, dragging Cordy with him, while he searched frantically for a clear space where they might get through. Rescue, however, came in the unlikely form of Harmony and her friends, who chose that moment to come running out of the school behind them. Harmony paused for a moment, taking in the scene, and with a speed and decisiveness that Xander would never have expected, seemed to immediately understand what was going on.

She rushed into the fray, grabbing hold of the shaft of Willow's axe and tried to wrest it from her. "Get away from him! He's mine!" she yelled.

Xander and Cordelia stood rooted to the spot with shock, for the space of two gasping breaths, then Xander grabbed Cordelia's hand and together they made their escape through the clear space left behind Harmony’s gang when they pushed Willow’s back. Behind them, his two groups of admirers were too busy fighting each other to notice.

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Angelus walked out of his bedroom. He appeared, to the
casual observer, to be concerned only with straightening the cuffs on his shirt. But Spike wasn't casual, not when it came to Angelus, so he didn't miss the way Angelus glanced sharply around the factory, checking and logging where each of the minions was stationed and what they were doing.

Strolling across the room to stand behind Dru on her high stool at the table, Angelus smiled at Spike over her shoulder and ran his hands around her neck and down her front, until he was cupping her breasts. Dru moaned and leant back, rubbing against him. "Did I hear you say there was a new game in town, Dru?" he asked.

She bent her neck to the side as she looked up at him. "Angel!" she breathed. Spike snorted. It was as if she hadn't seen the old bugger in years, instead of having rolled out of his bed a mere hour before.

Angelus raised his eyebrows at Spike and his smirk deepened. "Dru?" he asked again, a hint of menace entering his voice.

She giggled. Sliding his hands further down, he grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her out of her seat, setting her on her feet in front of him. He slipped his arms
around her and pulled her back against his chest, his eyes on Spike the whole time.

"I've been playing a game," she confided. "I found a kitten that's lost its family and I'm going to bring it home for my Spike, so he won't be lonely anymore."

Spike scowled. "I don't need you giving me toys, like I'm some sort of child, Dru." Angrily, he wheeled himself to the end of the table and spun his chair around so he was facing them across its width.

Angelus cocked his head and asked, in a voice full of polite interest, "Why not? You are her childe, and about as useful as a newborn, right now." One of his hands inched its way down Dru's body, over her belly, and began to stroke her mound through her dress. "I know Dru gives you pity access, but you have to admit it's so nice to see her happy, for a change." He paused. "And satisfied." He smiled as Dru arched her back, pushing against his hand.

Spike grit his teeth and turned away from the display, only to find himself staring into the wide eyes of a couple of minions. "Get out!" he yelled at them. "Go find me something to eat!"
He kept his eyes on them as they fled, then turned his glare on the rest, who sensibly decided to fade into the shadows. Spike waited for the sound of doors closing in their wake, before he turned back to his grandsire. "You would do well to worry less about Dru's happiness and more about that Slayer you've been tramping around with," he said.

Angelus let go of Dru, who staggered at her abrupt release, and walked around to the end of the table. "Yes, dear Buffy. I'm still trying to decide the best way to send my regards." He hopped up to sit on the table edge, leaning back on his hands so he was looking down into Spike's face. "I want it to have..." He paused, as if thinking. "Poetry," he finished.

Spike snorted and wheeled himself back a few paces. "You could rip her heart out," he suggested. "That's pretty poetic. Oh, wait, you wasted that one on a shop girl last week, didn't you?"

Angelus nodded, seemingly unconcerned by Spike's sarcasm. "It will have to be something very special," he mused. Jumping down off the table, he announced, "I'm going out. Inspiration will come to me."
Dru took a step towards him, but he waved her away. "Not this time, Dru. Can't have the new girlfriend trailing along behind, as I'm wooing back the old one, can I?"

Turning on his heel, he strode out, without a single backwards glance at Dru's disappointed face.

Setting his hands to his wheels, Spike pushed himself over to Dru's side and pulled her down into his lap. "Don't worry, pet," he crooned, "he'll be back," managing to swallow the 'unfortunately' that was hovering on the tip of his tongue.

Dru relaxed into his arms and nuzzled at his neck. "I know, my love," she whispered. "Never fear." She sat up and stroked a soft hand down his cheek. "And since Angelus is being a meanie, going off to play with himself... we'll go out too, together, you and I."

Spike pulled his head back, trying to catch her eye, but her face was hidden by her hair. "Go where?" he asked.

With a suddenly vivacious laugh, Dru pushed herself up, out of his arms and onto her feet. "We're going to catch you a kitten," she said. "He's waiting for you."
They seemed to have been running for hours before Xander dared to believe that he and Cordy had got away from their pursuers, but that could have been his terror, slowing time. He still couldn't believe that Willow, his Willow, had tried to attack him with an axe! Stumbling to a stop, he bent over, bracing his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. Beside him, Cordy was clutching her waist and also snatching deep gulps of air.

Straightening up, he looked around. They were in Revello Drive. "Okay, now I really think we've lost them," he gasped.

Cordelia was obviously not happy. "Damn it, Xander," she snapped. "What's going on? Who died and made you Elvis?"

Since he really didn't want to answer that question, he pointed across the street instead. "Look, Buffy's house. Come on, we'll be safe there. Let's get inside. I'll explain later."

Ignoring Cordy's continued protests and questions, he
staggered over to the house and knocked on the door. Joyce opened it, looking alarmed at their urgency. "Hi, Mrs Summers," he said, pushing past her. "Is Buffy in?" She shook her head, a now familiar, vacant expression already beginning to cloud her eyes as she gazed at him. Before she could act on her newly discovered love for the fool also known as Xander Harris, he grabbed Cordy's arm. "Can we wait for her in her room?" he asked. "Yes? Good!" adding, "Thanks, Mrs Summers," over his shoulder, as he bundled Cordy up the stairs, ahead of him.

In Buffy's room, he closed the door and leant against it, turning the lock behind his back. Cordy had come to a halt in the middle of the floor, but it wouldn't be long before her questions started up again. Hoping to delay the inquisition, Xander went across to the open window and twitched the curtains aside to peer out. The street was quiet and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Turning, he slumped down to sit on the windowsill as he tried to work out what to do next. Cordy had also collapsed, sitting on the bed with her elbows on her knees and her head hanging. All this trouble, he thought, he'd brought it on himself, because of her. In that moment, he couldn't imagine why he'd done it. She
dismissed him, ignored him, belittled him and mocked him. Why had he cared so much that he'd risk magic to get back at her?

She raised her head and stared at him. Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth, probably to demand the explanation he was no nearer being able to give her. He stood up and turned to the window, avoiding her eyes, once more failing to come up with anything to prevent her wrath falling upon him. "The mob still hasn't found us," he said. "We should be safe up here."

The doorknob rattled. "Xander, it's Joyce. Let me in."

Xander looked across the room, but before he could answer he felt himself grabbed from behind and Angelus's voice was in his ear, "Think you're safe, do you?" Angelus asked. "Yeah, well, works in theory." As he was hauled through the open window, onto the roof outside, Xander heard Cordy's alarmed yelp and a renewed banging on the bedroom door.

Angelus had hold of Xander by one large fist on his collar and Xander knew he had no hope of breaking free of that grip. He frantically began to unbutton his shirt, thinking he could wriggle out of it. Regardless of the fact that
Angelus's hold on him was all that was keeping him from falling to the yard below, Xander wasn't taking any comfort from such precarious security. Leaving his clothes behind was preferable to being within Angelus's grasp. He would be likely to survive the fall.

Those plans were wrecked when he was spun around and lifted up to Angelus's face. "Where's Buffy?" Angelus snarled.

Xander mutely shook his head, and then he was falling.

He landed painfully, his legs bucking beneath him, and fell onto his back on the grass. A stray thought popped into his head that he should be thankful he'd had so much practice in being thrown around by bad guys, because he wasn't really hurt.

A pair of large feet landed in front of his face and he rolled his head to look up the length of Angelus’s body to the predatory face at the top.

"Perfect," Angelus said. He grabbed Xander again and hauled him to his feet. "I wanted to do something special for Buffy, actually to Buffy, but this is so much better!"
Some instinct for preservation came to Xander's aid and before his brain could possibly have considered the action, he bent his leg and kneed Angelus in the crotch. Angelus didn't even flinch. With a roar, he flipped Xander, head over heels, onto his back on the grass again. Bending down, he grabbed Xander's hair and lifted his head up off the ground. "You need to try harder than that, boy." He growled, releasing Xander's hair and reaching for the front of his shirt, presumably in order to drag him to his feet again. "You're so easy, I'm almost disappointed." He smiled into Xander’s face and it was not pleasant.

Then Angelus was gone, thrown across the yard to smash into a tree, where he stayed, shaking his head, as if to clear it.

The only thought in Xander's brain was 'Thank god! Buffy!' as he blindly took the feminine hand offered to assist him up off the ground.

He scrabbled to his feet, turned, and found himself face to face with Drusilla. "Don't fret, kitten," she whispered. "Mummy's here."

Although he couldn't drag his terrified gaze away from
her, Xander clearly heard the confusion in Angelus's voice when he snarled, "I don't know what you're up to, Dru, but it doesn't amuse!"

Drusilla's head whipped around and she growled at Angelus, who replied in kind. Her lips pulled back to reveal her teeth, but her voice was mild when she said, "If you harm one hair on this boy's head..." Xander suddenly understood what people meant when they talked about deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, because his entire body seemed to be shutting down, starting with the muscles that made his legs move. "Just because I finally found a real man..." Drusilla crooned, returning her gaze to Xander and stroking his hair with the hand that wasn't still gripping his own.

Angelus gave a snort that sounded like disbelief, or derision. "I guess I really did drive you crazy," he said. He entered the edge of Xander's field of vision and, although he'd thought it impossible, Xander's terror levels went up a further notch and his voice had joined his legs and the rest of his body in total shut-down mode. His brain was whirring, like a hamster on a wheel, but nothing intelligible was being generated. He couldn't shape a coherent word, not even to save his life.
Angelus paused and considered them both. "Not really the prey I was hunting," he observed. He wiped his right hand carefully down his left arm, as if brushing away dust, and sneered, "You can have the boy, Dru. I have better fish to fry." Then he turned away and kept walking. Away. Away from Xander and away from Drusilla. Xander watched until he disappeared around the corner of the house next door.

A small sigh from the woman who held him captive dragged Xander’s attention back to his predicament. One vampire gone, but that didn't make him feel much safer. Running the fingers of her free hand through his hair again, Drusilla brought them down to stroke his face and lips. "Your face is a poem," she breathed. "I can read it."

Finally, Xander managed to gather enough brain cells together to force words past his lips. "Really?" he stuttered. "It doesn't say 'spare me' by any chance?"

Drusilla simply smiled. "You're coming with me, Precious," she said, pulling him in to her side and clasping her arm around his waist.

Xander struggled. He tried to pull away from her, tried to
twist out of her hold. When he opened his mouth to yell, her hand released his waist and was gripping the back of his neck, before he had finished drawing breath. Step by inexorable step, he was forced to walk towards a big black car that sat idling, facing the wrong way to the traffic, next to the curb.

Behind him he heard Cordelia shout, "Xander, hang on. I'll fetch Buffy; she'll save you," but he couldn't turn his head to reply. The painful feeling of dread that had taken up residence in his gut caused his stomach to lurch when he remembered that there was no hope to be had from that quarter, in any case; Buffy was a rat.

*Note: Some canon dialogue borrowed and adapted, courtesy of [http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/](http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/)*

**Part Three**

The back door of the car opened as they approached and Spike leant out. "What the fuck was that all about, Dru?" he asked. Then he looked up into Xander's eyes and
Xander looked back.

For the second, third, fifth time that night, Xander froze. Spike's eyes were so vivid. Xander's head spun and for a moment he thought he was falling. Then the world snapped back into focus and Spike was reaching out to him. "Come on, quick," he said. "Get in."

Xander took Spike's hand and was pulled with surprising strength right out of Drusilla's hold and into the back of the car, landing sprawled across Spike's lap. A strong grasp on the waistband of his jeans lifted him bodily and shoved him further across, and he scrambled to get his legs inside. Behind him, he heard an indignant, female squeal and a grunted, "Bugger off!" from Spike, as Spike's upper body moved, dislodging Xander's feet from Spike's lap and causing him to tip over the edge of the seat, onto the floor of the car. The car door slammed shut and Spike muttered, "Good bloody riddance!" followed immediately by an order to "Move! Just bloody drive!"

Busy trying to get his arms and legs into some semblance of order and haul himself up off the floor, Xander still spared a thought for how he was supposed to drive anything from where he was. Then the car jerked into motion, throwing him off balance again, and he realised
that there was a driver behind the wheel and that was who the instruction had been aimed at.

He managed to twist around awkwardly in the confined space, until he was sitting on his ass in the foot well. Looking up, he saw that Spike now had both hands gripping the edge of the open window and his head stuck out through the gap. "I don't fucking care!" Spike yelled. "Think I don't know that look? You're not double-crossing me. You bloody promised..."

As Spike's shouted imprecations trailed off, Xander silently cursed the way his arms and legs never seemed to do what he wanted them to do, but he did manage to grab the top of the front passenger seat and haul himself up and around, until he was kneeling backwards on the seat, next to Spike. Looking out of the rear window, he caught a final glimpse of Drusilla, sitting on the ground and screaming as she watched them drive away, before the car turned a corner and he lost sight of her.

Letting out a huge sigh of relief, Xander squirmed around to sit facing forwards and grinned at Spike. "Thanks," he said. "I think she was going to kill me."

Spike turned to look at him, and for Xander it was like a
welcome drowning in a pool of blue. He'd never seen eyes that colour before. He felt like he could gaze into them forever and never stop falling.

"Nah," Spike said, with a soft snort, breaking the spell of the moment. "No way was I gonna leave you with her; she's crazy." He smiled and Xander watched, fascinated by the way his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Angelus gave you to me. Don't know what she was on about, trying to keep you."

Xander nodded dumbly in agreement and Spike's smile faded. "You alright, pet?" he asked. "All catching up on you, is it?" He lifted his right arm along the back of the seat. "Come here," he said. "It's okay. You're safe now. I won't let her hurt you."

"No, no, it's not that," Xander said. He felt dazed, with relief and with something else, something he didn't recognise but knew to be more important than anything he'd ever felt before. "You have the most beautiful eyes," he murmured, edging a little closer along the seat towards Spike.

Spike laughed and brought his arm down, around Xander's neck, pulling him into a one armed hug. "I've
got you," Spike whispered, nuzzling Xander's hair. "I've got you. You're safe now."

Xander slipped his own right arm across Spike's stomach, and hugged back. Relaxing for the first time that day, secure in the knowledge that Spike would keep the monsters away, he allowed himself to enjoy the sensation of being held.

It couldn't last, of course. All too soon, he began to think again, about Willow with an axe, and Buffy in nothing but a skimpy coat, and Buffy as a rat, and Cordy, and Drusilla, and Mrs Summers. He tilted his head, where it lay against Spike's shoulder, so he could look up into Spike's face. "It's been a very bad day," he said.

Spike relaxed his hug, running his hand along Xander's shoulder and down his arm to his waist. "Come here," he whispered. "Come closer. I'm not as mobile as I was."

Xander hitched himself up a bit and slid across the last few inches of the seat, until his hip was flush up against Spike's, bringing their faces level. Spike smiled again. "That's better," he murmured, as he leant over and their lips met.
Once again, Xander felt like he was drowning, and it was the most wonderful sensation ever. Without his conscious intervention, his right arm snaked up Spike's body to his shoulder and around the back of his neck. He clung to Spike as the kiss deepened. Spike's lips were firm, but soft and mobile and something tight in Xander's soul relaxed and let go. He whimpered for the sheer overwhelming amazingness of it.

He had never, ever, ever, felt anything like this before. It was as if his every fantasy had come true. He had never realised that kissing could feel so good, but, he thought hazily, Spike had had years to practice. With that realisation came the sudden fear that what was so wonderful to him, might be a disappointment to Spike. It wasn't as if Xander had much practice in kissing. Even as he sank into the sensation of being joined to someone else in such an intimate way, he worried that Spike would realise how inexperienced he was, and laugh at him.

Instead, Spike let out a stifled moan, as he pulled his lips away. "Oh, pet. You are so beautiful," he whispered.

His insecurities temporarily banished by Spike's words and tone, Xander grinned at Spike with delight. ‘This is
what 'joy' is', he thought.

Spike leant forward in his seat and tapped the driver on his shoulder. "Sunnydale Hilton," he instructed.

The driver turned his head, looking back at them, and Xander caught a glimpse of gameface. But Spike was obviously respected, because although the vampire looked surprised, all he said was, "Yes, boss," before turning back to face the road ahead. Spike shifted slightly, jostling Xander as he fumbled in the pocket of his coat with his left hand. He pulled out a stake, which he shoved into the waistband of his jeans and then a wallet, which he flipped open. He needed to use both hands to inspect the contents and he wasn't letting go of Xander, so Xander ignored the jostling and rested his head against Spike's neck.

It didn't take Spike long to check whatever it was he was checking, because in a few moments he gave a satisfied snort, flipped the wallet closed again and shoved it back in his pocket. "Right," he murmured. "Where were we?" He brought his left hand up under Xander's chin, nudging him into lifting his face. "Ah, yes," he said. "We were doing this," and once again they were kissing and once again Xander's brain decided that he didn't really need it
to do anything at the moment and it left him to sink into the glorious sensation of lips and stroking hands.

It felt like moments, or maybe hours, later, that the car began to slow down and the driver grunted, "We're there, boss."

Spike broke the kiss. "Drive past and pull up," he instructed. "Then get the chair out."

Sitting up as the car came to a smooth halt a few yards beyond the impressive portico of the hotel, Xander straightened his shirt, which appeared to have come loose from his waistband at some point. He watched as the driver jumped out and ran around to the front passenger door, opened it and pulled a mess of metal from the front seat. He dumped the tangle on the ground and fiddled with it, until it expanded into a wheelchair. Pushing the chair around the front of the car, he stopped it next to Spike's door and engaged the wheel brakes, opened the door and reached inside to help Spike swing his legs out.

Xander sat still, watching as the driver slipped one arm under Spike's knees, the other around his back and picked him up.
Once Spike was safely out, without getting his head banged on the top of the door frame, Xander climbed out onto the road on his own side and walked around to watch as Spike was settled into the chair. The driver lowered Spike carefully into the seat, while Spike made sure his coat tails were pulled to the sides so he didn't end up sitting on them, and lifted each of Spike's feet onto the footrests. Before he could straighten up, Spike grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "Keys," he demanded. The driver handed them over. "Cheers, mate," Spike said. "You've been a good servant."

The driver grinned and almost sounded embarrassed when he mumbled, "Thanks, boss," through his fangs.

"Which makes this a bit of a shame, really," Spike continued. His left arm flashed up and he buried his stake in the driver's chest.

Xander gaped as the cloud of dust slowly settled to the ground. "Wha... why?" he asked.

Looking up at him, Spike smiled. "Can't have him going home and tattling to Dru and Angelus about where he left us, now, can we?" he asked. "Come on, pet. We need
somewhere quiet and private to hole up, while we work out what we're going to do. Give us a push, will you?" He pointed towards the plate glass doors of the hotel. "Sooner we get inside, sooner we can get settled," he added, with a conspiratorial grin.

Xander found himself smiling back. It didn't matter. It was one less vampire haunting the town. He walked around to the back of the chair, took hold of the handles and pushed Spike towards the doors, which opened invitingly as they approached. Spike tossed the keys to the valet. "Car's just up there," he said, as if it were perfectly natural for them not to have stopped in front of the entrance.

The valet caught the keys out of the air and gave a slight bow. "Yes, sir," he replied. "I'll look after it." Which, Xander decided, either suggested that it was normal behaviour, or The Hilton had particularly well trained staff.

**Part Four**

Inside, the Sunnydale Hilton looked like any modern hotel Xander had ever seen on TV. The large entrance lobby was painted in neutral colours, with vertical blinds hanging, ceiling to floor, inside the plate glass windows...
that faced the street. There was a scattering of beige coloured sofas off to one side. Across the equally beige, mottled marble floor and opposite the bank of elevators was an imposing mahogany reception desk and next to that was a small shop, which appeared to sell toiletries, jewellery and newspapers. Xander absorbed it all in one awed glance, before taking a fortifying breath and pushing Spike over to the counter.

The man behind the desk watched them approach and moved over to the portion of the counter that was set lower than the rest. He looked about the same age as Xander's dad, but much better dressed. "Good evening, Gentlemen," he said. "How may we help you this evening?"

"Apologies for the late arrival," Spike replied and Xander almost gaped at the sudden gentility of his voice. "We've had a hell of a journey. Flight was late and they've lost our luggage. It will no doubt arrive next week." Xander couldn't see his face, but he could tell from his voice that Spike was smiling. "We weren't supposed to stop in Sunnydale. On our way to London, you know. These internal flights will be the death of me. Is your penthouse free?"
The receptionist blinked under this barrage of information, but he pulled himself together quickly and smiled ingratiatingly. "Certainly, sir. It does happen to be vacant, at the moment. Will you be staying long?"

Spike sat back in his chair, bracing his hands on the arms. "A few days, I expect. I need to rest, before I'll be fit to resume our journey."

"Of course, sir. Allow me to check and make sure no one has a reservation for later in the week." He moved away to the middle of the desk and the sounds of a keyboard informed Xander that he was working the computer hidden behind the higher portion of the counter.

Xander leant down to Spike's ear. "Penthouse?" he whispered.

"Sure, love. Only the best." Spike sounded immeasurably pleased with himself.

Xander planted a quick kiss on the side of Spike's neck but straightened hurriedly when the tapping sound from behind the desk ceased and the receptionist returned.

"The penthouse is available until Monday, sir," the man
said. "I do hope that is satisfactory, but with so little notice..." he trailed off in such a way that Xander could hear the unspoken suggestion that if they had only given him warning, he would have ensured it was free for as long as they could wish.

"That's fine," Spike replied. "I only hope our luggage arrives before we leave, or we'll be forced to buy more clothes." He pulled out his wallet and handed over a credit card. "I'm just grateful that the Strat went with the rest of the group. If American Airlines had lost my guitar, I would not be nearly so sanguine."

Thank you, Mr..." the man turned the card over and looked at it, "Jones."

Spike laughed. "A nom de guerre," he explained. "My agent insists. But don't worry, it's good. And I'm not one of those artists who wreck hotel rooms, either." He waved a negligent hand, indicating his useless legs. "But if I were, it would be good for that too." Once again, Xander could hear the smile in his voice.

"I'm sure that will be fine, sir." The man swiped the card through the reader he had set down in front of him, studied it for a moment, then picked up a couple of key
cards which he handed across with the returned credit card. "The elevator on the right will take you to the top floor, sir." He gave a nod of his head that was almost a bow. "And if there is anything else I can do for you, anything you might want, I would be more than happy to have it delivered to your room."

"Thank you, James, we'll be sure to bear that in mind." Spike turned his head and looked up at Xander. "Let's go and find a comfortable bed, love," he suggested, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as Xander blushed and frowned in embarrassment and tried not to look at the receptionist. "Once we're settled, we'll get room service to deliver some supper. You must be starved."

Xander turned Spike's chair around and pushed him hurriedly across the lobby. He managed to restrain himself until the elevator doors had shut behind them and the indicator light was sliding through the numbers, but then he collapsed against the wall and gazed dumbstruck at Spike's amused expression. Eventually he pulled himself together and shook his head, unable to withstand Spike's smile. "That was amazing," he said. "Where did you get that voice? That man thinks you're some sort of rock star now, doesn't he? How did you
know his name?"

Spike snorted. "It's a talent, I reckon and he had a name tag, pet. Always pays to treat the help with respect. They're much more willing, if you do. Pays to keep them off balance, too." He laughed. "He didn't know what to make of me - punk with a posh voice, rock star with a huge bank balance - so he settled for servility. They always do. He'll have seen the credit limit on the card. Bet he'll be happy to bring up a special delivery, in his own time, for the tip he reckons I'm worth." He twisted around and lifted his hand to Xander's neck, pulling him down for a kiss. "Meantime," he continued, when the indicator bell tinged to tell them they had arrived and he let Xander go, "I want a bath, a soft bed and a drink, not necessarily in that order." The doors opened. "So, let's go raid the mini fridge, eh?"

The penthouse was not one room, but a suite, which Xander knew he should have expected, but the sheer size of it surprised him. The living room was decorated in the same neutral style as the lobby, which was a disappointment to Xander, who had hoped for rich colours and velvet drapes. He was beginning to suspect that all the beige was a deliberate hotel policy, designed to offend no one's tastes, and when he looked more
closely, even he could see that the neutrality was expensive. The bedroom was decorated in shades of pale green and cream, and had a huge bed that, in spite of not being a four-poster, felt very comfortable when he bounced on it. The en suite had doors from both the living room and the bedroom and had a tub big enough for three, with vents around the side which, Spike explained, were jets and were supposed to make you feel like you were having a massage. Finally, the mini fridge, which they found next to the large screen TV, was really not so much with the mini.

Spike allowed Xander to wheel him around on the inspection tour, but once they got back to the living room he said, "Time to get more comfortable, pet. Why don't you go set the bath running and I'll make us each a drink?"

"Do you need help?" Xander asked.

Wheeling himself across the room, Spike opened the wood panel door of the refrigerator. "Yeah," he said, "but I can do this bit. Go on, shoo. I fancy a couple of drinks in a hot tub. Want to join me?"

Xander felt himself blush again, but Spike's expression
was so soft, with no hint of mockery, that in spite of his nervousness he smiled and stammered, "Sure, uh, yeah, that'd be good. It, it looked big enough to take us both," before he fled back into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

Safely out of Spike's sight, he leant on his braced arms against the vanity counter and concentrated on breathing, as he analysed his reactions to Spike's suggestion. There was nervousness there, huge embarrassment, shame for his nerves, and more anticipated shame for his body, but there was also eagerness, excitement and a strong desire to reclaim the physical closeness that the car journey to the hotel had promised.

He didn't doubt that Spike loved him. He knew that he did. He knew it in a way that made the word doubt disappear from the dictionary. He didn't doubt that Spike would always love him, just as he would always love Spike. But Spike was beautiful. Beautiful and sexy. And Xander was... Xander wasn’t. Xander was an ordinary boy who probably ate too much junk food and, after an entire school career being beaten up by bigger boys, couldn’t forget how weedy he was, compared to Spike’s muscled strength.
"Okay, Xan-man," he thought, metaphorically girding his loins, a shiver of excitement disrupting his doubts, "it may be new to you, but he's almost two hundred years old, according to Giles, so he's done this before." The thought was both intimidating and comforting. He wasn’t jealous of those other lovers, although he did wish, for a moment, that he’d been born in an earlier age and met Spike then. "He's experienced and he's old enough to know what he likes, and he likes you. So stop worrying. You don't have anything hidden away that'll surprise and disgust him. You're nothing special, but you're not repellent either."

Lifting his head, Xander stared at his face in the mirror. He looked exactly the same as he had last week, before the madness with the girls at school started. Standing back he considered as much of himself as the mirror allowed. He'd worn his baggiest clothes that morning, the denim shirt billowed around him, but it didn't disguise the fact that, compared to Spike, he was fat. He looked down. His jeans hung on him and pooled around his feet. What had he been thinking? How could Spike love this? Except that he did. A wry smile twisted his lips. Maybe that would be enough. Maybe, if he just held onto that thought, he'd be okay. And there was no doubt
that the promise of a naked Spike was a prize to tempt him to far more difficult feats than stripping off his own clothes.

Taking a fortifying breath, Xander turned to the tub and set the water running. Then he went back out to the living room to face Spike.

Part Five

Spike had managed to struggle out of his coat and red silk shirt while Xander was having his little panic attack in the bathroom, and his chair was now next to the coffee table, which held a couple of large stem glasses and a glass jug of what looked like pale orange juice. Spike, himself, was leaning over in his chair, tugging at his bootlaces where they crossed each other down the front of his left foot, and pulling the sides of his boot apart, to loosen it. The laces on his other boot were already undone, the ends dangling across the floor. Xander paused in the doorway to admire the smooth curve of his
back. He was thin, but the tight t-shirt he wore clung to the clearly defined muscles of his shoulders. His arms bulged in all the right places and, from what Xander could see, his slim legs were similarly well defined, even if he couldn't use them at the moment. As Xander watched, he shifted his hands, one gripping his ankle, the other at the back of his boot, and tried to pull his foot free. It looked awkward and he gave a soft curse, his voice betraying his frustration.

Snapping out of his trance, Xander hurried forward. "Hey, let me do that," he said.

Spike raised cold, yellow eyes, snarling, "I don't want bloody help. I want to be able to do it myself."

Xander froze, shocked as much by the sudden realisation that Spike was dangerous, as by the surge of helpless emotion that washed through him at his first clear sight of Spike's gameface. Spike was beautiful in his human form, but in gameface, he was awesome.

Spike's features melted back to smoothness and he sat upright with a sigh. "I'm sorry, love," he said. "Take no notice of me. I just hate having to rely on other people. It's not my nature." He held his hand out to Xander.
"Come here," he added, his voice soft again. Cautiously, Xander went to him and took the offered hand. Spike's grip was firm, but gentle, as he slowly tugged at Xander to get him to bend down and planted a kiss on Xander's lips. "If you would help me get these blasted boots off, I'd be eternally grateful," he offered, adding with a sly grin, "and that's not an idle promise, from a vampire."

Xander grinned back and knelt on the floor in front of Spike's chair. He lifted Spike's right foot and tugged the already loosened boot off, peeling away the sock too. Even Spike's feet were beautiful - long, and slim, and pale. He placed that foot back on the rest and lifted the other, to do the same for it. Once it was naked, he rested it on his thigh, cradled in his hands. "Can you wiggle your toes?" he asked.

Spike leant forwards and stared at his foot. After a moment, there was a slight twitch in his big toe and Xander looked up into Spike's face, delighted. "See?" he said. "It moved."

Spike sat back, a broad smile lighting up his features. "Yeah, it did, didn't it? First time that's happened. Means I'm mending. If I try real hard, I think I can almost feel your hands." He shrugged. "Course, that's probably
wishful thinking." He leant forward again and cupped Xander's cheek. "Want to feel you so much, love. Want to feel every inch of you, on every inch of me."

The longing and promise in his voice sent a shiver of heat through Xander's body and he felt the warmth gather in his cock, causing it to swell. "Oh, yeah," he whispered. When Spike's hand slipped around the back of his neck and pulled him up and forward, Xander went with it. He felt Spike's foot slide off his thigh as he rose to his knees, then he was falling forward, one hand landing on Spike's leg, the other on the arm of the chair and they were kissing again.

Spike tilted his head to the side and Xander thought he was going to be swallowed whole, as Spike's mouth took possession of his own. Lips on lips, like mirror images, or as if they were glued together, their mouths opened and Spike's tongue pushed it's way inside, stroking against Xander's, twisting around it and teasing it back into his own mouth. Xander groaned into the kiss, as Spike's other hand came up, so he was holding Xander's head firmly in place. Xander felt his whole body relax. He felt as if his arms were about to cave under his own weight and that only Spike's hands were preventing him from melting into Spike's body, as the kiss went on.
All thought stopped, all care. His momentary panic of a few minutes before was lost and forgotten. All that existed was the sensation of the kiss and the growing heat that ran up and down his spine, until his legs began to shake from the strain placed upon them by the angle he was holding himself at. He ran his hands up Spike's chest to his shoulders, pushing himself away so he could kneel up straight. "Oh, yeah!" he whispered again. Leaning forward once more, he planted a last, swift kiss on the tip of Spike's nose, before pulling back. He still felt dazed. "Tub should be full by now," he managed. "How about we go have that bath?"

Picking up the jug and glasses, Spike sat back in his chair and nodded his head towards the bathroom door. "Whenever you're ready, pet."

Once he'd pushed the chair into the bathroom, Xander considered the problem of how he was going to get Spike into the tub. After playing for time, by relieving Spike of the jug and glasses and setting them within easy reach on the vanity unit, Xander leant down and tugged Spike's t-shirt out of his waistband. "Can't have a bath if you're still dressed," he said.
The t-shirt came off easily, with Spike obligingly lifting his arms so Xander could pull it over his head, but the rest? Xander was still trying to puzzle that one through when Spike reached out, pulled him close and went to work on the buttons of his denim shirt, pushing it off his shoulders and dragging it down his arms.

Another tug had Xander squatting down so that Spike could pull his t-shirt over his head, but once they were both naked from the waist up, he voiced his uncertainty, "Um, Spike?" he suggested. "I think I can lift you. Can you do your jeans, if I do?"

Spike grinned. "That's what you're frowning about, is it?" he asked, running a fingertip over Xander's brow to smooth it. "Not a problem, pet. Here, watch." He undid the button on his jeans and lowered the zip. Bracing his hands on the arms of the chair, he lifted himself bodily off the seat. Xander laughed and moved quickly to slip the jeans over Spike's hips and down his legs, tossing them onto the floor behind him. Then, imitating the move the driver had made outside, he picked Spike up, turned to the tub with Spike held in his arms and gently lowered him into the warm water.

Spike settled back, his arms resting along the rim of the
tub. He released a long sigh. "That’s good," he said. He dipped his hands in the water and scooped some up, scrubbing his face, then allowing his hands to run down his neck, onto his chest and further to his groin. Xander's eyes followed their movement. Spike tilted his head against the rim and smiled. "It’s very good. You should try it."

Wrenching his eyes away from Spike's pale cock, its pink button tip just peaking out from its protective foreskin, Xander looked up. Spike had sunk lower into the water, sliding down the slope he was resting against and Xander realised, with a start, that without his legs, he couldn't keep himself in place. Spike seemed to realise the same thing, because he put his arms back on the rim and hauled himself up into a more seated position. "Think you'd better get in," he said. “If only to stop me slipping under.” He smirked and his voice shifted to flirtatious teasing. “Wouldn't drown, but I don't want to get my hair wet. It'd spoil the 'do and we can't have that." He cast Xander a mischievous smile. "I'm like a sexy, male Dolly Parton - no one sees me less than perfect. Not even you, love."

Gazing at the slim body and the flat, muscular chest in front of him, Xander laughed at the idea that Spike had
anything in common with Dolly Parton, and that gave him the impetus to stand up and shimmy out of the rest of his clothes. Stepping quickly into the tub, he sat down facing Spike and hugged his knees. The water came up to his waist.

"Come here, pet," Spike asked, holding out a hand. "Turn around and lean back against me. Stop me slipping under water and let me hold you."

Still feeling slightly embarrassed, Xander wriggled around so his back was to Spike, then he shuffled backwards until he was sitting between Spike's legs, and relaxed, leaning against Spike's chest. One of Spike's arms came around him and gave him a hug.

He felt Spike shift behind him. It sounded like Spike was lifting the jug down off the vanity and putting it on the floor next to the tub. A moment later, the clink of glass against glass was followed by Spike's free hand appearing in front of Xander's face, offering him an orange drink that sparkling with bubbles. "Reckon you're not much of a drinker," Spike whispered, the breath of his words tickling the sensitive skin just behind Xander's ear. "So I made bucks-fizz - champagne and orange juice, since we're celebrating, and all."
Xander took the glass, raised it to his lips and sipped. It was sweet, but not sticky, and the bubbles were familiar. "Mmm, it's good." he said. Xander thought that he could get accustomed to champagne, if it was served like this.

**Part Six**

Spike's right arm was around his chest, Spike's chin was resting on his shoulder, Spike's left hand was reaching out to take the empty glass from him and returning to sneak around his waist and pull him back, stroking across his belly when he was positioned where Spike wanted him. Xander didn't know what to do with his own hands. They hovered an inch in the air, with nowhere to go. Spike seemed to sense this because he whispered, "Stroke my legs, love."

Gratefully, Xander dropped his hands to Spike's thighs and ran them down along the tops, to his knees, and back again. "Can you feel that?" he asked, repeating the
move, noting how the action brought the short hairs on Spike's legs into alignment, making them look darker.

Spike sighed. "No, but I can watch and I can imagine. And one day, soon, I'll be able to feel you there."

Xander sighed his agreement with the contained impatience in Spike's voice. That day couldn't come soon enough. Spike's arms tightened around his middle in an abrupt hug. "Want to feel you, so much," Spike whispered in his ear, his voice tight with want. Huffing a long breath, he sighed. "But since there's no doing anything about that..." He trailed off with a slight chuckle and his hands took over the conversation.

Xander relaxed against Spike, enjoying the feel of Spike's stroking. Clever hands teased along the creases at the top of his thighs and rubbed warm circles on his belly. "This is good," he sighed, bracing his feet against the end wall of the tub, to prevent himself sliding away from the solidity of Spike's body behind him.

"Gets better. You haven't seen the half of it. Watch." Spike's left hand disappeared, while his right once again circled Xander's chest, to hold him close, and Xander felt him move slightly. Suddenly the tub was full of bubbles
as the vents in the sides came to life. Xander laughed with delight.

Then Spike's left hand was back, bolder this time, once again stroking down his hip and thigh, while his right arm held Xander firm and secure. Xander allowed his body to go totally slack and open, and felt Spike's face nuzzle into the side of his neck, licking and then sucking on the tender skin there. Xander shivered, suddenly hyper-sensitive to every touch.

For as long as he could remember, Xander had lain in bed at night, attempting to produce this sensation, without knowing that this was what he'd sought. His own hands stroking over his skin had never set him alight, like this. He'd never been able to isolate what he felt on his neck and chest, being caressed, from the feeling on the palms of his hands, doing the caressing. He'd also never felt anything that produced this powerful longing, which seemed to curl down into his core, before erupting out, causing every nerve ending to tingle.

The combination of Spike's mouth, alternating kisses and suction on his neck, and Spike's fingertips teasing down his front, was something new and entirely wonderful. Xander felt his mind go as slack as his body, as if it were a
physical sensation.

Spike's fingers played across his skin, pausing at his belly button and briefly poking in, causing Xander to release a soft giggle and making him realise that he'd been holding his breath, without knowing it. Spike's hand flattened against him, pressing down, anchoring Xander in the warm, bubbling water and the cradle of his thighs.

Xander's cock was hard and wanting. In his bed at night he would have closed his hand around it, long before reaching this point. Not Spike. Spike passed it by and reached beyond, running a fingernail along the smooth skin behind and following that up with a flick of multiple fingertips against the underside of Xander's balls. Xander gasped and his body arched up, as if it were attempting to escape, although that was the furthest thing from his mind.

Spike chuckled against his neck and allowed Xander to relax again, but not for long. At last he closed his hand around Xander's shaft and began to stroke, fast and urgent, twisting his wrist occasionally, making Xander pant and his hips twitch as the pressure built. The arm around Xander's chest was withdrawn and before he could do more than stiffen his knees again, Spike's right
hand skimmed between his legs to grab and squeeze his balls.

With a strangled gasp Xander arched his hips one more time, as the tightness that had been building in his groin and up the length of his spine suddenly exploded. For a moment, he had the illusion that he was hanging in mid-air, only his heels and the back of his head in contact with anything solid. The world froze, time stopped, all that existed was the pulsing waves of release that felt as if they would never end.

Afterwards, only a moment later, he knew, he lay back against Spike, panting as his body began to bring him down from the clouds. A hysterical giggle was attempting to force its way out of his mouth and he tried to keep it inside, until he didn't. Then he was laughing, great gasps of happiness, tinged with a smug feeling of achievement, although for what, he wasn't sure. It wasn't his first orgasm, or even his hundredth, but it was his first orgasm that wasn't self-induced.

Shifting himself slightly to the side, he rolled his head and looked up at Spike, who was grinning down at him with an expression that was also smug and completely unrepentant. An attitude that, Xander realised, was
probably totally in character. Meanwhile a small voice in
the back of his own brain was screaming at him that his
own behaviour was not. Xander ignored the voice; where
he was felt too right, as if fate had finally cut him a break.
"I love you," he whispered.

Spike's grin widened into a delighted smile. "I love you,
too," he replied. He bent his neck, straining to reach
Xander's mouth and Xander twisted around a bit more,
bringing his left arm up to Spike's right shoulder, so he
could reach back. They kissed, mouths warm against
each other, lips fused in a leisurely acknowledgement of
shared certainty, while Spike's left hand stroked up and
down Xander's spine.

Eventually, Spike pulled away. "Want another drink?" he
asked.

Xander settled back against Spike's chest and looked
down at the mess across his front. "Uh, yeah, sure," he
agreed.

Dipping a washcloth in the water, Spike wiped Xander
clean and then lobbed the cloth with deadly accuracy
over his shoulder into the hand basin in the vanity unit.
"How about we take the rest of the jug to bed?" he
suggested.

That sounded like a good plan, although the idea of moving did not. "It's good here," Xander said. It was more of a token protest than a real one.

"They call them Jacuzzis, where I come from," Spike replied, with a non sequitur worthy of Xander himself.

Xander twisted his head and looked up at Spike's face. "I didn't know they had plumbing in the middle ages."

At first, Spike didn't react, then Xander’s words apparently registered and, for a moment, his face was a picture of offended dignity, until he started to laugh. "Cheeky bugger," he growled. He grabbed Xander at the waist and began to tickle. "I'll learn ya."

Desperately, Xander tried to capture Spike's hands, but he couldn't hold them. He twisted, hauling himself around onto his knees, but he still couldn't escape the assault. It was only when he began to pull away, towards the other end of the tub, that Spike relented. "Alright. I'll stop," he conceded, his hands falling still and transforming into a firm grip. He pulled Xander towards him, twisting him around, and hauled him back into his
"How come we never met before?" he asked, once Xander had again settled against his chest.

"I don't know," Xander replied. "We did once. When you busted into parent-teacher night at the school."

Spike kissed Xander's neck. "Yeah, I remember," he said. "You were spitting chips at Angelus." He chuckled and gave Xander a squeeze. "Brave boy." There was a moment of thoughtful silence before he added, "Not what I'd call a proper meeting though."

"No," Xander agreed. "I saw you a few times after that, but never to talk to. I think it might have something to do with the fact that I'm friends with Buffy and she kills people like you."

With snort of derision and in a tone of supreme assurance, Spike asserted, "There are no people like me." He raised a hand and ran the back of a finger down Xander's cheek, adding quietly, "Can't believe Dru, sometimes."

"Yeah," Xander whispered, too busy enjoying the feeling
of Spike's finger on his face to risk dislodging it by nodding.

"She knew we were coming to get you. Was her idea. Although I didn't know then. But as soon as I... as I... as soon as..."

"It's okay. I know. You wouldn't leave me with Dru, if you knew where I was."

"Wouldn't leave you with anyone," Spike promised. "Not going to leave you."

"I know. It's okay." Wanting to lift the suddenly heavy mood, Xander gave Spike a nudge. "Wiggle your toes again," he suggested. Spike did so and Xander watched. "I think they're working better than they were, even an hour ago," he observed.

"Not the only thing that's working."

Xander laughed and twisted around so he was face to face, chest to chest, with Spike, his back bent like a seal, his forearms resting on the sloping wall of the tub, on either side of Spike. "Really?" he asked.
Spike reached down between their bodies and picked up his half-flaccid cock. "Maybe not," he acknowledged, allowing it to fall again.

Looking up into Xander's face, he seemed to read the sympathy there and gave a half-hearted smile. Xander allowed his face to drop to Spike's chest, to hide his disappointment.

"Soon, eh?" Spike suggested, running his hands up and down Xander's back.

Xander looked up and smiled as encouragingly as he could. "Sure," he said. "The way you've already got more movement in your toes, I bet it won't be long before you're running around with all parts fully functional again."

Smiling back, Spike briefly cupped Xander's shoulders with his hands, before running them down Xander's upper arms and pushing him away. "Love you, pet," he said. "Let's go to bed, yeah?"

Across town, Giles sighed with exasperation as he faced Amy across the chemistry lab bench. "Alright, Buffy should be back safe... I hope. Show me the other spell."
With bad grace, Amy shoved her book towards him. He pulled it the rest of the way and studied it. "These additions," he asked doubtfully, "are they your mother's? They look more recent." Amy didn't reply.

Giles continued reading, attempting to plot the shape and texture of the spell. When he got to the end of the page he looked up, aghast. "You did this?" he asked. "Didn't you read it, you stupid girl? This... My God! If any part of his mind was not focused on his revenge upon Cordelia. If there was any part of him that was thinking about the lover he was truly destined for..." Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm himself. Agitation would not help and could hinder his attempt to break the spell. "Never mind. At least your mother noted down the antidote, too. We'll just have to hope that Cordelia was the only thing on his mind."

Sulky to the last, Amy added more worry to Giles' already severe concerns. "He said he knew Cordy wasn't his true love," she announced. "That's how I know that he's destined to be with me. He wouldn't have come to me for help, unless he felt it too."

Giles closed his eyes and silently begged for strength. At least they already had the ingredients ready. He wouldn't
have to put up with this misguided adolescent angst for much longer. Hopefully. He stood and moved over to stand next to the beaker of distilled water that was bubbling over the Bunsen burner. With one final glance at the spell, he picked up the glass stirring-rod. "Just pass me the ingredients as I point to them," he ordered.

Getting Spike out of the tub was more difficult than getting him in. Xander got out himself and dried off as quickly as he could, so he would have a better grip, before he attempted it, but the task was awkward. Leaning forwards with his forearms under Spike's arms and his hands clasped across Spike's chest, he hauled Spike up, until he was sitting on the edge of the tub. Then he had to hold him there, as he lifted Spike's right leg up and over the side. Once Spike was astride the rim, Xander was able to stand up straight, while Spike braced himself on the edge.

To make up for the indignity of the first part of the manoeuvre, Xander spent some time drying off the bits of Spike that he could reach, before lifting Spike's other leg out. From there it was fairly easy to lift him back into his chair. "I'll dry the rest of you when we've got you into bed," he promised, walking around to take hold of the handles of the chair.
Giles sprinkled a pinch of dried herbs into the water. "Diana, goddess of love, be gone," he recited, stirring the mixture and noting with satisfaction the brief burst of sparks that that action elicited. "Hear no more thy siren's song." He picked up the heart pendant that Amy swore was the anchor for the spell, waved it once over the liquid and dropped it in.

Feeling like an old hand at vampire wrangling, Xander lifted Spike out of his chair and laid him on the bed.

A cloud of light particles erupted from the beaker in front of Giles' face and a burst of energy broke around him, rocking him back on his heels. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves and watched as motes of light danced around the room, like dust in a sunbeam. It was almost mesmerising. For what felt like long minutes nothing more happened and he began to fear that he had failed to defuse the metaphorical bomb, but then the light contracted, coalescing into one bright ball that hovered in the air above the bench. The ball began to spin.

Xander picked up the towel he'd slung over the back of the chair as they left the bathroom and turned back to the bed. "You're pretty dry on your front, but I want to
roll you over and make sure you're back's dry too," he explained.

Spike reached out his hand. "Or you could just get in here with me," he suggested.

As it spun, the light pulsed; spiral arms began to form in the mass and Giles took a step back.

Xander took Spike's hand, laughing and pulling away when Spike tried to drag him down onto the bed. "No, let me dry you first," he protested. "I don't want to cuddle a soggy vampire."

Spike smirked up at him. "Vampires don't cuddle, love," he corrected. "We're fearsome predators who'll ravish innocents like you, at the drop of a hat."

Snorting with laughter, Xander pulled his most threatening face and waved the towel at Spike.

The light spread out from its centre, like a miniature spiral galaxy. Giles stared at it in fascinated horror. That wasn't what he'd been expecting. A premonition of failure formed as a tight knot in his stomach. He took another step back, noting from his peripheral vision that
Amy had also backed away and was now cowering against the far wall, her face a stark study in contrasts under the bright, ominous light from above.

The light pulsed and Giles began to fear more than just his failure to undo the spell. It spread across the ceiling and he felt the wall hit his back. He hadn't realised that he'd been moving. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the entire sheet of light imploded, contracting down into a single fiery point, which fell like a shooting star, straight down into the beaker. The room was suddenly very dark by comparison.

All over town, gangs of girls and women stopped in their tracks and looked around in confusion.

In the alley behind Willy's Alibi Bar, Dru lifted her face to the stars and growled.

Xander straightened up, the laughter dying from his lips as he gazed down at Spike in horror. Spike's face mirrored his feelings, his eyes wide with shock. Xander staggered backward. "What? I... We... Did...?"

Something changed in Spike's expression, but Xander didn't wait to interpret it. Turning on his heels, he rushed
into the bathroom. He heard Spike shout "Wait, love!" but he closed his ears and grabbed his clothes off the floor, hugging them to his chest as he tried to figure out what to do next.

He felt as if he ought to feel sick, but in truth, he was too shocked for even that natural reaction to the sudden tilt to his world. Realisation of his exposure penetrated his consciousness and he frantically pulled on his jeans, desperate to get out of the room, the suite, the entire hotel, and thankful that the vampire on the bed couldn't follow him.

In the time it took to get his shirt and socks on, his memory ruthlessly replayed the entire evening in front of his mind's eye. He tried to breathe slowly, to calm his heartbeat. He tried to think of any reason why he would have done what he had done, to rationalise his madness. He came up blank.

Without bothering to tie his shoelaces, he tugged his shirt down and walked, as calmly as he could, out into the living room.

Spike's voice reached him through the open door to the bedroom. "Hey, can you bring the chair a bit nearer,
before you scarper, pet?"

He reached the door to the outside and turned the handle. As he slipped through, into the hall, he thought he heard Spike still calling after him, "Will you at least tell me your name?"

**Part Seven**

The morning dawned bright and far too early, for Xander. He'd managed to sneak into the house without being noticed and escape to his bed, but his mind had been in turmoil. After what felt like hours of tossing, turning and staring blindly at the ceiling, he'd pulled out his headphones and eventually fallen asleep to the music of confusion, which was a bit like the music of pain but less depressing and much louder. Pink Floyd shouting about all the things that were just another brick in the wall seemed to have been what his Idiot Jed brain needed for it to take over and switch off all thinking functions, hopefully leaving his Yoda brain to sort out the mess that was his life.

While Xander’s mouth often went off the rails and never censored itself, usually with unfortunate consequences, his feet regularly tripped over anything in their path and his intellect seemed to spend much of its time cowering
in a corner with its hands over its head, gibbering, Xander had come to think of his Yoda brain as something to be trusted. True, it could be trusted to wander off, whistling, but it could also be trusted to come back, having sorted out his everyday crises without his conscious involvement. As long as his mouth and feet hadn't got him into too much trouble in the meantime, he usually found that, given time, his Yoda brain knew how to make his problems go away, or at least make them manageable.

Not on this occasion, though. And not with this particular problem. When he woke up and looked at the day ahead, it seemed like his Yoda brain had failed him, because he was still a mass of confusion and his dreams had been full of soft touches and pale skin.

The idea of facing any sort of inquisition was more than he could bear. He knew, with a deep seated dread, that with one good look at his face his father would be able to sense exactly what he’d done the night before. It had to be there – the knowledge that he couldn’t erase of how a vampire's touch had set his body on fire. A shiver formed deep in his gut as memory conjured an almost physical sensation of smooth hands touching him.
For the hundredth time, Xander forcibly stomped that thought train into the ground. Then he stamped the earth down on top of it and finally dropped a huge boulder on the spot. He was not going to think about it! He was not going to remember! That way led to confusion. Confusion led to fear. Fear led to anger. Anger led something else. And so it went on and none of it was good. His Yoda brain would sort it out, if he just gave it time. Xander had great faith in his Yoda brain. He had to; it was his only hope. It would work everything out, eventually, and tell him what to do about the fact that he had gone totally stark raving crazy and had sex. With a vampire. A male vampire.

He briefly considered spending the day hiding in his room, but with his luck his mom would come in and find him, and he couldn't risk meeting his dad. Plus, the chances of Willow noticing were too great. Facing the Willow inquisition into his absence from class was almost scarier than the thought of facing his parents, although in a totally different way. And there was also the urgent need to talk to Buffy.

Slipping into the hall, Xander tiptoed towards his parents’ room. Their door was ajar and he peered through the gap, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw two inert
lumps under the covers. Turning away, he went to the kitchen to rummage through the fridge for breakfast and something to take with him for lunch.

The good thing about school, Xander discovered over the next few hours, was that everybody seemed as eager to avoid seeing him, as he was to avoid being seen. The bad thing was that the same thing apparently applied to his best friend. When he finally tracked Willow down and tried to apologise, she turned her back on him. Oz gave him a sympathetic look and a shrug, before turning away with her, his arm around her shoulders.

Xander was still gazing after them when Buffy joined him. "Why so morose?" She asked.

He slowly turned his head to stare at her. "Morose?" he asked.

Buffy shrugged. "Hey, it's a thing." She looked slightly embarrassed.

By mutual consent they started walking in the opposite direction from the way Willow and Oz had gone and away from his next class. "A thing?" Xander asked.
"Word of the week," she replied, almost making it a question.

"Right. And you started with morose?"

"Seemed sort of appropriate. So, how're you doing?"

"I seem to be back to being incredibly unpopular."

Buffy smiled, slightly. "It's got to be better than everyone trying to axe-murder you."

"Yeah, I guess. Mostly. But Willow won't even talk to me."

Buffy shot him a sympathetic look, but she didn’t let him off the hook by making any false promises. "I know. She was on the phone to me last night. Is there any particular reason she should?"

Xander looked down at her, acknowledging the justice of her question. "How much grovelling are we talking here?" he asked.

Smiling, Buffy gave him a bump with her shoulder. "Oh, a month, at least. It would be longer, but I think Oz might
manage to talk her around. She’s mega-embarrassed, but he seems to be strangely grudge free. The rest of us..."

Stroking his jaw and thinking about the power behind Oz’s punch, Xander grimaced. "You remember, huh?"

"Oh, yeah," Buffy agreed. She shot him another quick glance. "I remember coming on to you, I remember begging you to undress me... And then a sudden need for cheese. I also remember that you didn't."

"Need cheese?"

"Undress me."

Xander remembered the feeling of nausea that had threatened, as she stalked towards him in the library. It didn’t seem like a sensible move to admit to that, though. "C'mon, Buffy," he said, instead. "I couldn't... take advantage of you like that." Trying for a joke, he added, "Okay, for a minute there, it was touch and go..."

She interrupted his attempt at humour. "But you came through." Another shoulder bump, this time accompanied by a grin. "There might just be hope for you yet."
"Gee, thanks."

"It’s no trouble."

Stopping, he turned to look at her properly. "So are we good?" he asked.

She nodded decisively. "We’re good."

He smiled, feeling better than he had all morning. "Thanks," he said, meaning it. They started walking again. "So, having established the hope that I might be forgiven, in time, how are you doing?"

She shrugged. "Okay. It's been a weird week."

Remembering what he needed to tell her, Xander directed her over to the wall. He looked around, checking that no one was in earshot. "I, I saw Angelus last night," he said. "He grabbed me from your bedroom. Straight through the window. You need to be careful, Buff."

She didn’t react the way he expected. "My bedroom?" she asked, stretching the words out incredulously. "What on Earth were you doing in my bedroom?" Suddenly she
grinned impishly. "If I'd known that last night..."

"No!" Xander held up both hands in front of her, warding her off. "Please, don’t go there," he begged. "I, I was hiding. With Cordy. From your mom."

Buffy’s face screwed up in an expression of disgust. "Eew! Thank you for that image." She cocked her head on one side as she considered him. "It does explain why Mom was looking particularly distracted this morning though." She stepped around him and started walking again. "Thanks for the heads up," she said. "I’ll speak to Giles.” They continued in silence for a few moments. "How’s Cordy?" She asked.

"I don't know."

"She won't talk to you either?"

"I don't know, because I haven't tried talking to her. She looked at me and that was enough." As they turned towards the staircase down to the first floor, he added thoughtfully, "This whole thing was... totally horrific, but it’s sorta put my Cordy obsession into perspective. I can't think why I was so..."
"Stupid?" she asked, when he trailed off. "I always said you could find someone better."

A fleeting image of who, or what, he’d found better flashed across Xander’s mind and he shied away from it. “Oh. But you don’t mean, better like you, do you?” he asked, more to distract himself than to tease her.

"God no!" Looking up at him, she grinned. "No offense."

Smiling back, Xander shrugged. "So not a problem. I remember when that reaction would have been insulting, but truthfully? I can't imagine wanting to date anyone for a long, long time. Possibly ever."

Casting him a sympathetic grimace, she obviously decided to avoid those potentially dangerous waters and returned to their earlier exchange, asking, "So, Angelus, huh? What happened? How'd you get away?"

Xander had known that this question would come up and the one thing his Yoda brain had done was provide him with a tactic to deal with it. He'd decided that telling the truth, if not the whole truth, was the least dangerous option, since it had allowed him to warn Buffy about Angelus. He just hadn't got as far as working out the
exact words. "You won't believe this," he said, "but Drusilla saved me." He paused for effect. "Then Spike saved me from Drusilla."

Buffy’s eyes went round with surprise and her eyebrows rose up near her hairline. "You make it sound like a game of pass the parcel," she said, her voice hitching in a cross between a laugh and gasp, "with you as the parcel." The laugh won. "Did they try to unwrap you?" she asked.

That was a little too close to the whole truth, but thankfully she seemed to interpret his sudden choking fit as simple embarrassment, because she moved on before he had to find an answer to her question. "How did you get away?" she asked again. "Because you're here. With the safe and the living. Who saved you from Spike?"

Trying to sound offended, Xander asked, "And you assume I didn’t manage to escape on my own?" He frowned at her. "He is in a wheelchair, you know." Their eyes locked for a moment. Buffy’s lips twitched and Xander capitulated. "Yeah, okay. Actually, I have a feeling it was Giles. He broke the spell, didn't he?"

Buffy nodded. "Yeah, he did."
A frown formed and Xander suddenly, and rather belatedly, recognised the huge hole he'd left in the logic of that explanation. He broke into her thoughts before she could chase it down and question him further on why breaking the spell would help save him from Spike. "Whenever I try to get a love life, it tries to kill me," he said. "I'm thinking, monastery. An all-man monastery. Where there are no women. Ever." She looked up at him sceptically and he shrugged again. "Yeah, you’re right," he acknowledged. "I don't think I'd last a week, either."

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans as they started down the stairs and Buffy slipped her hand through his arm. "I never said that," she protested. "But I don't think you need to run away to a monastery. Willow will come around, eventually, and someone else will do something totally stupid and this will be forgotten."

"Gee, thanks. I feel much better now" He looked down at her with a smile, to show his offended tone wasn't serious. "I don’t know though," he said. "If looks could kill, Cordy would already have me sliced and diced." He paused in thought. "Hey, remember that idea I had, where we go out on patrol and use me as bait?"

Dropping the game, Buffy pulled her arm free from his
and swatted his shoulder. "Xander! It's not that bad."

By this time they’d reached the bottom of the stairs and she stopped. The library was ahead of them, half way down the hall. "Have you seen Giles yet?"

Xander shook his head. "I'm sort of heading that way now."

She tucked her hand back through his arm. "Want company? Moral support?"

"Someone to hide behind?" He shook his head again. "Nah, I need to face him and get it over with. It's not like he's going to eviscerate me, is it?"

Buffy grinned and stepped back, releasing him. "I have Chem lab, now," she said, "but I'll be back later, to scoop up the pieces. I promise to give them a decent burial."

She turned on her heel and Xander watched her walk off with a swing in her step. How she’d managed to forgive him, he didn’t know, but he was intensely grateful that she had. Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and headed towards the library.
Part Eight

Giles frowned. "What you did was extremely foolish and dangerous."

Xander hung his head. "I know."

It hadn't been a painful lecture, by the standards by which Xander judged such things, but it certainly hadn't been pleasant. When he first entered the library, Giles was busy tidying up the checkout counter. He looked up as Xander came through the door and for a split-second Xander thought he was going to smile. He didn't. He simply put down the date stamp he was holding and turned away. Xander hesitated, unsure of what to do, whether to leave and hope that Giles had calmed down after another night's sleep, or whether to stay.

The idea that Giles didn't want to talk to him, made Xander's stomach clench. As a result, when he walked around the edge of the counter and came out into the
main part of the room, Xander felt himself sag with relief.

"Xander," Giles said. He sounded stern, but not as angry as he had the day before. "How are you?"

That was Giles, always polite, even before ripping you a new one. Giles raised an eyebrow in interrogation and Xander realised that he hadn't been asking a rhetorical question. "Um..." Steeling himself, Xander took one more step forward and stopped, clasping his hands together in front of himself. Giles simply waited. Xander realised that his hands were twisting together so he forced them apart, shoving them into his pockets and rocking back on his heels. "Um... Look... Er, Giles. I, I'm sorry. I know you're really mad at me at the moment, and I understand that I'm in trouble..." He paused to take another breath. "And whatever you decide, I'll not argue. Because I know I screwed up. And, and, I'm sorry..." he trailed off and lifted his head to look Giles in the eye, being a man, like his dad said he should.

And that was where it got really unpleasant. Giles didn't shout. He remained calm. He didn't even appear to be annoyed. But by the time he was finished, Xander was left with an overwhelming appreciation of just how disappointed Giles was, which was worse than any
If Giles had yelled at him, Xander could have got mad in return.

Eventually Giles paused, his lips pursed thoughtfully as he studied Xander. "Why do I get the feeling that you'd be happier if I said you were grounded for life?" he asked.

A number of replies flitted through Xander's mind and he felt a giggle threaten, but the situation was still too uncertain for joking so he fought the urge back. "Like you were my dad?" he asked instead. "Er, I think you might be a bit too young for that."

Giles' eyes widened, and yes, that was definitely a softening of his frown. With a huff, he clapped a hand on Xander's shoulder and Xander ducked his head as his stomach twisted again, with pleasure this time and hope that maybe the worst was over.

"I am hardly in a position to condemn you," Giles continued. "I was angry because I never wanted to see you," he made a vague sweeping gesture with his other arm which Xander interpreted to mean he was referring to all of them, not just to him, "making the same mistakes I made." That made Xander look up and stare,
and Giles' lips twitched. "I know you think of me as an old man," he said, ignoring Xander's earlier statement, "but it might surprise you to learn that I was young once. And I too made foolish and dangerous mistakes."

He became serious again and the sudden shift in tone reinforced for Xander the importance of what he said. "It's because of that that I worry about you all. I do know how seductive magic can be." He paused, his eyes leaving Xander's and focusing on some point beyond, then he sighed and seemed to pull himself back from a private memory. When he spoke again, he was his usual firm, no nonsense self. "However, I also believe you are too sensible to allow that to happen. Let this act as a warning to you. Learn from it and I have every faith that you will be okay."

During the course of the lecture they had somehow edged across the room to the table. Xander pulled out a chair and sank into it, determined to live up to Giles' assessment of him. "I know I messed up," he said. He looked up at Giles. "I know you broke the spell. You probably saved my life."

Giles pulled out the chair next to Xander's and sat sideways on it, his right arm resting along the back.
"Magic always has consequences," he explained. "In most cases, breaking the spell is enough. On other occasions there is a backlash. And some spells have layers. Breaking the obvious enchantment doesn't reverse the whole. It leaves the rest of the spell untouched." With a sigh he leant sideways against the back of his chair, looking tired. The lines on his face, the ones that gave him such character, were more deeply etched than usual.

"What kind was this?" Xander asked tentatively.

Pulling himself together, Giles sat up straight and twisted in his seat so he was facing the table. He reached across its width, pulled over an open book from the far side and turned it around so he could read it. He pointed at some hand-written notes in the margins of the page. "I don't know," he said. "Amy took a basic love spell, but she added to it, mixed in some new elements and I'm not sure what they were for." He stopped speaking and Xander found himself watching Giles' hand lying on the page, fingers tapping as he thought.

He was just beginning to consider how to frame his next question when Giles spoke. "I think if you told me about it, it might help," he said. "Can you describe everything
"That happened?"

"Everything?" Xander gulped.

"Everything you remember about the spell and everything that happened as a result of it. I saw the mark on the floor; I could still read it, even though someone," he gave Xander a look over the top of his glasses, "did their best to wash the evidence away."

Xander shrugged ruefully. He'd known that they hadn't managed to clean the strange circle away completely, but he'd been sure that no one would notice the faint outline that was left, unless they were looking for it. Giles obviously had been.

"It was a composite of the masculine and the feminine," Giles said. "That's, uh, odd for a love spell. As a male supplicant to Diana, the sign should normally have been the feminine alone. As I said, I don't understand these additions. I need you to tell me everything you remember."

Xander slouched down in his chair with his head back, looking up at the ceiling, his hands resting on his thighs, and tried to remember every detail of the spell. He
started hesitantly, describing the jars of herbs and powders, the beaker on the Bunsen burner and the marks Amy had drawn on his chest. As he spoke he found that the memories became clearer. He described how the lights had swirled around the room and how they seemed to suck him into a vortex where he could almost see and touch someone else, but never quite did. Finally, he described how the marks on his body had disappeared, once the spell was finished.

Looking over at Giles, he asked, "Is that what you wanted?"

"Yes, it's certainly a good start," Giles agreed. "There are some strange elements there. I'll have to do some more research. Am I right in thinking that the effects were not immediate?"

"Yeah, Amy said it would start working when the moon set. So I helped clear up the mess and went home. But it didn't work. At least it did, but not the way it was supposed to."

Taking a deep breath, he told Giles about what had happened the next day, how every girl, except Cordelia, wanted him and how, when it turned nasty, he'd had to
run and hide. Looking at Giles, he sat forward and rested his forearms on the table. "Could it have made me to do something I didn’t want to do?" he asked, once he'd described how he'd rescued Cordy, their run to Buffy's house and how they pushed their way inside. He hoped that a question might divert Giles, while he considered how much more he was going to tell and how he was going to tell it. Giles was being very understanding, but he needed to ease himself gently towards any thoughts about the rest of the evening, let alone speak about it aloud. He would prefer to avoid it altogether, but he didn't know which bits might be important.

"Why, what did you do?" Giles asked, looking suddenly nervous.

"Nothing!" Xander's fingers curled and dug into his palms. "I just wondered... I felt... I mean... I did it for Cordy... but..." He paused to take a breath, like he was always advising Willow to do when she stumbled over her own thoughts. The difference was that Willow tripped over her words because she had so many thoughts. Xander felt like his had all gone on vacation. Possibly to Canada. "I, I suppose I must have loved her," he said.
Giles obviously heard the question in Xander's voice, because he smiled reassuringly. "Maybe not 'loved'," he said cautiously. "But you must certainly have fancied her. And from my observations, I would hazard a fair degree of lust."

Xander felt himself blush. 'Fancied', he thought. It was an odd word. "You make her sound like a chocolate cookie, or a bar of candy," he said. Pulling himself back to the original subject, he continued, "But that's the point. I don't. I mean... I can't remember why I did."

Giles' gaze suddenly sharpened and he pulled the spell book nearer again, running one finger down the handwritten notes in the margins of the page. "Do you remember feeling attracted?" he asked.

"Yeah, sorta. I mean... she's beautiful and I remember... but I don't feel it now."

Giles gave him a searching look, but didn't press for more. "From what I've understood of this spell," he said, "Amy tried experimenting. She claims that she doesn’t know what her additions would do, or what they were for." His expression made it clear that he didn't believe that assertion.
After a moment's silence, during which he continued to read, he smiled and, although it looked forced, his voice was reassuring. "I do know that it didn’t change you," he said. "That, at least, is clear. You are still the same Xander you were before. The basic structure of the spell is unchanged from the original. It didn’t attempt, and couldn't have succeeded, in making you do anything against your nature, or your will." He paused, perhaps noticing Xander's dismay and Xander did his best to look reassured, rather than alarmed. Giles continued more cautiously, "It might have encouraged certain natural desires," Was that a question in his voice? "exaggerated them, as it were. But there was no element of direct compulsion involved."

Xander threw his hands up and leant forward to lay his forehead on the table. "Shit!" he exclaimed, only belatedly realising that by doing so he had pretty much given the game away.

He sat back up and looked at Giles who had a slight smile on his face, as if Xander had just done something amusing. "Angelus caught me last night," he said and there was some satisfaction in the way the smile immediately disappeared, to be replaced by an
expression of shock.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sort of. Drusilla grabbed me from him, before he had a chance to do anything permanent. She was definitely under the influence of the spell. But then, then Spike arrived and Spike was..." He took a deep breath. "Spike was like Drusilla and all the other women," he said. "And so was I. With him. And it had to be the spell, because last time I saw him he was trying to kill us and there was no love there. But this time... It was like we never questioned it, um, well, until after."

"So that's what you meant by me saving your life?" Giles still looked concerned.

Xander nodded. "Yeah. I felt the spell break. And it was like I'd been in a dream and I suddenly woke up." He stared down at his hands. "I ran." Looking up at Giles again, he added, "And he can't, so, so I got away. I, I don't think I stopped running until I was back in my room with the door locked."

He tried for a smile and Giles smiled back. "I'm very glad you're safe," Giles said. "Thank you for trusting me
enough to tell me this."

Ducking his head, feeling suddenly shy, Xander mumbled, "I thought you'd guessed, anyway."

"I think it would be more accurate to say that I had suspicions and was concerned, but I didn't realise how close a call it was. I thought you'd possibly met with Larry and..." He stopped speaking and plucked his glasses off, rubbing his eyes with both hands. "Thank goodness I was able to talk Amy into co-operating," he said, his voice muffled. Dropping his hands from his face, he placed his glasses carefully on the table. "I dread to think what would have happened if Spike had got close enough to bite. I'm fairly certain that under the influence of the spell, he would have turned you."

*****

Across town, in a warehouse long abandoned by the packaging company that built it...

Spike looked up when Angelus threw his cards down on the table between them and stood up. "You're no fun like this, Willie," he said. "You're pining. Stupid boy, just because you're stuck in that chair, doesn't mean you
have to go without." A crafty smile twisted his lips. "Tell you what," he suggested, "how about I go fetch him for you? Won't take you long to break him." Adding casually, "His name's Xander."

Spike growled. Trust Angelus to drop that little gem into the conversation, as if he didn't know how Spike had been fretting. "Sod off!" he snarled. "You leave him alone. I don't want you anywhere near him."

In spite of that assertion, he considered Angelus's proposal. He imagined having the boy, Xander, delivered to his bed. He remembered Xander laughing in the hotel and tried to put that laugh on the face of the boy in the bed. He tried to make the boy smile shyly up at him.

It didn't work. He didn't want Angelus to force Xander to come to him. He wanted Xander to come on his own. Snorting silently, he thought, "Romantic fool," with disgust for his own weakness. Not that it mattered; if he ever agreed to Angelus's suggestion, Angelus would take great delight in twisting his promise. Reason enough to refuse. The boy, Xander, would probably be delivered dead or already turned, Spike's grandsire's childe. Stupid bastard wouldn't be able to resist the temptation. "I'll fetch him myself, as soon as I'm out of this blasted chair,"
he said. "You keep your mitts off, okay!"

Laughing, Angelus raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, taking a few rolling steps backwards. "Easy, tiger," he said. "Alright, he's yours. No big deal. It's not as if I want him. I told you, I'm more interested in women, or girls in this case. You fetch him whenever you like." Turning on his heel, he sauntered out of the room.

Part Nine

Although he was doing his best to hide his anxiety, Xander was well aware that he was only partially successful. In spite of their difficulties, Willow knew him too well to be fooled.

It had taken her two days to decide that she'd forgiven him for his stupidity and he suspected that he had Oz to thank for the fact that it wasn't longer. At least she hadn't made him beg. One minute, he'd been sitting alone in the student lounge waiting for the day to start,
the next, she was on the couch beside him, pulling an apple out of her school bag. She'd given him a timid half-smile and that was it - they were hanging out again.

They hadn't talked about her ambush in his bedroom. She was still too embarrassed and he was trying to blank the whole thing from his mind, but with Buffy to act as buffer, they'd made it through the morning. By the time afternoon classes separated them, Willow was pretty much back to her usual bouncy self. There was still awkwardness, but they were both doing their best to ignore it. That was where the bit about her knowing him too well came in; she'd noticed that he was avoiding the library. Xander knew that he was acting weird, but he couldn't help it. He had the strangest feeling that only a week before, he'd been a totally different person. He just couldn't figure out what had changed.

On the third day after his confession to Giles, Xander sat in class during last period, ignoring Mr Burke's attempts to educate his young mind. All his thinking capacity was fully occupied by the conversation he'd just had with Larry, in the locker room, when Larry caught him staring.

Xander couldn't remember what he'd been like 'before', but he was pretty certain that the old Xander would not
have been caught staring at Larry's ass. It was also more than likely that old Xander hadn't felt queasy at the thought of kissing Cordy, even if he might still have been stupid enough to open his mouth and tell her so in front of all her minions, when she cornered him near his locker to make some cutting remark. Dimly, Xander could remember a time when it had been girls' chests that irresistibly drew his eyes, rather than boys' butts and the fact that 'busts' and 'butts' were only one letter different, didn't help at all.

He did remember that he'd never had a non-violent close encounter with Larry before; unless you counted the whole werewolf confusion, which Xander didn't. To have Larry not only notice him, but come on to him and suggest a date at the Bronze some night, in front of the entire football team, was not something that would have happened to old Xander. He was sure that if there had been the slightest hint of such a thing, old Xander would have done something to stop it, even if it was only to stutter and flail until Larry realised that not even his cool could survive a date with such a loser. New Xander blushed and mumbled, "Yeah, maybe." He didn't think they'd fixed an actual date, but it did mean that the Bronze had now joined his growing list of places to avoid.
On top of the weirdness of suddenly noticing what an attractive guy Larry was (and why had he never seen that before?) was the realisation that his feelings for Giles were just as confused.

Xander suspected that it was the memory of years of having the crap beaten out of him that was at the root of his ambivalent feelings for Larry. It didn't really matter that Larry was now rewriting history to fit his new, openly gay persona, Xander still remembered the black eye in sixth grade.

With Giles it was more complex. There was guilt over the whole teacher and father figure thing. It made Xander squirm.

But in the end, it was not Cordy, or Larry, or Giles, that was messing with Xander's head. The root problem and major source of his confusion, was Xander's feeling of being disconnected from his past self. That and the fact that it was getting worse. That and the fact that, in addition to it getting worse, he knew that he wasn't supposed to find vampires attractive. It was almost as if he remembered how he thought he should feel, but it was different from how he really felt. It was like he'd been split in two and was watching himself from a
distance.

When the class was interrupted by the delivery of a note from Giles, telling him to come to the library immediately after, Xander ignored Mr Burke's remark that if he'd known Xander could read, he'd have expected more from him. He was too busy feeling grateful. If Giles hadn't forced his hand, Xander knew he'd have had to go to the library soon. On top of everything else, he needed to tell Giles about his stalker.

And that was the last on his long list of worries.

The sight of a glowing cigarette end in the dark of his night-time back yard, could not be anything but threatening, especially when considered next to the black roses and dead fish that Buffy and Willow had received. Xander never thought it was Angelus who was doing the smoking, any more than he thought it was Spike who'd killed Willow's fish, but it was all part of the same creepy vampire behaviour.

When, with the sun shining brightly overhead, he found a small pile of cigarette butts lying next to the impressions of two narrow tires, it became faintly ridiculous, but it remained creepy. The spell had made him lose his mind
for a night, but with the morning had come sanity. And fear. And the fear was mounting with each nightly reminder that any sanity Spike might have once had, it didn't seem to have returned with the breaking of the spell.

The fact that Xander had to keep reminding himself that Spike was a vampire, and therefore dangerous, simply made the whole thing worse. There was something so... strange about being the focus of such attention.

Traditions had to be respected, though, so he loitered on his way to see what Giles wanted. He went first to pick up Buffy and Willow from extra English and they stopped off at the vending machines, since a request for a library meeting could mean a late night.

The Larry incident would have taken less than twenty minutes to get from the locker room to the canteen and all points in between, but his girls were being tactful, for once, and Xander only saw Buffy elbow Willow into silence on a couple of occasions. As they fed their quarters into the vending machines, she talked resolutely about everyday stuff - vampires, training, the demon that had taken over the ladies' dress shop and speculation about what Giles wanted them for.
Eventually, however, they had to stop procrastinating, before it became real and presentcrastination, and Xander knew they had reached that point when he finally ran out of change for the machines and Buffy and Willow did a flanking manoeuvre on him. Stuffing his chocolate bars in his pockets and cracking open his soda, he grinned. "Into the breach?" he asked. Buffy smiled slightly and Willow nodded.

He walked to the library between them, feeling like a prisoner being marched to his cell by two prison guards, which was totally unfair to the girls, who didn't realise what they looked like. The image made him smile though and he was about to nudge Buffy in the ribs and share the joke, when they pushed through the library doors and the words died on his lips.

Giles was seated at the table with his back to them, his elbows resting on the top and his head in his hands. In one of those sudden shocks of recognition, Xander realised that he had never seen Giles already sitting down when they arrived (apart from that one time, when he was rehearsing how to ask Ms Calendar out on a date). Giles was always on the move, always shelving books, or cataloguing, or looking stuff up. When he
wanted to sit down and hide, he retreated to his office. He never sat at the big table, out in the open.

He must have heard the swish of the doors, because he raised his head and twisted in his chair, standing up and visibly bracing himself when he saw who it was. "Buffy, Willow, Xander." He nodded, but his polite smile looked forced. "Thank you for coming."

Buffy walked forward cautiously, as if she were afraid Giles would crack if she moved too fast, and given the rigidity of his stance, he was close to that point. "Who's dead?" she asked.

Giles' eyes flashed to each of them in turn, and then his shoulders slumped. "Amy Madison," he said.

A gasp from Willow's direction was cut short when she clapped her hand over her mouth. Xander, himself, felt a jolt along his spine, as if he'd been hit by an electric shock, while Buffy did that sudden focussy thing, where she switched from light and cheerful to powerful and poised in the blink of an eye. "How?" she asked.

Taking off his glasses, Giles dug his handkerchief out of his pocket and began to clean them. That was a stalling
tactic. It meant that Giles needed to gather his thoughts. Hoping that it would help, Xander asked a different question: "Was that why you wanted to see us?"

Giles took a moment longer to lift his glasses up and peer at the lenses from a distance, before he hooked them back over his ears. Shoving his handkerchief back into his pocket, he took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. "No," he said and his voice was firm and calm again. "Although it was on a related matter that I wished to speak to you, Xander. I only just learned about Amy. Principal Snyder called a brief teachers' meeting, to inform us all. Apparently it happened two days ago, but the police didn't notify the school and it was only when she was still missing from class..."

Buffy sounded like she was speaking through gritted teeth when she asked again, "How did Amy die?" Xander looked over at her and saw that she was holding herself perfectly still.

Giles came towards them and reached out his hand, but aborted the move before he touched. "No, Buffy," he said gently. "She was stabbed."

"So it wasn't vampires?" Giles shook his head. She didn't
look convinced. "What else could it be?"

"Any number of things, I imagine, but on this occasion it would appear to be human malice, not supernatural. Her father is missing." Detouring around them, he walked over to the check-out desk.

Buffy turned on the spot, following him with her eyes. Willow hadn't moved since Giles broke the news and Xander wanted to comfort her, but she was still shying away from him, every time he went to touch her, so he walked over to the table and propped himself against it, instead. Crossing his arms over his chest he asked, "Are you sure it wasn't vampires?"

Buffy turned slowly back to look at him. "Because she did your spell and Angelus got caught up in it, you mean?"

Xander shrugged.

Giles looked up. "On the whole, I doubt it," he said. "She was in her home."

Nodding, Buffy relaxed a little, and Willow seemed to pull herself out of her thoughts. She came over to take a seat at the table, a few places away from Xander.
Giles cleared his throat. "The reason I asked you to come," he said, addressing Xander directly, "is because I interviewed Amy again, after our last conversation, and I learnt more about her spell. She said she had a teacher, a woman, who showed her how to improve it." He raised an eyebrow and Xander was pleased to see that he seemed to be recovering his equanimity.

"A woman?" Xander asked. "Did she describe her?"

"No, she didn't." Giles' lips twisted in a faint smile. "She merely said that she wasn't a wrinkled old crone, but I've got the impression she was well versed in magic."

Buffy had been following this exchange, her gaze swinging from one to the other and back. "So you think that if we can find the teacher, we might find out what the spell was supposed to do?" Giles nodded. "And maybe," Buffy continued, "a motive for Amy's murder?"

Giles pursed his lips, thoughtfully. "I hadn't actually considered that," he admitted. "With her father missing..."

Willow looked up. "Her Dad was devoted to her," she
said fiercely. "After her mom threw him out, he never saw Amy. She told me, he was so happy to be back in her life, they were always spending time together."

Buffy nodded in agreement. "It's true," she said.

"And yet she found the time to study magic?" Giles asked.

"Her dad works shifts at LSM, in the new industrial park, the one off the freeway," Buffy explained. "She would still have had time by herself."

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. "I had simply assumed," he said, "that because she was at home..." He trailed off, thoughtfully. After a moment, he turned to Willow. "Willow, can you look up the coroner's report and see if Amy's unfortunate murder was indeed -"

"Supernaturally related?" Willow interrupted. "On it." She stood up and went over to the computer at the opposite end of the table, sat down and immediately started clicking away at the keys.

Giles glanced around the check-out counter, looking for something. Apparently spotting the book he was after,
he picked it up, but didn't open it. Instead, he turned around to face them. "Amy's spell was very advanced," he said. "Far beyond what I would expect, given what I've learnt of her other experiments. It had layers of enchantment, which built upon each other."

"Like an onion?" Xander asked.

"More like a house of cards. Taking out the lowest level first would have caused a catastrophic collapse, with serious consequences to your continued well being. Maybe to your life." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Xander. I could have killed you, as easily as Spike."

Xander gulped. The idea of his life and the word catastrophe, put together, was not appealing, no matter how many near apocalypses he'd already managed to survive.

"It has to be dismantled, layer by layer," Giles explained. "Thankfully, the pendant charm was linked to the uppermost layer - the love spell aimed at Cordelia." He paused and looked at each of them, before continuing. "I think I got everything I need to remove the deeper layers."
Turning to Xander he explained, "Amy used your blood, to bind you. The original spell was supposed to use the feminine principle to tie Cordelia through the love token you gave her." He opened the book at a place marked by a couple of sheets of paper inserted between the pages. Picking up one of the sheets, he turned it to display a large diagram of a circle with a cross attached to its lower curve. "This was the intended symbol. The interference created by introducing the masculine principle," he put the book down and, picking up the other piece of paper, showed them another symbol. This time the circle had an arrow pointing out from it, attached to the top right edge, and it was drawn on tracing paper, "caused the spell to invert." He held the second sheet in front of the first and Xander saw that the two drawings combined to make the symbol that Amy had used on the floor of the chem lab. "That's why Cordelia was unaffected, but every other woman," Giles' lips quirked and he shot Xander a sly glance, "was not so lucky." Slapping the papers down on the counter next to the book, he continued, "What I'm not certain about is why Amy introduced the masculine element in the first place. It makes no sense." His voice made clear his frustration, if his movements hadn't already done so. "Willow, are you...? Um, have you managed to...?"
Willow looked up, over the top of the monitor. "Nearly there, Giles. I just need to..." She looked down. "Yes, I think..." She trailed off with a frown of renewed concentration.

Buffy had wandered across to peer over Willow's shoulder and Xander saw that they were both deeply engrossed. He stayed where he was, there was something tickling at the back of his mind, something Giles had just said didn't make sense. Or it did, but there was something missing.

Under other circumstances he'd have been amused at the way Giles seemed to take it as a personal slight that he couldn't fathom Amy's motives. Unfortunately, these weren't other circumstances. At that moment Xander's Yoda brain proved its worth again, providing him with a sudden suspicion that he did know what Amy had been doing.

He walked across to Giles. "I don't know why she did it, but I think I know what she did," he whispered, herding Giles towards the doors.

Giles allowed himself to be herded, until they were in the corridor and out of earshot, then he stopped. "What?"
he asked.

Now that the moment was upon him, Xander didn't know how to start. "Um, during the spell... er... I, I told you about how Angelus was his usual wacky, charming self, yeah?" Giles nodded. "And Drusilla seemed as affected as all the other women." Again Giles nodded and Xander took a deep breath to steady himself. "But that doesn't explain Spike, and me, and what happened to us," he said. "More importantly, why us? Why Spike? Amy didn't know anything about Spike."

Giles face froze in a mask of annoyed recognition. "How could I have been so stupid?" he asked. "Are you suggesting that Drusilla was mixed up in this, somehow?" He unhooked his glasses and pulled them off. "I must admit, the complexity of that spell..." He paused, tapping one arm of his glasses against his lower lip. Xander watched, fascinated by the way his lips curved. "I take it," Giles said, pulling Xander back to their conversation, "that is what you're suggesting, that Drusilla was Amy's mysterious teacher?"

"Er... no, I hadn't got that far." Xander cast a quick glance through the glass porthole in the door and saw Buffy looking around the room as if she'd just noticed that
they'd disappeared. She wouldn't respect his need for privacy for long. "But she was there that night."

"I need to look at that book again." Giles said.

Another glance through the window showed that Buffy was indeed heading doorwards. "Please, don't say anything to the girls," he begged. "Buffy knows about Angelus. Well, you know that, because you've spoken to her. I told her that Spike took me from Drusilla, but I didn't tell her anything about what happened after that. Just that you broke the spell and I got away. She hasn't gotten around to asking more, so please don't say anything, okay?"

Xander reached for the door, pushing it open. With a nod of understanding, Giles allowed Xander to usher him back into the library. "I will probably need a few more details," he said, as he passed, "to counter the spell." Xander could hear the smile in his voice and he could have murdered Giles for teasing him at such a moment. Instead he simply dodged Buffy's questioning look and developed a sudden and overpowering interest in Willow's research.
Part Ten

Xander lay on his bed. His eyes ached and his chest hurt. The day had started with such hope, after the shock of the day before, when Giles told them about Amy, and Willow discovered that the knife cut to Amy's throat disguised twin puncture marks, while a distinct lack of blood at the murder scene contradicted the police report. Ms Calendar was dead and Giles was broken and Buffy's troubles with her mother were eclipsed beneath guilt. When Willow phoned him from Buffy's house with the news, his first reaction had been disbelief. Not since he lost Jesse, had the nightmare of Sunnydale touched anyone so close to him. Not that he was close to Ms Calendar, but Giles was, and Xander was close to Giles.

Poor Giles. He'd collected Xander in his car before dawn and driven them to the library. The counter spell had to be done before the moon set and Xander had slept in his
clothes, so that he'd be ready when Giles arrived. When his alarm went off, he rolled out of bed and then spent twenty minutes hovering by the living room window, so Giles wouldn't need to ring the doorbell and risk waking his parents. As soon as he saw the old Citron draw up outside, he eased open the front door and slipped out. Giles even got out of the car and walked up the front path, so that Xander wouldn't have to brave the ten yards from his porch to the sidewalk, alone. It felt excessive, but since Giles had heard about Spike's night time habits, Xander was forbidden to go anywhere after dark without an escort and, on the whole, Xander was happy to comply.

Giles was calm and businesslike, never hinting that he resented the need to get up so early. Xander was sleepy, but hyped, a combination he wouldn't have believed possible, before experiencing it.

He'd watched as Giles laid out the ingredients for the spell and thanked God that he didn't have to get naked this time. Giles simply used one drop of Xander's blood on a circle of filter paper and held it over a beeswax candle, whilst bidding Diana to release him. There were no fireworks, no sparks or explosions, but at the edges of his vision, Xander thought he saw a faint greenish mist
separate from his body and sink into the floor. Afterwards, Giles took him for coffee.

They found an empty booth easily at that time of the morning. The Espresso Pump had only just opened and the one staff member on duty was still setting things out on the counter.

Raising his mug in a toast of thanks, Xander took his first sip of his hot chocolate. As he savoured the sweet richness, he suddenly realised that he felt lighter. He looked at Giles, really looked at him, and yes, the inappropriate attraction was gone, leaving only the familiar warmth of admiration and affection. The memory of the way his heart had sped up when he caught an unexpected glimpse of tweed, and the way he'd kept thinking he saw Giles in every middle-aged man on the street, was still there, but it didn't embarrass him as it would have done, had he even once given in to temptation and spoken of his feelings.

With some caution he conjured an image of Spike in his mind's eye - Spike leaning over to loosen his boots, the muscles on his arms catching the light, the feel of Spike's skin. Xander sighed with relief. Yes, he could admit that Spike was beautiful, but it was aesthetic appreciation
only. If Spike were a statue... Xander grinned at the thought of a marble or bronze Spike in the corner of his bedroom.

He pictured Cordy in his mind, as she'd been in Buffy's basement when the bug man chased them down there, and sure enough, he didn't feel ill at the thought of kissing her. He didn't feel particularly hot and excited either, but he hoped that was due to his recognition that Cordelia would always be Cordelia, rather than anything else.

It was a bright morning and Xander was happy. When Giles finished his coffee and left, therefore, Xander stayed where he was. He didn't think he'd ever been in town this early, so he'd never seen the workaholic management types, with their sharp suits and cell phones, heading into work. It was like watching the animals at the zoo - they were a different species, with their day-to-day concerns and oblivious, busy lives.

He turned his gaze across the street, admiring the long swinging hair and equally swinging hips of a group of college girls, until he was distracted by the play of muscles in the arms and shoulders of an electrician, who was taking advantage of the quiet time of day to set up a
precarious looking ladder on the sidewalk and install a new neon shop sign. His attention was caught by a construction worker of some sort, with his hard hat in his hand and a tool-belt around his waist, as he stepped inside the cafe and stood studying the bill of fare on the pillar by the entrance, before shrugging and continuing on his way. Xander felt a shiver of attraction for his confident stride and envied him the way people stepped naturally out of his path.

He froze with his mug of chocolate halfway to his mouth and ran through that list again. Girls, swinging hips, hot. Check. Guy, sexy muscles. Another check. He examined his feelings and his thoughts. It all felt normal, but so had his crush on Giles, at the time. He deliberately wasn't thinking about Spike.

Setting his mug down on the table, he reflected that it was becoming annoying, how he couldn't be sure that his feelings were his own. And it was tiring.

He went back to the library.

"Giles," he called, as soon as he walked through the door. "Are you sure it worked?"
Giles was halfway up the steps to the stacks, but he turned around and came back down to the main floor. "Absolutely certain," he said. His eyes crinkled in that way that it had taken Xander two years to recognise as amusement. "You are yourself again, whatever that may be."

Refusing to rise to the tease but recognising a leading statement when he heard one, Xander narrowed his own eyes suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

At that, Giles apparently realised that Xander was really worried about something. He put the books he was holding down on the table and came closer. "Well, the spell didn't change you, Xander," he said slowly. "It simply focused you in one direction, turning you away from another."

Xander absorbed that statement silently and allowed the sense of it to settle in his mind before he spoke. "So, so what you're saying..." He paused, trying to find the words to ask the question he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to. "What you're saying is... that what I felt for Spike... It was real?"

Giles nodded. "Maybe not in the specific, no, but you
wouldn't have felt anything for Spike, if you didn't already have a predisposition towards..." Giles waved his hand in a vaguely circular you-understand-what-I-mean, sort of way.

That was so not want he wanted to hear. "But, but, that's crazy. I mean... I've never... I like girls. I've always liked girls. Look at Willow and Buffy... and..."

Ushered him towards the table, Giles asked, "And what do you feel for Willow and Buffy?"

Xander stopped and gazed at Giles with dawning horror. "My dad is so going to kill me," he breathed.

The raised eyebrow and slight smile faded and Giles' face went blank. "Xander," he said seriously. "There is nothing wrong with such feelings. You can no more control who, or what, you feel attraction for, than you can help breathing." He paused and stared at Xander, as if he thought he could force the reassurance into Xander's mind, before adding, "But you can control what you do about it." They had reached the table and Giles pulled out a chair, urging Xander to sit. "If you suspect that your father would react badly, if you came out," he said, "I'm afraid you will have to decide whether it would be more
advisable for you to wait until you are old enough to leave home and become independent, or if you will keep that side of your life a secret."

Summoning a weak smile, Xander looked up at him. "So many words, Giles," he joked, before taking a deep breath and facing the implications of what Giles had just said. "What you're saying is: face up to my dad, or hide what I am? Apparently am. Maybe."

"Precisely," Giles acknowledged Xander's more economical summation, before pulling out another chair and twisting it around so he could sit down and look at Xander on a level.

"Or I could date girls?" Xander suggested.

Nodding, Giles agreed. "Or you could date girls."

With a mock sigh of relief, Xander slumped in his chair. "It's good to have a simple life."

Giles' slight smile resurfaced. "So I'm told," he said. Becoming serious again, he continued, "This revelation has come on you by surprise. The spell Amy cast removed your inhibitions and learned blindness." Xander
watched, as Giles paused and pursed his lips thoughtfully, as if considering his next words carefully. As if he wasn't already Sunnydale's biggest weigh-it-all-up guy. Finally he drew a breath and his words, now he was ready to speak them, were level and measured. "You are, perhaps, a late developer, Xander. You're what, seventeen? And Cordelia was your first girlfriend?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No. No, of course not. And without the spell, I'm sure that the knowledge of what form your preferences take would have grown on you over a period of months, or even years, and you would have adapted to it as you matured."

"Do you think maybe I'm bi? It doesn't make me feel ill to think about kissing a girl, any more."

"It did before?"

Xander sighed, allowed his head to loll back and stared at the skylight above them. "Yeah, kinda."

"That would be the spell, engaging in, um, aversion conditioning of some sort. Xander, everybody's sexuality
is personal. Whether you are gay, bi, or heterosexual, is something you will discover for yourself. There's no need to rush it."

Xander gave a shaky laugh. "Because that way leads to badness and evil boyfriends. Got it."

Xander went to class then, although he was distracted and absorbed even less of what the teacher said than usual. He spent lunch hour dodging Larry, who seemed to want to talk about something and Xander so wasn't ready to make a firm date for the Bronze. But, inevitably, over the course of the day he calmed down, as his natural common sense (his dad would say, laziness) reasserted itself. He would take Giles' advice and wait and see what happened. There was no need to rush into anything.

He ran into Giles again, as he was leaving school at the end of the day, and was surprised to see him smiling.

"Xander," he said. "What are you doing still here?"

He was... chipper. That sounded suitably British. "Nothing, I'm not... still here. I mean, I'm just leaving..." Xander hesitated, because you couldn't take the unusual
for granted in Sunnydale. "Are you all right?" he asked cautiously.

Giles' smile broadened and yes, that was verging on a grin. "Never better," he announced, because it was an announcement, not just a simple statement.

"Right," Xander replied, drawing out the word doubtfully. "So there haven't been any suspicious spells? No one has been around, offering you magic rings or brass lamps? Because you know, those puppies never come without a catch."

Giles sighed, but his smile didn't disappear, although it diminished slightly. "Xander..." he trailed off.

"Giles?" Xander prompted.

"I'm quite well. There is nothing wrong. It is kind of you to be concerned, but my private life is really just that - private."

Xander looked at him dubiously. "If you promise me that you've not been dabbling in magic and accidentally cast a spell on yourself?" He paused when a thought occurred to him. "Except," he added, dismayed, "how would you
know? It would feel normal. It always does."

Giles put a hand on Xander shoulder, turning him towards the door that led out to the courtyard. "There is no spell. No talisman. No magic of any kind. I can assure you of that." He gave Xander a gentle push. "I have some errands to run on my way home, and you should be on your way to yours, before it gets dark, since Buffy isn't here to walk you."

And then it turned out that Giles was happy because he'd got back together with Ms Calendar and Buffy and Willow and Xander had to go chasing around town, so Buffy could save him from the consequences of his rage and grief.

Xander lay on his bed, thinking about the day, without actually thinking about it. All he felt was a chest deep ache for Giles' happy smile and he realised that, although he didn't want Giles any more, as he had when under the spell, he did love him and he hurt for the pain Giles was suffering. Staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, he swore revenge on Angelus. No matter what it took, somehow, he'd see that bastard dust.
Part Eleven

Giles didn't come in to work that week and although Xander took a detour on his way home, every afternoon, and walked past Giles' apartment building, he never quite managed to summon up the courage to knock. What would he say? What could anyone say, in such circumstances?

When he expressed his sense of helplessness to Buffy, she advised him to give Giles some space. "He needs a bit of time," she said, "he'll come around," and for a moment he wanted to punch her, slayer or not. But he noticed the tightness of her lips and the crease between her brows, so he kept his mouth shut and his hands in his pockets.

For a few days everything was quiet, as if the Hellmouth had decided to give them time to mourn, but quiet was a relative term in Sunnydale and each morning there was still a fresh pile of cigarette butts on the ground in
Xander's backyard. He didn't bother to tidy them away any more. If his mom saw them, she'd assume it was his dad. And his dad? He wouldn't notice.

The advent of stalker-Spike had required that the girls be told a slightly censored version of the truth about the night of the spell and as a result, Xander was being escorted everywhere he went. Buffy walked him home, each evening after patrol. Willow rang to check that he got there and Xander endured the confinement.

Then Buffy got sick and it was Xander who, marvelling at how small and light she was, ended up carrying her to the hospital. He staggered in with her prone in his arms, calling for help, and the staff immediately jumped into action. A nurse directed him to a trolley and then shooed him away. The doctor took one look at her and rushed her into Trauma 1, which sounded ominous, Willow went to call Mrs Summers and Xander was left to hover helplessly in the corridor.

They waited. It was a huge relief when Mrs Summers arrived and the doctor would finally give them the news - Buffy was going to be okay.

Once the paperwork was completed and Buffy was
settled in a proper bed, in a room off the ER, Mrs Summers took Willow home. Xander promised Willow that he'd call a cab, but he ducked back into the hospital, instead, to sit vigil outside Buffy's door. He had a bad feeling and if he'd learnt anything in the time he'd known Buffy, it was to take notice of his feelings.

Angelus arrived minutes later, looking like any innocent visitor, with his bunch of white roses. Xander took a deep breath, stood, and blocked his passage. He was both shaking with nerves, and also strangely calm and resigned.

"Visiting hours are over," he said.

Angelus smirked and gave a casual shrug. "Well, I'm pretty much family."

Gathering himself, Xander called upon his reserves of wit. "Why don't you come back during the day?" he suggested. "Oh, gee, no, I guess you can't." So, okay, his wit had failed him, but he wasn't going to back down from this bastard.

Still playing the part of the concerned friend of the family, Angelus smirked. He stepped up close, crowding
Xander. "If I decide to walk into Buffy's room," he asked quietly, his voice heavy with menace, "do you think for one microsecond that you could stop me?"

Xander looked around for support and realised that there was some. "Maybe not," he admitted, facing Angelus again. "Maybe that security guard couldn't either. Or those cops... or the orderlies..." His voice got firmer with each addition to his list. "But I'm kinda curious to find out," he finished. "You game?"

That made Angelus pause. He looked around and took in the number of people who could legitimately claim it was their job to prevent disruption. "Buffy's White Knight," he sneered. "But you're still Spike's toy. He told me how easy you were. How you squirmed and begged for it. Soon as he's up and walking, he'll come for you." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Might give you a try myself, once he's broken you in."

Suddenly Xander was more furious than scared. "You're gonna die," he snarled. "And I'm gonna be there."

Laughing, Angelus slapped the roses against Xander's chest. "Tell her I stopped by," he said, before turning on his heel and walking back outside.
Xander shuddered and covered his mouth with a shaky hand, feeling the gorge rise in his throat. He swallowed convulsively, followed by a huge indrawn breath of relief, and collapsed back into his chair.

Giles arrived, soon afterwards, all businesslike and watcherly. Willow had called him, when she couldn't raise Xander at home. He was both relieved to find Xander still there and horrified when he heard about Angelus's visit. He shrugged away Xander's stumbling attempt to offer sympathy, demanding the details of Xander's exchange with Angelus and concentrating on that, to the exclusion of any other concerns.

Once he'd got all the details, he stuck his head around Buffy's door and confirmed that she was sleeping soundly. Apparently satisfied that all his charges were likely to survive, he sat down and told Xander to go and phone Willow, to apologise for worrying her. They spent the rest of the night alternating guard duty and dozing, until the sun rose and he sent Xander home.

Xander was out of the loop for the next few hours. He slept away the morning and most of the afternoon, returning to the hospital just in time to indulge in some
breaking and entering of the records room. It turned out that there was either a demon or a mad doctor preying on the children's ward. But it took a child to give them the clue.

So, Willow used her sciency genius to stop Buffy from killing herself with the flu, Buffy slew the demon and Xander got the kids out of the danger zone.

When Giles dropped him home from the hospital, it was late, but Xander was still too hyped to sleep. He stood at his bedroom window, gazing out at the dark yard and thinking about children and what they saw that adults didn't. He thought of Jesse and how, when they were trick or treating one year, he'd loudly envied the monster costumes of a group of other kids. Was it Xander's imagination that he remembered being embarrassed when the kids obviously overheard Jesse's comments?

They'd been 13 that year and felt very grown-up. A few years earlier they'd both run in terror from a man who approached them on the street. The light had caught his eyes oddly, that's what Jesse's mom said, when they ran sobbing into her kitchen.

Kids believed all sorts of stuff, but the last year had
taught Xander that the adult rationalisations he'd come
to accept were the bigger lie, although who profited
from their continuation, apart from the vampires and all
the other monsters, he didn't know and couldn't imagine.

But the anger he felt didn't care about big pictures. It was
focused on the specific monsters that hurt his friends and
turned his life into virtual house arrest.

Movement caught the corner of his unfocused eye and a
shadow detached itself from the general blackness of the
fence. Spike slowly wheeled himself across the grass and
stopped next to the stump of the old apple tree. Xander
took a step away from the window.

Leaning back in his wheelchair, Spike reached into his
pocket and pulled out a flask. He raised it in salute to
Xander's window and although Xander couldn't see his
face clearly, he was willing to bet that Spike was smiling.
He watched Spike lift the flask to his mouth and tilt his
head back to drink. And he had a flash memory of
watching the same action, in the back of a car. He
imagined the long length of Spike's throat and the jerk of
his Adam's apple as he swallowed, and he shivered at the
memory of Spike's skin against his lips.
Another memory arose and his involuntary flush of desire was swept away by mortification at the thought of what Spike had said to Angelus. A sweat broke out all over his body, making his skin prickle.

Spike lowered his head, shoved the flask back in his pocket and placed his hands on the arms of the chair. As Xander watched, he very deliberately lifted his feet, one after the other, off the footrests and placed them on the ground. He stood, giving the chair a casual kick as he did so, so that it toppled onto its side. Facing the window, he stretched his arms straight out from his sides, in an obvious 'here I am' display, before sketching a deep and decidedly courtly bow, his eyes fixed on Xander the whole time.

Anger gripped Xander, displacing the embarrassment of a moment before. He crossed back to the window and pushed up the bottom pane. It was almost impossible to express his outrage, while keeping his voice low, but, "Get out!" he whispered fiercely. "Leave me alone. I'll call Buffy."

Spike laughed. He walked across the grass towards the house, with a distinct swagger in his step and his voice was gently teasing when he asked, "Xander, pet, can you
Xander took a half step back into the safety of his room. "I'm not your pet!" he retorted, realising that he'd raised his voice only after he'd spoken. He cast a fearful glance towards his bedroom door. His mom had gone to bed, but his dad was still up, watching some late night show. A burst of canned laughter from the living room reassured him that he was safe. He noticed Spike notice his move and stepped forward again, to stand between the window and the door, being careful not to get too close to the window.

"Yeah, I know," Spike sounded momentarily subdued, but then the smirk was back and his voice was mocking again. "I'll call Buffy," he said, in a high pitched parody of Xander's voice, before reverting to his normal tones. "You sound like a girl."

This time Xander managed to keep his voice to a harsh whisper. "I do not! Go away! I am not your pet! I am not your toy! I am not your anything! You will never 'have' me! And nor will that monster you live with! So go away and don't come back! Buffy's my friend, as well as the slayer."
Spike laughed again at the start of Xander's tirade, but by the end he was frowning. He rested his forearms on the outside sill, like a neighbour settling in for a chat across the back yard fence. "What did Angelus say, pet?" he asked. "Because I never said anything to him."

"So how did he know who I was, huh?" Xander replied scornfully. He reached for his telephone and began to dial.

Spike pouted theatrically. "Alright, alright. I'm leaving. You're no fun tonight." He let out an equally theatrical sigh. "Let the slayer get her beauty sleep. She needs all the help she can get." He stepped back from the window, turned with a swing of his coat and swept away, around the corner of the house, his exit only slightly marred by the fact that he came hurrying back a few moments later to reclaim his chair, before leaving for a second time.

Xander put the telephone down, relieved that Spike hadn't called his bluff. He wondered if he would have called for real, if Buffy were not still in the hospital. She would have come, but would he have called her? She had enough troubles, without him disturbing her when she was snug in her bed. He puzzled over the question for a short while, before dismissing it from his mind.
He didn't sleep well that night. His dreams were full of morally reprehensible and confusing images of warm water and bubbles, his hands on naked flesh and long pale fingers trailing over his skin, touching him in places that no one but he had touched before.

When his alarm clock dragged him back into consciousness, he felt like he'd not slept at all, but he supposed that he must have done, for it to have woken him up. He rolled out of bed and staggered to the bathroom.

A hot shower went some way to clearing the fog and he was thankful to see that his mom was already up and making coffee, when he entered the kitchen. He didn't usually drink coffee, but on this morning he made an exception. Sitting down opposite her at the kitchen table, he told her the story he'd worked out during the early hours - that a guy at school had a grudge against Xander and had called in his elder brother, who was a criminal, to back him up, so she needed to be careful of any punks with bleached hair, who might pretend to be his friend. She looked concerned and asked if he was okay, whether he needed her to phone the school to complain. Xander reassured her, saying that he'd manage his problems his
own way, and he felt better when she promised not to let any strangers in. Xander considered warning his dad, but since he never got up to answer the door, even when he was alone in the house, Xander decided he could afford to avoid that exchange. He'd get a lecture about standing up for himself on the mean streets of Sunnydale High and he already knew that script by heart.

He was on his way to school before it struck him that he'd never felt the need to warn his parents about the danger of Sunnydale night life before. The fact that Spike was walking again had obviously freaked him more than he'd realised. He wondered, for the hundredth time, what it was like to be Buffy, not only unable to tell, but also in real danger every night, both as a hunter of monsters and as a potential trophy target for the more ambitious. He'd be glad to see her home, where the disinvite spell could at least ensure she was safe, whilst asleep.

Arriving at the library, he was surprised to find Buffy already there, talking to Giles. "They let you out?" he asked.

Buffy grinned. "I think they were glad to get rid of me. Seems like the hospital had a disturbance in the
children's ward last night, so the doctor was called in early. She came to see me before breakfast and cleared me for discharge, so here I am. Happy to see me?"

"I surely am," he replied, returning her hug, grateful that she left his ribs unsquished.

They drew apart. "Have you seen Willow yet, today?" Buffy asked. "I am so glad to get out of that place. Because really... hospitals are bad enough, but that thing..." She gave a shudder, but she was smiling too.

For a moment, Xander hesitated, not wanting to break the mood, but this news was too important. "Spike can walk," he announced.

Buffy closed her mouth with a snap and Giles looked up from the book he held. "What?" he asked.

"Spike, he can walk. I saw him last night. He got out of his chair and stood up."

"Where were you?" Buffy reached out and took hold of his arm, as if she needed to check that he was really alright.
"Safe. I was in my room."

"Even so," Giles said, "He's a dangerous monster. And he's obviously fixated on you, Xander. You need to be even more cautious, if he can walk again." He put his book down on the table and ran his hand over his hair as he thought. Buffy and Xander waited. "This is very strange," he continued. "I've been doing some reading up on our friend Spike, in some of the old watchers' diaries. The fact that he's shifted his obsession from his long-term paramour, to you, makes me think that there might be yet another layer to Amy's accursed spell, which is operating on him."

Xander considered that. "Another?" he asked. "How complicated was this spell?"

Giles smiled grimly. "Yes, precisely. It went far beyond Amy's capabilities." He walked over to his office and disappeared inside, but continued speaking, more loudly so that they could hear. "The pendant, your blood... those were the charms that we've already unlocked." He reappeared with the familiar spell book open in his hands. "I've read this so many times, I almost have it memorised," he said, "and I recognise most of the ingredients, but there's one that isn't properly named."
It's simply called the binder." He looked up. "I know we went over this before, but can you remember anything else about the spell?"

Something Giles had just said was tugging at Xander's memory, but it was elusive. He deliberately stopped thinking and allowed his Yoda brain to take over. And there it was - a tiny silver flask and Amy standing next to the Bunsen burner saying, 'It's the ingredient that makes the whole spell work properly.'

"There's one thing..." he said slowly. "There was one ingredient that Amy said was the binder... um, it sort of looked like blood..." He paused, allowing the thought to form. "And if it was my blood that made me go crazy..." He trailed off.

Giles nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "There would be a sort of awful symmetry to that. If that was Spike's blood..." he turned to Buffy. "We need a sample of Spike's blood."

Buffy stared at him, bug eyed. "Great," she said, flinging up her arms. "I'll get right on that. How about I knock him down and hold him, while you ask nicely for a donation?"

Her sarcasm obviously took Giles by surprise. It certainly
surprised Xander. "Um, I... Well... I, I'm sure we'll think of something," Giles said weakly, although Xander thought that Buffy had pointed out the major flaw, already.

Immediately contrite, Buffy apologised. "I'm sorry," she said "That came out way harsher than I meant. It's just that I'm not back to full strength yet." She turned away and began to pace. "And even if I were, I can hunt him, but even if I win a fight, vampires don't leave much blood when they dust and -"

"No!" Giles interrupted her. "I apologise. I wasn't thinking. You're right. You should not go up against Spike, if he's back to full strength. We, we'll just have to figure out a way to get a sample through guile."

"Or if he dusts, then presto," Xander added. "The problem goes away, doesn't it?"

Buffy and Giles both turned to look at him, smiles forming as they realised what he'd said and Buffy came over and gave him another hug. "We'll find a way, Xander," she promised. "We'll find a way to kill him, for you."
Xander wondered why he didn't feel excited by the thought.


**Part Twelve**

Pretending to still be stuck in the blasted wheelchair, when he was quite capable of going hunting, was frustrating. Spike reflected, with some cynical amusement, that patience had never been one of his few virtues. In spite of which, he seemed to have been practicing far too much of it over the past few weeks.

Angelus was scraping at his nerves, with his sly allusions to boy-toys and his monopolising of Dru's time and energy. The charade that he was still crippled was the only advantage Spike had in the subtle game of one-upmanship he found himself playing.

The new place was Angelus's most significant move in
that game, to date, and he'd scored more than a few points there, priming Dru to fall in love with the stupidity of huge windows for the sake of a courtyard garden that she'd never do anything with. Moving into Angelus's house had caused a shift in the balance of power, tearing away the last vestiges of Spike's authority over the minions.

Spike didn't believe that Angelus would have him staked if he found out that Spike was no longer crippled, but he did know that if he was going to keep an eye on Dru, he couldn't afford to be thrown out on his ear. Lulling Angelus with the continued belief in his helplessness was all that kept that from happening.

Meanwhile, Dru was slipping through his fingers. The fact that she slept every day with Angelus didn't bother him. That was just family and Angelus was her sire. Spike had learnt that lesson early in his death. It was the way she'd stopped looking to him for guidance that rankled. Two weeks before, when Angelus brought down fiery vengeance on their heads, Dru had deserted her sire in order to get Spike to safety. He wasn't so sure that she'd do the same again.

Then there was the blasted boy. Spike wanted him and
his instincts screamed to just take what he wanted. But Spike was no fledge, no matter how Angelus persisted in regarding him. He'd learnt to master his instincts, far more thoroughly than Angelus would credit, if he ever took the trouble to look.

Xander was constantly surrounded by minders or out of reach in his house, and it gnawed at Spike, but that wasn't the major obstacle. It was because he wanted Xander to come to him willingly that he was straining his reserves of patience, and recognising that bit of unrealistic truth went no way towards reconciling his inner conflict. Such contradictions were unnatural in one who was usually so certain of his actions and Spike resented it. Sometimes he wished that he wasn't cursed with such a clear understanding of his own motivations. If he could live like Angelus, who was busy fooling himself that he just wanted the slayer dead, he thought he could be happier. Unfortunately, that wasn't what he was. And in spite of his difficulties with Dru and his anger at his situation, looking at his cursed grandsire, he couldn't honestly say that he'd swap his own clear thinking for the mass of muddled-headed stupidity that was Angelus.

And so his thoughts came full circle, back to his grandsire and his sire and his own sense of frustration. His
occasionally successful verbal darts salved his underlying anger, slightly, but Angelus was as skilful as Spike at placing barbs and Spike was still burning from the latest taunt. Angelus's self-disgust took out some of the sting and Spike had enjoyed watching his grandsire in his futile attempts to scrub away the memory of his possession by a lovelorn ghost. Angelus's admission that he'd been, how did he put it? Oh, yes, 'friggin' violated', still brought a smile to Spike's lips. But Angelus always got the last word and his comment that Spike wouldn't understand, given as how he was so human it was embarrassing, still had him seething with impotent fury, as did the more mundane taunt that he'd only slow them down.

Spike remembered a time when he was Angelus's companion of choice, when he felt the need to indulge in a really vile kill. He'd never trusted Dru enough to rely on her constancy. Now, he didn't hesitate. Nor did he thank Spike for the fact that it was a hundred years with him that gave her the steadiness under fire that she'd lacked when Angelus had the raising of her. Once again Spike felt frustration rise in his throat.

Sitting, fuming, in the empty mansion, he considered the idea of ditching the chair and going out; there was still more than an hour before sunrise and he could be back
before Angelus returned. If Angelus was really determined to wreck his vengeance on some passing bystander, he might not even make it back before dawn.

Spike was more than half way to his feet when the sound of a door banging shut in the distance and her voice issuing an order to one of the minions heralded Dru's return and he sat back down, quickly, before she appeared.

She walked in, looking sleek and beautiful, with a faint flush to her cheeks. Spike was still amazed by the change the spell in the church had wrought. Prague seemed so long ago; he'd become used to her weakness.

"Michael has your supper," she said, when she spotted him. "He'll bring her in, once he's put the rest away in the pantry."

Resettling himself in his chair, Spike raised an eyebrow. "Profitable hunt, was it?" he asked coolly. They'd been arguing about his supper, or lack of it, when Angelus came home and decided to scrub his own skin right off, under the fountain, and Spike wasn't sure that he was ready to forgive and forget, quite yet.
Dru drifted over to him, all sinuous grace, and he watched her come. There was a shadow of a taunt in her voice when she replied, "We found a lovely family. You should have been there." She smiled like the cat that got the cream and he knew she was enjoying her power, compared to his apparent dependency.

Her eyes drifted away to a spot behind his shoulder and her voice shifted to the airy tones that he was more accustomed to. "They reminded me of someone, someone long ago - three daughters and their mother, walking in the square."

She was very close now and she looked down, seeing him. Her voice was focused and hard when she spoke again. "Angelus took the blonde one and wouldn't let me share. He's taken her somewhere else, but I kept the rest."

He expected her to dance away, but she always surprised him and with one of her mercurial shifts, she plopped herself down on his knee and wrapped her arms around his neck. His own arms came up of their own accord and she melted into his embrace, hands in his hair and face buried in the crook of his shoulder. Her lips nibbled at the skin below his ear and he felt the pinch of a gentle
nip from her teeth. "I was wrong, my Spike," she murmured. "So wrong. Your little American cookie isn't cooked yet. The mirror is still too clear. It needs to temper in the fire of betrayal and loss. Then the kitten will become a cat and he'll never be spayed."

That was obscure, even for Dru. Usually, he had little trouble understanding her ramblings, but if this was about Xander, and he strongly suspected it was, it was too serious for ambiguity. "What do you mean, pet? What do you see?"

"I killed the witch, you know. I walked into her house and I killed her."

"The witch?"

She sat up and looked down into his face. "The one who cast the spell. The one that made you love the boy. I thought it would make you happy. But it made me want him too and I didn't mean for that to happen."

"Dru," he said, carefully, keeping his eyes and voice low. "What did you do?"

"I ate her all up, but I was good. I had my knife and I
made it look like I didn't do it."

"I don't mean what you did when you killed some silly bitch, Dru. This is Sunnydale, no one cares if you practice safe eating, or not. Did you do a spell with a witch?"

"She was making the air hum. It was all shivery." She smiled. "Her blood was rich with magic."

Spike fought down his impatience. There was no way to rush Dru. That only resulted in her becoming more cryptic. "But what did she do?" he asked. "Before you ate her? What did you get her to do?"

Dru cocked her head thoughtfully. "I twisted her around so you would have a playmate," she explained. "He was lost and he wants to be found, so I found you for him."

A cold weight gathered in Spike's gut. "Are you saying," he asked through tightly gritted teeth, "that the only reason we ended up in that damned hotel was because of a spell? That what I felt, what I feel, isn't real?"

Dru smiled at him. He focussed on her mouth. He was expert in reading Dru's emotions from the curve of her lips. That particular smile had none of the pinched
appearance of Dru being sly. "Of course it's real, silly. You feel it, don't you?" Her mouth turned down in a pout. "But the watcher man broke the spell. I felt it. It went snap. And it was hanging by a thread, and now that thread is broken too."

He wanted to murder her. She'd played him. Everything he'd felt. It wasn't real. "Take it off," he growled, releasing her waist and moving his hands in preparation to shoving her off his lap, onto the floor. "Take the blasted spell off me."

Dru slipped to her feet and stood, bent forward with her hands still clasped at the back of his neck and her arms straight. "Look at me!" she snapped and involuntarily he did as she ordered. Immediately, he was caught, unable to look away. Her eyes were huge and demanding and he felt their pull. "Forget him," she whispered. "Angelus has big plans. Your kitten will still be here in the wreckage. I can see it. Hell opens up and your boy is right there. But now you must forget him, or it will all go wrong. You mustn't step on this butterfly."

She drew away and Spike felt his heart strain, as if it were being drawn out through his eyes as she retreated. She'd said something, but he couldn't remember what it was.
Something important.... about...

A fleeting image of a shadowy figure hovered at the edge of his mind. Elusive and desirable, he tried to grab at it, but it remained insubstantial, fading from his consciousness, leaving only a desire to hold a tall, slim body. "Dru," he sighed.

Dru looked down at him. "It's not perfect," she said thoughtfully, "but it will have to do. The huntress doesn't listen to the dead."

**Part Thirteen**

There had been no cigarette butts on the ground in Xander's back yard for over a week. Xander was relieved. And nervous. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

*****

As expected, Larry caught up with Xander during lunch break. Xander was heading for the library by a roundabout route and he'd just turned the corner behind the gym when he heard footsteps running up behind him. "I heard the swim team got disbanded, man. I'm sorry," Larry said, overtaking Xander and starting to walk backwards, ahead of him.
Xander had been wondering, idly and with some amusement at the change in his status in Larry's eyes, what today's topic would be. There always seemed to be something. He also wondered if Larry would have been quite so persistent, if Xander weren't the only other gay kid in school. "Um... sure... thanks. But I wasn't really... I mean... I was only there because of what happened to Dodd and Cameron."

Larry stopped walking, forcing Xander to stop too, and shook his head indulgently. "Dude, you were there. You were so there." Xander felt a blush rise and Larry took a step closer, crowding him slightly. He took a step back and Larry took another step forward.

As he was manoeuvred by Larry's greater bulk, until his back hit the wall, Xander was struck by how, of all the times this same scene had played out, for the first time he knew that he could stop Larry by saying just one word.

"You were hot," Larry murmured.

Ducking his head to hide his blush, Xander didn't say the word. Larry stepped even closer, so they were almost touching. When one of Larry's hands came to rest on the
back of his neck, Xander looked up. Larry took that one, last, small step and they were touching. They were kissing. How had that happened? Xander's arms came up of their own accord and gripped Larry's waist. Larry's other hand was on Xander's hip...

Wrenching his head back, Xander straightened his arms, pushing Larry away. "I can't do this," he gasped. Looking up into Larry's face he saw annoyance, but also some hurt. "I'm sorry." he said. "My dad... I... I'm not ready to tell the world. I can't risk him finding out."

Larry froze, his eyes fixed on Xander's face, then he shifted his weight from foot to foot, settling himself, as Xander had seen him do a thousand times on the football field, or before a fight. Xander tensed and shut his eyes, waiting for the pain.

He was jerked back to full attention when he felt Larry's hands on his shoulders. Larry looked down into Xander's eyes. "It's okay," he said. "Don't worry. I understand." He patted Xander awkwardly. The gesture was reassuring and a little patronising. "I wouldn't do that to you. Your secret's safe with me," he said as he stepped back, giving Xander some space. "Look," he added. Xander looked and he realised that Larry was really nervous - Xander-
levels of nervous. He was rubbing his hands up and down the front of his thighs. "I'm, um... What I wanted to say was..." He took a deep breath and swallowed, which seemed to calm him, because although he still looked stiff, what he said next came out smoothly. "You need some space. I get that. And I've been pushing and I'm sorry. I know better than that." He studied Xander's face as if searching for something and Xander was aware that he was probably giving out all the wrong signals. Larry sighed. "Look," he said, "I'm going as a counsellor at camp over the summer. So, if you want..." He paused again and his expression softened. "Can we talk about this when I get back?" he asked.

Xander nodded mutely, not sure, yet again, what he really felt about anything. A part of him was a little ashamed of using his dad as an excuse. Another part was relieved to have the need to make a decision delayed. Larry sighed again, gave him one last wistful smile and walked away. Xander slumped against the wall and watched him until he turned the corner, before he pulled himself together, straightened up and continued on his way.

He had just pushed through the double doors into the school when he sensed another presence looming at his
shoulder, although why he should feel loomed over by a girl eight inches shorter than him, he didn't know. It was probably part of the slayer package - super-duper looming powers. He looked back. "Hi Buffy," he said.

Buffy bounced to his side, her arms swinging. "Hi, yourself. Whatcha doing?"

Up ahead, Willow came out of a classroom and started walking towards them, so that they were all converging on the T-junction leading to the library. "Hey, Willow," she called.

"Hi, guys." Willow reached the corner first and waited for them. "How'd it go, Xander?" she asked when they reached her. "Are you all drug-free and guaranteed human?"

She slipped an arm through his and grinned up at him. Xander grinned back. "Yeah," he said, "totally flushed out."

"Eww! Xander!" Buffy swatted him on the shoulder in mock disgust. "TMI!"

With a bark of laughter, Xander slung his free arm
around her neck, pulling her in to his side. "My blood, Buffy. They flushed my blood. Had my last plasma injection this morning. I'm headed to the library, now, to report."

"Oh, alright." She pouted up at him, pulled herself free of his hold and slipped her arm through his, so he had them one on either side of him. He felt like the ultimate playboy, as they walked along the corridor.

"Good thing you don't mind needles," Buffy said, "because the way they've been sticking you like a pincushion..."

Xander nodded. "Yeah, but I keep the ultimate purpose in mind. Turning into a creepy-crawly with personal hygiene issues wasn't on my top ten list of things to do before I turn twenty." Willow looked blank. "The smell," he explained. "You missed it, but can I just say, 'yuck!'? That stench... It was the worst thing ever!"

Buffy elbowed him gently in the ribs. "Um, no. I think I can honestly say that being thrown into a storm drain with a pod of sex starved mutant ninja carp, was the worst. Or should that be a shoal?" she asked, looking across him at Willow. She didn't wait for a reply. "But
thankfully, you came to the rescue and hauled me out."

They had reached the library by this time and she released him to push open the doors. Xander looked at Willow. "Caffeine?" he mouthed. Willow shrugged and they followed Buffy into the library.

Xander sometimes wondered if Giles lived in the library. It was entirely possible, his recent absence notwithstanding. He was beside the check out desk, perched on a stool, writing on an index card when they arrived. Looking up, he placed the card neatly on top of a small stack of identical cards and put his pen down. "Ah, there you are," he said. "How did it go, Xander?"

"Okay. I'm done with the hospital. Gotta take a make-up chem test at three, but that's it."

Buffy sniggered. "The fun never stops with you, does it?"

Xander grimaced. "Wanna swap?" he asked. "Lead my merry life, while I do the super-slayer thing?"

Anxiously, Willow cut off Buffy's reply, turning to Giles to ask, "It's gonna work, isn't it, the treatment?"
Ushering them towards the table Giles smiled reassuringly. "I have every confidence," he said. "The toxicology lab were almost excited by the prospect. They wouldn't be so blasé, if they had any doubts." Xander and Buffy exchanged a doubtful look, but Willow seemed reassured. Giles continued, "The... people from animal control have just left. Our creatures have apparently made a dash for it. Um... so to speak."

Willow's face fell. "Does that mean we're gonna have to hunt them again?"

"No," Buffy said. "I don't think so. I don't think we'll be seeing them anymore."

His attention apparently caught by the note of certainty in her voice, Giles asked, "Why not? Where do you think they'll go?"


When Buffy and Willow left for class, Giles went back to his stool and Xander hung around. He sat down at the table and pulled out his school books, stood up and wandered around the room, went into the book cage and started tidying away Buffy's weapons, all the while trying
to figure out how to ask the question he wanted to ask.

Eventually, Giles noticed the blatant loitering. It was probably when Xander started flicking through the card index, as if he knew what he was doing. With a rueful smile, Giles left his cataloguing and sat down in one of the chairs by the table. He leant back and stretched his legs out, crossed at the ankles, seemingly settling in for the long haul. "Well?" he asked. Xander appreciated the lack of subtlety.

Closing one eye, Xander tilted his head to one side and regarded him thoughtfully. He considered his question. There was really no way of asking it, that didn't sound like he was accusing Giles of lying. Walking over to the table and taking a steadying breath, he opened his mouth and launched the words in one single burst. "Is it true what you said when we went to storm the Bronze and stop the Harvest?" he asked.

Giles' expression became slightly wary, but he didn't say anything; he merely raised an eyebrow and waited.

Narrowing his eyes, Xander hesitated. Giles wanted clarification? Okay, he could do that. Time had blunted the sharpest edges, so he could do it. "That when a
person's turned, what's left isn't them, it's the monster that killed them," he explained.

"Ah." Giles sat up and leant forward, abruptly sober. "I was wondering when this would come up," he admitted. The change in his demeanour set off a light bulb in Xander's head.

Glimping at Giles, Xander accused, "You enjoyed that, didn't you?" He was both offended and flattered by the realisation. "You were teasing me."

A sheepish expression flitted across Giles' face and he shrugged. "Yes, I'm afraid I was. But I didn't realise your question was so serious. Forgive me if I appeared to make light of your dilemma."


"Okay. Well, yes, it's true. But it may not be the only truth." Giles hesitated and Xander pulled a chair out from under the table and sat down, facing him.

"A person with no soul is incapable of judging right from
wrong." Giles paused. "No, that's not quite right. They are incapable of caring about what is right and what is wrong. Vampires are demons, but more importantly, they have no soul."

"If they're demons, that means they're different, different people, right? Why more importantly?" Another thought occurred to him. "Can you even have a person with no soul?"

"Oh yes. There are records in the council's archives of people born without one, of spells that can strip the soul from you and imprison it in a jar, leaving you free to do whatever occurs to you, with no concern for morality." He pursed his lips as he paused in thought. "There are also instances of humans being turned into demons, through magic, or circumstance," he added.

That was a surprise. "Yikes!" Xander said. "Gives a whole new meaning to the idea of a life changing experience. That's horrible."

"Not all demons are rampaging monsters," Giles said. "A human who becomes a demon, especially a demon with a soul, is no more evil than they were before. Some demons play very important roles in balancing the world,
harmonising it. Others are simply different, and have much the same weaknesses and strengths as humans."

Xander rested his elbows on the table and considered that. "But, spells that strip out souls... People who become demons... Is this your way of saying that you don't know what happens when a vampire's turned?"

Giles gave a reluctant grimace. "In a way. It is possible that the turning process is a demonisation of the human, combined with the stripping away of the soul. It is also possible that the human dies and a demon takes up residence in their body, fully integrating so that the body is preserved, and absorbing the memories of the dead host."

"Which means that a vampire might be the same person, or they might be something totally different," Xander observed. "Which do you believe?"

Giles paused before answering. "The council teaches the second," he replied judiciously.

Nodding his recognition and acknowledgement of Giles' attempt to avoid the question, Xander pressed. "Yeah, sure, that's them. What about you?"
"I honestly don't know," Giles admitted. "I was taught, from an early age, that the host dies. It was not until I had almost completed my training that I stumbled across the alternative theory. There is very little evidence, either way, since the demon believes they are the same person. They have continuity of memory, after all."

Xander frowned. He clasped his hands together, allowed them to fall to the table top and returned to his original thought. "I think it was Jesse, you know. Really Jesse."

Realisation dawned on Giles' face and he slumped in his chair. "I'm so sorry, Xander," he said.

Xander studied his hands and shrugged. "Yeah. I know." He looked up. "But you tell Buffy that the person's gone."

Pulling off his glasses, Giles rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "There have been instances of slayer's families being targeted. It's one of the reasons that they are usually isolated. Slayers carry a huge weight on their shoulders. The decisions they make, often in the heat of battle, can decide the future of the world. There may be a debate in the more theoretical reaches of academic demonology, but on the ground the practical problems
are the same, as are the solutions. I see no reason to enter into the intricacies of the arguments, for or against, while sitting in the trenches of the front line."

That made a kind of sense. "And the fish boys?" Xander asked. "Are they people who got turned in to demons?"

"Yes, I imagine they are demons of some sort. Quite possibly, now that they are in their natural element, they may even be beneficial to the harmony of the oceans, in some way." Giles pursed his lips in thought before asking, "And Spike? Has he been back?"

Taken by surprise by the sudden shift in the conversation, Xander shook his head. "You mean as my personal backyard stalker? Er, no, he seems to have given up. I haven't seen sign of him for days."

"So these questions, they weren't prompted by his reappearance?"

"No way!" Xander exclaimed. "I was just curious."

Gules nodded, smiling. "I'm glad, Xander. For a while I was worried about you."
"Worried?"

"Yes." He shrugged. "I'll admit, it seems stupid now, but for a while, I was a little concerned that I had failed to completely break the spell. Every time I thought I had reached the end of it, there seemed to be still more. I was afraid that there was still some influence at work."

Xander flashed back in his mind to the kiss with Larry. It had felt odd, but kind of nice. Not quite like kissing Cordy, but that was partly because Larry was taller than him, and not like kissing Spike, either. Kissing Spike had been strange, powerful and very sexy, but that had been the spell at work. Not that it was ever going to happen, but Xander was willing to bet that if he ever got kissed by Spike again, it would be a disappointment. "You don't have to worry about that," he said.

Some bits of dialogue borrowed courtesy of http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/
Part Fourteen

From his position, flat on his back and half hidden behind a tombstone, Xander watched Buffy knock down two vampires at once, while demanding they listen to her lecture. She fought with a grim determination that reassured him she was serious when she said that she was through waiting. He just hoped that her resolve didn't crash and burn when she finally faced Angelus, himself.

He'd had his doubts at times, during the past few weeks. Immediately after the incident in the mall, when she'd possibly castrated Angelus, but certainly hadn't killed him (and Xander wasn't ever going to admit that he knew about that because he'd been hiding in the stacks with Cordy when she reported to Giles) Xander hadn't cared much. Back then, Angelus was just another vampire, like every other vampire they'd faced (except that Xander disliked him personally, before he turned evil-er). Even during the incident with the sketched portraits and the dead fish, when Angelus taunted them and danced out of reach whenever Buffy got near, even then he was more of a nuisance than a serious threat. Xander had known that once Buffy got her head around the fact that her boyfriend was gone, she would snap him like a twig.
Stupidly, incomprehensibly, Xander had believed that they were immune. Too many weeks and months of fighting big evil and coming through unscathed had lulled him into a false sense of security. They'd faced down the Master and Buffy had lived to beat him; how could any villain be worse than that? But then Angelus had killed Ms Calendar and Xander's delusions had been ripped away.

Sitting up, Xander rubbed at the back of his head. "I had that guy under control," he groaned, as Buffy helped him to his feet, "until he resorted to fisticuffs." He made a show of straightening the kinks out of his neck and did a silent count. "That's what... five vampires in three nights?"

"Yeah, I think so." Buffy grinned, obviously still high on adrenaline. "You know, you don't have to patrol with me," she said.

"Hey," he objected. "After a month of house arrest and being baby sat? I'm loving every single tombstone I get thrown into." He looked down at her. "Anyway," he added, half serious, "someone has to get your back."

Buffy smiled her appreciation of the sentiment as she
made a show of wiping dead leaves from his shoulders and back. "I just want it over," she admitted.

Finished with his grooming, she turned on the spot and scanned the graveyard. "Looks like that's it for tonight." With a sigh, she picked up the stake Xander had dropped early in the fight and handed it to him. "We'd better go. I haven't even started studying for finals yet."

He trailed behind her, towards the gates. "Finals!" he groused, "You had to remind me? Why didn't you just let me die?"

*****

Classes were almost over and Xander knew that his grades were pretty much decided, so he wasn't making a big effort to attend the last few timetabled sessions. It was, he figured, impossible to cram a whole year's learning into a couple of days, so why bother? Buffy had a better excuse than his apathy - she had a murdering monster to hunt down, but that didn't diminish the pleasure Xander got from having company in his absenteeism. As long as they stayed out of Willow's sight, they were safe. It was necessary; Willow was quite capable of dragging them both into class with her, in
spite of any protests they might make. Thankfully, she seemed to be fully occupied in herding Oz.

In spite of which, they waited until the hallways had emptied before making their way to the library. Giles would be expecting Buffy to check in, as early as possible. He'd mentioned, only the day before, that she seemed to be encountering more than her normal quota of vampires on her regular patrols. Reporting the continuation of that pattern had to be more important than memorising the periodic table.

It was a surprise, therefore, to find the library empty. Xander stuck his head around the office door, but even Giles' teapot was cold.

Returning to where Buffy waited, he shrugged and she pulled a face. "If he's not here," she said, "does that mean we have to go to class?"

"Buffster!" Xander was shocked by the suggestion. "If we did that, we'd interrupt the study session for everyone else. Mr Franks would have to stop what he was doing to bawl us out. Then there would be more time lost, while he decided whether to send us to Principal Snyder, or not. Not to mention the need to recap the intro..."
Buffy's face broke into a grin as his reasoning wound down. "So by staying here, we're actually doing the rest of the class a favour?"

"Now you're getting it." He looked around. "Think we could sneak a look at a few of the restricted books?"

"You had better not try," said a voice behind him and Giles walked past, shrugging off his coat and detouring to the table to dump his briefcase before making his way to his office.

Xander turned to Buffy who gave him her best innocent expression. "Did you know he was there?" he whispered.

Buffy smiled.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Giles called. The sound of teaspoons against mugs and the clatter of the kettle being put on punctuated his words. "I've been to the museum," he explained, returning to the main room with his Watcher notebook. "How was patrol last night?"

While Giles brewed tea and made notes, Buffy reported on their patrol and by the time he brought three mugs
out to the table and sat down with them, she was done. "So what's at the museum?" she asked.

Giles looked up from jotting down the tally, or whatever he did when Buffy reported back and listed her slays. "What's that? Oh, um, it seems that some construction workers dug up a rather large artefact, outside town. Dr Perren, the curator, didn't know what it was and called me in to advise."

Xander gave a low whistle. "Way to go, Giles. You're famous. I promise, we'll never take your book learning for granted again."

Giles closed his notebook. "Thank you, Xander, for your vote of confidence. I feel much better appreciated."

"So could you? Advise?" Buffy interrupted, having apparently slipped right back into paranoid slayer mode. "What was it?"

"I don't know." Giles rubbed at his forehead. "I've made some sketches. There's an inscription that I want to translate, but I needed my books." He took a sip of his tea. "I did, at least, extract a promise that they wouldn't open it, until I had done so."
"Open it?"

"Yes." Giles looked around, dragged his briefcase across the table, towards him, and peered inside. He pulled out a handful of loose sheets of paper and a large photograph, spread them out and sorted them into some order, with the photo on top. If that was a picture of the artefact, it looked like a large block of dirt encrusted rock, to Xander.

Giles had sat back in his chair and was taking another sip of tea, when he froze. Placing the mug down, he reached into his jacket pocket and produced a magnifying glass which he used to peer closely at one corner of the picture. With the flat of his other hand he fanned out the papers, pulled one sheet out from the middle and set it down on top. The sketch on it looked like nothing so much as a poached egg on a bed of spaghetti, but it seemed to mean something to Giles.

"What is it?" Buffy asked.

Giles didn't reply.

Buffy pushed her chair back and got up. "Giles?" she
asked.

He glanced up. "Oh, um, yes." He frowned. "Nothing to worry about," he said. "I think... Don't you have classes you should be at?"

"Um..."

It was clear that Giles had stopped listening. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid this will have to wait until I..." He stood up and went over to the book cage, where he scanned the shelves. "Very good. So I'll see you later then," he said over his shoulder. "Thank you for stopping by to report."

Buffy and Xander exchanged a look and gathered up their bags, abandoning their half drunk tea. "We've lost him," Xander observed. "He's going to be no good for explanations for at least another hour."

Nodding her agreement Buffy said, "Yeah. We'll come back later when he's worked it all out." She sighed. "I guess that means it's Mr Franks," she said, "unless you can make me a better offer?"

*****
Dru made her stately way down the steps from the back garden gate and Spike looked up over the top of his newspaper to admire her. "Nice walk, pet?" he asked.

She pulled a face "I met an old man. Didn't like him," she said, adding with a wicked smile, "He got stuck in my teeth."

Spike had laid the newspaper down on his knee when she reached him and he saw her notice it. She came to a halt and started to sway, her sinuous snake-charmer dance. "But then the Moon started whispering to me..." she breathed. Straightening up she closed her eyes and turned her face to the sky. "All sorts of dreadful things."

Angelus appeared from behind him and walked over to Dru. "What did it say?" he asked.

Jolted out of his admiration of Dru's act, Spike sneered, "Oh, look who's awake."

Angelus ignored him. "What did the Moon tell you?" he asked again, placing his hands on Dru's shoulders and pulling her close. More mind games. He wasted so much time in proving points that Spike didn't need to learn and didn't care about. "Did you have a vision?" Angelus
asked. "Is something coming?"

Dru leant back and undulated against his body. "Oh, yeah. Something terrible. Psst, psst, psst, psst, psst, psst..."

"Where?"

"At the museum. A tomb... with a surprise inside."

"You can see all that in your head?"

Angelus sounded impressed, so it was a pleasure to burst his bubble. "No, you ninny. She read it in the morning paper," Spike said, holding it out with the headline uppermost and giving it a small shake.

Angelus released Dru, took the paper from him and glanced at it.

Dru crept closer and peered around Angeulus's shoulder at the photo Spike had been studying. "That's what's been whispering to me," she said.

Angelus smiled as he read beyond the headline. "Oh, yeah," he breathed.
Part Fifteen

Xander had been hiding out in the library, all afternoon. Giles had blackmailed him into helping shelve books, earlier, before the phone call from the police, but now he was lounging back in his chair with his feet up on the table, studiously doing nothing. He figured they had an hour or two, before they could go out hunting for clues as to who had stolen the demon from the museum. They'd have to wait until sundown, for the crime scene to clear.

He looked at his watch. Another half hour and he'd go and find the girls and tell them about it, which would have the incidental benefit of deflecting Willow from the fact that he'd dodged her chemistry tutoring session. In the meantime, he was going to study the skylight and
allow his mind to wander. Far away from all things
demon related.

His attempt at escapism was interrupted when Willow
burst through the door, with Buffy trailing behind her.

"Giles," Willow called. "I've found it. I've found the
curse."

Xander sat up sharply, his feet falling to the floor and
Giles came out of his office. "What's that?" Giles asked.
"What are you saying?"

Buffy held out a computer printout and her voice was flat
when she said, "The curse. This is it."

Willow, on the other hand, was beyond excited. "It looks
like Ms Calendar was trying to replicate the original
curse. To restore Angel's soul."

Speechless, Xander watched as Giles took the printout
from Buffy's hand. The curse? The vampire souling curse
that Ms Calendar's people used on Angel? This could not
be happening. But one glance at Willow's face told him
that it was.
"Willow says, it looks like it might have worked," Buffy said with a shrug.

Watching her, Xander tried to figure out what she was thinking behind her mask. It was usually so easy to read Buffy, but the way she was talking, it could have been some boring textbook she'd handed over.

He looked at Willow. She was almost bouncing. It was as if she thought that resouling Angel would make everything right again. Buffy knew better.

Getting to his feet, he walked around the table to join them. "So he killed her... before she could tell anyone about it. What a prince, huh?"

He was watching Buffy's face as he spoke, so he saw her wince, before she turned away and started to pace.

Meanwhile, Giles was rapidly scanning the papers. "Um, well... this certainly points the way." Xander couldn't tell from his tone, whether he was trying to let Willow down easy, or if he actually thought it was worth considering. "But..." Giles paused as he read further. "The ritual itself requires a greater knowledge of the black arts than I can claim."
Willow cut across him. "I've been going through her files and, and researching the black arts, for fun, or educational fun. I may be able to work this."

Giles shook his head. "Willow," he said gravely, "channelling such potent magics through yourself is very dangerous. Even if you could do it, it might open a door that you would not be able to close."

Xander let out a breath of relief. He shouldn't have doubted. Giles knew it was a stupid idea, even if Willow didn't.

Buffy turned around and came back across the room. "I don't want you putting yourself in any danger, Will," she said, laying a hand on Willow's arm.

Giles nodded, but Willow appeared insulted by the suggestion that the spell was beyond her. She shrugged off Buffy's hand and began to argue. Listening to her trying to persuade Giles, while Giles attempted to talk sense into her, Xander hardly recognised her. She was so convinced that she could do it. So convinced that she was right.
Xander watched Buffy's face as they argued back and forth. She interjected, occasionally, seeming to swing one way and then the other, as each of them made a point. It was too much! "So this spell might restore Angel's humanity?" he said, speaking loudly enough to cut through the noise and make them listen. "Well, here's an interesting angle. Who cares? Angel's a killer. Have you forgotten Ms Calander?"

As soon as he finished, he knew he'd said the wrong thing. He had no excuse. He'd lost his temper and he, of all people, should have known that that never helped. His objection just led to Buffy admitting that she still had feelings for the monster and turned her dilemma into a tragedy, while the sight of Giles' stricken face sobered Xander immediately. He tried to regain a reasonable tone, but it was too late for that. Within moments the debate had escalated into a full blown argument.

Eventually Buffy yelled at them all to shut up and persuaded Willow to leave with her. Xander watched them go, hoping that Willow would think about it all more carefully, before she went and did anything stupid. He turned to say something to Giles, to apologise, maybe, but Giles retreated to his office and shut the door. The sound of the latch clicking home was like a slap
Spike sat back and studied the thing. "It's a big rock," he said. "I can't wait to tell my friends. They don't have a rock this big." His lack of enthusiasm bounced right off Angelus's thick hide.

Walking across the room, tossing a crowbar from one hand to the other, Angelus smiled. "Spike, boy," he said, "you never did learn your history."

The patronising 'boy' rankled and he saw Angelus notice. 'Poncy bugger!' Spike thought. At least he'd spent four years up at Oxford. He doubted that Liam had even finished whatever mediaeval equivalent of high school he'd attended in his benighted corner of the Empire, but all he said was, "Let's have a lesson, then."

Angelus started spouting some tedious rubbish: Acathla the demon came forth to swallow the world, blah, blah, blah. Something about a virtuous knight. Why the fuck were they always so virtuous? The truth was, they were the best fighters, and in Spike's experience, the best fighters were rarely virtuous. Angelus probably got the
bowdlerised version of the legend; couldn't cope with the unabridged edition.

When he finished his lecture, Angelus gestured to Andrew and handed him the crowbar. Andrew, the last of the minions Spike had inherited from the anointed one, had a star struck expression on his ugly mug as he took it and went over to the sarcophagus. He scratched at the place that looked like the join and, once he'd managed to clear the groove sufficiently to gain purchase, he gave a grunt and jemmied the front away from the case. It crashed to the floor, where it broke into three pieces, revealing the demon Acathla inside, made of stone and skewered by a sword.

Dru appeared to be delighted. "He fills my head," she whispered in an awed tone. "I can't hear anything else."

Maintaining his front of boredom, Spike asked, "Let me guess. Someone plays King Arthur and pulls out the sword?"

"Someone worthy," Angelus corrected.

"Yeah, sure, aint that always the script? Someone worthy pulls out the sword. The demon wakes up, and wackiness
ensues."

"And every creature living on this planet will go to Hell," Angelus finished.

Spike shook his head. That just went to show that Angelus really was crazy, as well as stupid. If Spike believed it, he might be worried. Everyone goes to hell? What kind of a plan was that? While Hell on Earth didn't necessarily mean no food would survive, it did rather suggest an increase in the number of competent predators. Why the fuck would anybody willingly do that?

Angelus nodded to Andrew, who went over to the double doors leading to the back salon and threw them open, revealing two more minions with a bound human between them. Angelus must have had it planned. Theatrical git!

The minions dragged the man forward and dropped him on the floor in front of Angelus. "I will drink," Angelus intoned portentously. "The blood will wash in me, over me, and I will be cleansed. I will be worthy to free Acathla." He glanced around at his audience, probably checking that he was still the centre of attention. "Bear
witness," he said, "as I ascend. As I become." Allowing his
gameface to fall into place, he grabbed the man by the
hair and lifted him to his feet, pushing his head to the
side to expose his neck. With a roar of triumph, he
lunged and began to drink.

Spike set his hands to the wheels of his chair and pushed
himself across to the door leading to the kitchen and
pantry. Behind him he could hear Angelus being all
pseudo-philosophical and he didn't feel like hanging
around for more of that. Besides, the sight of Angelus
feeding had made him hungry.

As he manoeuved his chair around to get the door open,
he happened to glance back and saw that Angelus was
approaching the statue, bloody hand outstretched. In
spite of himself, he paused to watch.

Angelus reached the statue, grasped the hilt of the sword
and pulled. And nothing happened. Nothing at all. Nada,
ingen ting, nowt!

Spike felt a laugh bubbling up, "Someone wasn't worthy,"
he sing-songed, before beating a strategic retreat.

The sound of crashing and breaking, behind him, made
him glad he'd done so. It sounded like Angelus was throwing a right paddy. Given his well voiced attitude to the whole plan, Spike had no doubt that if he'd stayed, he'd have taken the brunt of that tantrum and in the face of that, he might not have been able to maintain his charade of being crippled.

Dru came to him a couple of hours later, in his room. She was sporting a new black eye, but appeared happy enough. Not sulking anyway. "He's going to get help," she said, perching herself on the edge of Spike's bed.

"Is he now?" Spike replied, returning to his book.

She laughed. "We're going to have a party," she said. "Cakes and wine and old brandy for the men."

Spike grunted, but he looked up at her when her voice changed. "He's crazy, Spike," she whispered. Her face had gone blank. That was never a good sign. "He wants to bring the old ones back and they don't like us. Half breeds and animals. Weak and fit for nothing. I don't want to be there, Spike."

Putting his book aside, Spike leant forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Thought you wanted to end the
world."

"Oh yes, it'll be fun. Angelus says we're going to make history."

But there was a quaver in her voice and Spike recognised its origin. "What do you see, pet," he asked carefully, "when you look at the mists?"

Dru cocked her head on one side. "I'm a princess," she replied. "It's warm at night and the imps are there to bring me pretties and his horns..." She paused and a sly smile twisted her lips. "...both kinds. They're long and hard and soft for me."

Didn't sound too bad, so far. Leastways Dru sounded like she was looking forward to getting her fill. "This is what Acathla brings us?" he asked.

A shiver ran through her and her eyes went wide. "Oh Spike. It's dark and burning. I don't like it there."

That was not so promising. "Where am I, pet? Am I there with you?"

"You're there and you're here and you're with me, but
"your boy calls you."

"My boy?" Something tugged at Spike's memory, but he couldn't pull it in.

"No, he's gone. You can't see him anymore. And we're gone too." She shook her head and her hair came free of it's loose clasps, falling forward, but Spike could still see her eyes and the fear in them.

He wheeled himself closer, intending to prod her for more, when Angelus opened the door and came in. "I need a message delivered," he said. "Dru, you can still play your little mind games, can't you? Remember Vienna? I want you to do it again."

Dru looked at him and slowly a smile began to form, lighting up her face. "I remember, remember, the fifth of November, gunpowder treason and plot. We always had a bonfire on the commons. And they all came to it. Pretty maids all in a row."

Angelus turned to Spike. "What the fuck is she on about?"

Spike shrugged. "Don't know. You set her off. You or that
lump of stone out there. What happened in Vienna? Did you throw someone on a bonfire?"

Angelus smiled. "Before you were made, boy," he said. "So she knows what we're doing then? Good."

"Yeah, but I don't. What the fuck do you want of her, now?"

Jumping to her feet, Dru glided over to Angelus, ignoring Spike. "Of course I know, silly. I'm here aren't I? I can hear you."

Angelus gave a soft snort. "Sometimes I wonder about that." He turned to the door. "Margaret!" he bellowed. "Get in here and listen to your mistress, she has a message for you to deliver."

Part Sixteen

Xander ran. It had all come apart. Giles was kidnapped. Kendra was dead. Willow was in hospital. Buffy was on the run and wanted by the police. And Xander was running, running towards certain danger.

When he'd regained consciousness, properly, back in the library, he'd been pretty fuzzy as to recent events. A
couple of paramedics were crouched over him, checking his neck and back, then they helped him to his feet. At first, all he could see was the group of police gathered around Kendra's body. He couldn't see anyone else and he’d entertained the faint hope that Giles had got Willow out. But they found her under a fallen bookcase and there was still no sign of Giles.

Once they'd got him up, the paramedics insisted on him sitting down again and it was then that the memories began to reform.

Dru had been as scary the second time around, as the first. He remembered her entering the library in the middle of the fight. Then he'd been knocked down by the vampire he was trying to stake with the handle of the library broom and his head had crashed into a bookcase. He’d hit the ground expecting the vampire to pounce, but Dru’s voice had cut through the general mêlée. “Enough!” she said, clapping her hands together, once.

The vampire had left him and he remembered being vaguely aware that the fighting had stopped. It was during that moment of false reassurance, he supposed, that he'd lost consciousness.
He’d come to, briefly, to the sound of Buffy arguing with someone but he had no memory of what happened next, because when the paramedics got him up, she was gone. After that he'd stayed awake, while he and Willow were loaded into an ambulance. Lying on the stretcher, he'd watched as they worked on Willow, until they arrived at the hospital and were separated.

Now Willow was determined to do the spell and Buffy was on her way, finally, to fight Angelus. And Xander was running to meet her at a mansion on Crawford Street.

When he got there, there was still no sign of Buffy, so he decided to scout around. The mansion was built into the side of the hill, with the back rooms on the first floor almost underground. Skirting the building, to the right, Xander pushed his way through the underbrush, up the slope along the side of the house, searching for any way in. The windows were above his head, until he got half way up, when he saw one he could reach. Clambering through to it, he peered in. It was too dark to see anything inside and putting his ear to the pane, he could hear nothing. He tried to open it, but the lock held and it wouldn't budge.

Further along the wall, he saw another window, this one
set low, as the ground rose. There was a faint yellow light coming from inside so he pushed his way through the bushes until he got close. Crawling up to it on his hands and knees, he looked in. Giles was below him, tied to a chair, and Angelus was crouching in front of him. Xander couldn’t hear what they were saying, but the way Giles’s head lolled spoke of rough treatment.

The window was too small to climb through, even if Angelus left and Xander could get it open. He looked around. The mansion towered above him. Further up the slope, to his right, the thick brush and undergrowth stopped, where a footpath from the road reached the house and carried on alongside. The wall of the building continued for about another ten yards, but there were no more windows. After that, a lower wall ran beside the path up to a gate.

Xander crawled out from under the bushes, intending to investigate, but he'd only just reached the path when Spike rounded the corner.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?” Spike asked. “A spy?” Xander scrambled to his feet. “Suppose eating you is off the menu, too,” Spike mused, strolling casually towards him. He sounded regretful and Xander knew he
should be scared, but it was difficult to be scared of a guy who’d spent weeks moping in your backyard.

Falling back on the old tried and tested technique of attacking first, Xander asked, "What's up with you? You spend weeks haunting my back yard and now you can't even say, 'Hi'?

It certainly seemed to work. Spike stopped short and frowned, but after a moment he shook his head, apparently dismissing the accusation. Before he could say anything, Xander cut him off. “You’ve got Giles!” he accused.

Spike held up his hands. “Not me, pet. I’m out of this one.”

“Sure you are,” Xander replied, imbuing the words with as much sarcasm as he could manage.

“I am! I want nothing to do with it.” He sounded sincere, but, Xander reminded himself, he was a vampire so he could probably fake it.

“And why would that be?”
Spike shrugged. “Don’t fancy the end of the world. Too many people get invited to that kind of party. Ends up with the place trashed and nothing in the pantry. Not my cup of tea, that’s all. I just want Dru safe and Angelus stopped.”

“And I say again, why should I believe you?”

With a grin, Spike relaxed and pulled a packet of cigarettes out of a pocket in his coat. “Not got much choice, have you?” he asked. He fumbled for a lighter and stuck a cigarette in his mouth, speaking around it. "But you could always ask the slayer." Lighting his smoke, he took a deep drag. "I was round her house when she phoned you at the hospital. Who do'ya think told her where to come?" He craned his neck, as if he was trying to spot Buffy in the bushes behind Xander. "I heard her tell you she was negotiating a deal. Well guess what? She did."

Xander stuck his hands behind his back, trying to appear relaxed, but using the movement to grab hold of the stake from his waistband. “What did she say?” he asked.

“We did a deal." Spike shrugged again and took another drag on his cigarette, flicking the ash off onto the path
when he was done. "Drives a hard bargain, that one." There was a hint of admiration in his voice. "Demanded a phial of my blood and the life of a cop. In return, she gets Angelus, however she wants him."

“What does that mean?”

“Means, she can take him alive and shove a soul back in him, for all I care. Or, if she’s feeling merciful, she can just stake him. Doesn’t matter to me. But Dru and I get a free pass out of town." He dropped his half finished smoke and ground it out under the ball of his foot. "Now," he said casually, "I’ve got to go and stop Angelus from killing the watcher in his enthusiasm. I’ll leave the gate unlocked, so you stay alive to show her how to get in, there's a good boy. There’s steps. Takes you down to the courtyard and in through the French doors, to the main hall. That’s where they’ll all be. Got it?”

Feeling thoroughly disconcerted by Spike's strange attitude, Xander nodded. “Uh, yeah, got it!”

“Good.” Spike turned on his heel and walked up to the gate, without a backwards glance.

Xander made his way back to the front of the building, to
wait for Buffy, wondering if schizophrenia was a vampire trait. Spike had spoken to him as if he'd never met him before. And while that was a relief, it was also decidedly odd.

Once he got to the street, he went back down the hill for about a hundred yards and crouched in the shelter of a large rock, to wait. He didn’t have to wait long. Buffy came marching up the road, just as the sun began to clear the rise behind the mansion. She was carrying a long, cloth covered package under her arm. He scrambled out of the bushes to intercept her.

“Xander," she said, stopping and squinting up at him. He realised that the sun must be directly behind him and she couldn't see him clearly. "What are you doing here?"

“I’m the cavalry,” he announced.

“The cavalry?”

“Yeah, sorta. Listen, I went and spied out the mansion. I know where they’re holding Giles." He paused and looked her in the eye. "And I met your new partner.”

She might not have been able to see him clearly, but she
could obviously read his voice. "My? Oh, you mean Spike." She frowned. "I’m sorry, Xander, but we need him if we’re going to get Giles out."

Xander shrugged awkwardly. “I know," he agreed. "It’s okay. He said something about souling Angelus again. Did you tell him about that?”

“It came up. It doesn’t matter now." She didn't move and he took a few steps forward so that he was standing in the sunlight. She relaxed. "I wasn’t sure he’d hold to the deal,” she admitted.

“There’s a gate. He said he’ll leave it unlocked. Um…”

“Okay," she said, "let’s go, then." She took the package from under her arm and started undoing the ties that held the cloth in place. “You have a weapon?” Xander pulled his stake out of his back pocket and held it up. She nodded. "Stay back,” she said. “You get in, you get Giles out. I won't be able to protect you.” The final tie fell to the ground and she pulled the cloth aside, revealing a long and very sharp looking sword. “I'm gonna be too busy killing,” she added, lifting the blade and sighting along it.
“Whoa, that's a new look for you.”

“It's a present for Angel.”

She started up the hill, but Xander stayed where he was. “Buffy.”

“Yeah?” she asked, turning around. Now it was he who was blinded by the sun.

“Willow...”

“What? She’s okay, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. She's fine. Don't worry. She says...”

“What?”

Xander closed his eyes for a moment, weighing his choice. “Kick his ass,” he said.

Buffy turned away. "Don't worry, I will.”

Xander led Buffy through the bushes to the path and then to the gate in the wall behind the mansion. On the way he indicated the window where he'd seen Giles and
Buffy paused to look. Her expression was grim when she caught up with him.

At the gate, she stopped. “You're not here to fight,” she said. “You get Giles out, and you run like hell, understood?”

"Understood."

Buffy eased the catch and pushed the gate ajar, peering through the gap before she slipped around the jam. Xander followed.

They tiptoed down the stone steps into a sunken courtyard with access to the house through a pair of large glass doors which stood open but obscured by heavy drapes. The ground was paved in old stone flags and the whole space was cool and green, with plants around the edges and in a central bed. A small fountain, to the left of the doors, tricked water from a spout in the wall into a stone bowl. The sound added to the air of tranquillity. On any other day it would have been beautiful.

Buffy kept close to the wall as she skirted the fountain and stopped next to the doors. She lifted the edge of the
curtain aside to take a look. Xander couldn't see past her, but he could just hear the sound of Angelus's voice. He seemed to be chanting but Xander couldn't make out the words.

After a moment, Buffy eased the curtain back into place and turned to push Xander away, along the wall. Once they reached the fountain, she whispered, "They're in there. It looks like Angelus is about to do something. I'll go in and distract them. Wait until I lower the odds, then keep to the left and you should get past. Okay?"

Xander nodded.

Buffy turned back, slipped around the corner and through the door. Xander edged after her and peered through the curtains in time to see her swing her sword and a vampire turn to dust.

She stepped forward into the middle of the room and announced her arrival, saying, "Hello, lover."

Angelus had been advancing on the stone demon, but he paused at the sound of her voice. "I don't have time for you," he said.
Xander couldn't see Buffy's face, but he knew the expression she'd be wearing when she replied, "You don't have a lot of time left."

Angelus smiled. "Coming on kind of strong, don't you think? You're playing some deep odds here. Do you really think you can take us all on?"

Shrugging, Buffy replied, "No. I don't."

Angelus frowned. He never saw Spike rise from his chair behind him and slam a crowbar into the back of his head. He fell to the floor and lay still, but Spike didn't stop. He kept hitting Angelus across the back, shouting words that Xander couldn't hear, because the whole place was suddenly in chaos. A second vampire rushed across the room and attacked Buffy. Drusilla screamed and ran at Spike. Buffy took a punch to the head as she turned to face her attacker and went down, but managed to trip him with her feet as he closed in for the kill. Spike and Drusilla were a tangled mass of arms, legs and red velvet skirts, rolling across the floor.

Xander decided that the odds had been lowered enough and rushed into the room, getting himself slightly tangled in the drapes and colliding with Buffy's opponent, who
was careening backwards towards him, as if he'd been shoved, which Xander guessed he had. Xander's back hit the wall. He shook his head to clear it and pushed the vampire back at Buffy, who kicked him in the face as he stumbled forward. He went down. She seemed to have lost her sword, but she grabbed a bit of wood from a broken chair and closed on him. "Find Giles," she yelled over her shoulder and Xander ran, not wanting to distract her from her fight.

He made his way around the edge of the room. Spike and Drusilla were still on the floor, neither apparently able to hold a dominant position on the other. Angelus was flat on his face at the feet of the statue, a dark, wet patch of matted hair visible on the back of his head. Xander considered taking a detour and staking him before he could regain consciousness, but Spike and Drusilla were in the way and he knew he would never get past them, if they noticed him. Even occupied as they were, they couldn't miss him if he tried to jump over them. He looked around, taking his bearings from the doors they'd come in by and judging the position of the room where he'd seen Giles. An arch to his left appeared to lead in the right direction so he made his way to that. Again it was hung with heavy drapes, but when he pushed them aside, he saw a small room, with a chair in the middle of
the floor and Giles tied up, his head hanging forward on his chest.

Pushing through the curtain he went in. "Giles!"

Giles lifted his head and Xander crouched down behind him, picking at the ropes that bound his hands. He hardly heard Giles' voice, over the noise from next door, it was so weak. "Xander?" he asked.

Xander got the ropes around Giles' wrists undone and moved his arms so his hands rested in his lap, before starting on the ropes around his ankles.

"Can you walk?" Xander asked. One foot free, he shuffled around in front of Giles and reached for the other.

"You're not real," Giles whispered.

"Sure, I'm real." The knot on Giles' left foot was stubborn and Xander was wishing he'd thought to bring a knife. Giles muttered something else, something about seeing things. As the knot finally gave and he pulled the ropes away, Xander looked up into Giles' face. "Why would you see me?" he asked, trying to sound reasonable.
Giles grunted. "You're right. Let's go."

Grinning, in spite of the circumstances, Xander got his shoulder under Giles' right arm and helped him to his feet. Holding tight to Giles' right hand, he got his left arm around Giles' back, supporting him. Slowly they staggered out through the arch.

In the main room the fight was still going on. With a quick look around, Xander saw Buffy on the floor. She was in the process of rolling away from her opponent and for a moment he didn't understand why, until he spotted her sword lying by the door and realised that she was trying to reach it. Drusilla and Spike were on their feet again, but still fighting and Xander saw Drusilla take a swipe at Spike's face, tearing four parallel scratches down his cheek with her fingernails. While he was still reeling from that blow, she followed up with a punch that knocked him to the floor. Over by the statue, Angelus began to stir. The vampire Buffy had been fighting when Xander left the room was scrambling to his feet and just as Buffy's hand touched the pommel of her sword, he launched himself towards her, kicking it aside. Buffy pulled her hand back and did some sort of fancy scissor thing with her legs, rolling up onto her feet. She still had the table leg in her left hand and she tossed it
across to her right. As the vampire swung around, she threw it like a knife. It spun through the air, turning end over end and buried itself in the vampire's chest. Buffy took a step back as he exploded into dust and her shoulders seemed to sag.

Angelus was using the statue to pull himself to his feet and Xander opened his mouth to shout a warning to Buffy, but she was already turning around. She spotted Xander and Giles. "Get out!" she yelled. "Get him safe."

Xander realised, again, that their continued presence would only be a distraction to her, so he nodded and although he continued to watch, he began to pull Giles around the edge of the room, towards the big front doors onto the street. Giles was hardly conscious and Xander was carrying most of his weight. There was no way he could manage the steps up to the back gate, even if they could reach the courtyard.

Angelus had regained his feet and he reached out, grabbing the hilt of the sword sticking through Acathla's chest. There was a burst of blinding light and everything froze for an instant.

When his eyes cleared from the flash, Xander saw that
Angelus had pulled the sword free. He whipped it around in his hand and held it up to look at. Buffy scrambled across the room to her own sword. Drusilla had also paused to watch and while she was distracted, Spike came up behind her. He grabbed her around the throat and it seemed that he did something to her neck because, quite abruptly, she slumped. With one arm around her back, he dipped her and scooped his other arm under her legs, picking her up.

Buffy reached her sword and turned to attack Angelus. He parried her first blow, the action appearing almost lazy, even to Xander's untutored eyes. She thrust again and again he blocked, following with a swing of his own, which she managed to parry in turn. Then they were fighting in earnest, blades clashing, over and over, as they danced back and forth across the room.

Xander continued to edge Giles along the wall, while keeping one eye on the fight. A fast series of swings and parries ended with Buffy reeling backwards. Angelus closed but Buffy managed to hit him in the face with the pommel of her sword, causing him to duck away. She jumped into the air to avoid a low swing from Angelus's blade and Angelus regained his feet.
Xander and Giles had reached the front door when Xander became aware of Spike and Drusilla nearby. Spike was watching the fight with an expression of awe. "God, he's gonna kill her," he breathed. Xander wanted to shout something, to contradict his apparent certainty, but he was afraid of distracting Buffy. Then Spike shrugged and turned around. His eyes met Xander's and Xander wondered if he was going to say something. Spike frowned at him with a puzzled expression, but Drusilla gave a low moan and Spike looked down at her, his face softening into an expression Xander recognised from the crazy night of the spell. Spike shrugged again. "Best get him to a hospital," he said, nodding towards Giles. "Angelus wasn't gentle." He hitched Drusilla's limp body closer to his chest and walked away, down a short side corridor, disappearing through an arch at the far end.

Xander opened the front door, but paused, unable to leave Buffy fighting for her life. Buffy's eyes met his. "Get out, Xander!" she shouted, barely managing to block another vicious swing of Angelus's sword.

"Don't go far," Angelus added, and Xander realised that if Buffy was to have a hope of winning, he couldn't stay. He pulled Giles though the door and out into the brightening dawn.
The sun had cleared the hill behind the mansion and the street was already sunlit, but the mansion cast a long shadow. He staggered down the steps, almost buckling under Giles' dead weight, and they had just got out of the shade when a crash behind them was followed by a big black car bursting through the doors of the mansion's garage. The windows were painted black on the inside. It screeched out into the road and, with a roar, tore away down the hill towards the highway.

Xander watched it go, then laid Giles down on a patch of sunlit grass and set off at a run in its wake, to find a phone from where he could call 911.

Giles was kept overnight and interviewed by the police. Xander didn't know what he said, but when he went to visit Giles assured him that Buffy was no longer a suspect.

Xander borrowed his mom's car to collect Giles from the hospital and get him settled at home. Then they waited. Willow and Oz arrived in the late afternoon, once Willow was also released. But still Buffy didn't come. Xander tried calling her house, pretending that he wanted to borrow a book for his homework, but Mrs Summers
wouldn't tell him anything, except that Buffy wasn't home. He spent the night at Giles' apartment, with strict instructions to call Willow as soon as Buffy showed. There was no need.

The next day, at Giles' request, he went up to the mansion. Acathla stood frozen in place and the sword was back through his chest, but of Buffy, or Angel, there was no sign.

Part Seventeen

Interlude - Bothered, part 1

Sunnydale, Summer 1999

The morning after graduation, Xander stood opposite the place where the front entrance to the high school had been and stared at the ruins. The sight seemed to sum up his life. It had been a tough senior year, beginning in
danger and collective incompetence, when Buffy ran off, leaving them to cope alone, and finishing in danger and grief, with the loss of so many, in the fight that ended with an exploded school full of lumps of mayor meat.

Intellectually, he knew that he was probably still in shock. He'd spent most of the night at the hospital, until he had the full casualty list, and their faces kept surfacing in his mind, robbing him of any desire for sleep. It wasn't just Larry, although he was perhaps the worst. It was Jimmy B and Jimmy D, and Harmony, and Jack Keele, and Antonio, and Dwayne and Wayne, inseparable even now, and Helen, and Suzi, and Heidi, and Kyle, and Jamie, and the two Franks, and Jannine, as well. Suzi had signed his year book, with a heart instead of a dot above the 'i' in her name. Kyle had been boasting about his football scholarship, even as he strapped his axe on under his gown. And Larry... Larry had tried to talk him into resurrecting their disastrous and short-lived relationship, for a one-nighter, saying that Xander would regret not taking a last chance to have sex, if he went and died. Well, it was Larry who died and Xander did regret it. If they'd snuck off, like Larry wanted, and spent the night together in a cheap motel, would Larry have died happier? Would he have died at all?
So many parents, who had come to see their kids walk up onto a stage in a stupid gown and shake the hand of the Mayor before going home to celebrate and boast to their family and neighbours, were now making funeral arrangements instead.

And it was Xander who was still alive. It didn't seem right. He'd led them into the fight and they'd died, leaving him to contemplate the wreckage, before loading his bags into his car and driving away.

The blackened hulk of the school loomed over the surrounding streets. The clock tower was gone, but many of the walls still stood, even if the roofs had fallen in, or out, from the blast and the fire that followed.

He was still numb from the discovery that Larry hadn't made it. There had been no body, so it wasn't until Suzanne Grainger offered him her condolences that he heard the news of that one more death and forced himself to stop searching among the wounded.

They had never really been compatible. They were simply the only two gay guys in school and the dating and kissing, and the sex, had seemed to follow naturally from that.
Turning on the spot, he scanned the parts of the town that he could see from where he stood. Everywhere he was reminded of things that had marked this year and, in the process, had marked him. Down the street, at the far end, was the place where he'd saved Faith from the Sisterhood of Jhe and ended up having his one and only experience of sex with a girl. Just around the corner was the shop doorway where he watched her verbally disembowel Wesley, soon after his arrival. Xander wasn't particularly proud of that memory now, but it had felt like vindication at the time.

Like a man going to the gallows, he started walking around the ruins of the school. The sports field came into view, with the bleachers where he'd finally surrendered to Larry's persistence, at the start of the year. Next to it was the staff parking lot and beyond that, the door near the basement entrance, still hanging incongruously from one hinge. It was in that basement that he'd faced down Jack O'Toole and his bomb, while Buffy and the others were upstairs fighting the hellmouth in the library. That was the night, he thought, when he'd finally started to grow up.

Lifting his face to the sun, Xander looked up at the hills
behind the school. Somewhere in amongst those trees was Crawford Street and he wondered if Angel was still there, holed up and waiting for sundown before he left, or whether he'd already gone. He felt no desire to go and check.

The science block was still intact; probably the only part of the school that was. It was from there that Spike had kidnapped Willow in an attempt to get Drusilla back, sending Larry and Oz on a mad chase, while Buffy, Angel and Xander fought a gang war in the magic shop, to protect him long enough to find out what he'd done with her. It was not long after that, Xander remembered, that Larry and he broke up for the last time and Larry stopped coming to scoobie meetings. Larry had been a good man; in spite of how he felt about the supernatural and the life Xander led, he'd kept Buffy's secret. And in the end, he'd taken up a flame thrower and fought with the best of them.

Xander kept walking until he got to the crossroads at Ednamay Street, where he was faced with a choice - to continue to the left, around the back of the school, or to turn right and go to The Bronze. Ahead of him was the road where the Mayor set Faith up in a city-owned apartment, when she finally turned against them. That
way also led towards his parents' house and he wasn't ready to return there yet.

The idea of standing outside a closed up nightclub was too depressing, so he turned left. He didn't need to see the drab day-time entrance to The Bronze, to remember the vampire with Willow's face, or the dark corners Larry had found and dragged him into in their early days.

Crossing the road, he continued along the sidewalk behind the school to the corner that would take him around to the front again. On the other side of the junction was City Hall, where the Mayor had hatched his plot to become a demon and where Buffy, Willow and Michael were almost burnt at the stake for being different.

The main school building looked less damaged from this angle, although the windows were all gone and the walls above them were blackened by smoke. He walked on, offering silent homage to each memory as it arose, until he returned to the steps where the senior class had proved itself more than brave. The steps where Larry died, protecting his classmates, fighting to save his town and family.
Studying the ruins, a weight finally lifted from Xander's shoulders. He had done his duty and paid his tribute to the year and to his fallen class mates. The memories and the scars would remain, but with the completion of this task there was a chance that he would find sleep again. Now all he had to do was visit Giles and Buffy and Willow (Oz would be at Willow's house) to say goodbye. Then he could go and pick up his bags, and drive away. He would get out of town, find a quiet rest-area by the side of the road and sleep in the car. He figured he'd being doing a lot of that over the next few months.

Interlude - Bothered, part 2

Early southern hemisphere spring, Chile, 1999

Spike wanted to scream. He wanted to tear something to pieces, to wreck havoc on the room, the town, on Dru. Instead he turned his back on her and walked over to the wall, leaning his hands against it, so he wouldn't be tempted to hit her. "What boy?" he asked. "You keep talking about this boy. I don't know any boy." Pushing himself upright, he turned around and the misery on her
face drained the anger and frustration right out of him. "Baby, you know there's no one for me, but you," he said, returning to her side and drawing her into an embrace. Brushing his lips across her hair, he whispered, "There never has been."

Dru pulled herself free and stepped away, her back straight. "You're lying!" she spat. "I can still see him floating all around you, laughing at me. Why won't you just go?"

Dragging the remains of their supper off the sofa and dropping him on the floor, Spike collapsed in his place. He grabbed the open bottle of Scotch from the side table and took a swig. "For the last time, Dru, I don't know what the fuck you're talking about. There is no boy. There never has been a boy. And I don't see why there ever should be a boy. But if you keep on at it, I'll go out and find one, just for the hell of it. Then, maybe, you'll be happy, Yeah?"

She cocked her head to one side, the expression Spike always thought made her look like a sparrow. "Oh," she said. "I forgot."

Closing his eyes in relief, Spike sighed. "Thank you," he
said. "Now, can we go back to the festival?" He tossed the empty bottle aside. "I saw a lovely senorita in a black dress that would look wonderful on you." Smiling, he looked up at her. "You'll look like the princess you are. What do you say, love? Fancy some real Spanish lace?"

Picking up her skirts, Dru stepped delicately over the body and sat down, straddling his thighs. "Poor pet," she crooned, stroking the back of her hand down his cheek. "I forgot. But it's time now and you must go." Her voice sharpened and she snapped, "Look at me!"

Surprised by the sudden order, Spike looked up into her eyes. They drew him into their swirling depths and he was free, weightless and calm. Lying on his back, floating in nothingness, he gazed at the night sky, where the stars crackled and flashed, obscured occasionally by wispy clouds. A soft hum filled the air around him, through him, and the clouds began to gather and pulse so that he started to worry that they hid lightning to crash down and burn him. He tried to reach for Dru, but she was fading away, leaving him. The lightening split the sky from left to right, jagged bolts that blinded. He watched, as if frozen in time and space, as one huge flash, far greater than any of the others, formed above him. It spread outwards in slow motion, coming closer and
closer as it did so, and when it struck, his whole body went rigid with the shock. Pictures inside it flashed across his eyes faster than he could take in, yet each was as clear as a memory - a street, in Sunnydale. A car. A hotel room and a strong young body. A laugh that sounded like joy made corporeal. Lips like coming home. A bath full of bubbles and a voice that moaned in his ear as its owner surrendered to his caress.

Then it was gone, the knowledge of what he was sank into his brain, a part of him again, and he was back in the little house on the edge of the square. He raised his head and stared at Dru. "What the fuck did you do?" he gasped.

Part Eighteen

Spike selected his vantage point to favour him in the late evening breeze. He sat back against the stone legs of an angel (with a snort for his inappropriate complacence with the image) and lit a fag. The Slayer's voice carried
clearly to him, just as the smoke was carried away, although he had to strain to hear her little friend.

"You need to pick your classes, Buffy," the redhead said. What was her name again? He cast his mind back a few months, to his last visit to Sunnydale and his stupid plan to kidnap the witch and win Dru back. It was all a bit of a blur, what with the alcohol, but... Oh yeah, Willow; that was it.

"Ah!" she said. "An Introduction to the Modern Novel." She was using a torch to read from a brochure she'd picked out from a litter of others that were scattered around her on the grass. "An introductory course on the twentieth century novel. Open to freshmen. You might like that."

The Slayer was doing some sort of calisthenics between the gravestones. "Yeah, I guess," she replied. "But there's no rush, is there?"

"Well..." Willow looked up from her reading with an exasperated frown, but she obviously decided that the subject was a lost cause, because she lapsed into silence.

The Slayer ignored her, continuing with her useless
display of agility - useless because she might as well put up a flashing neon sign saying, 'Experienced fighter here'. Any opponent would be forewarned. Not that Spike cared about that. If something turned up and wanted to take her on, it might make the fight more entertaining.

The little girl (he needed to find a name for her; thinking of her by her given name seemed too much like pandering to the conventions of human society) sighed. "I wonder where Xander is," she said. "I'm getting worried." Ah, to hell with it, she could be 'Willow'; this was what he'd been waiting for. This was why he'd been tracking them for the last week. He strained to catch every shift of tone and emotion in her voice. Worried didn't sound good. "One card from Oxnard, two months ago and nothing since," she continued. "Do you really think he's okay?"

Pausing in her jumping and punching at nothing, the Slayer rested her hands on her hips and turned to face her friend. Spike had a good view of her profile and could still hear her clearly when she replied, "I think he's a boy, Will."

With another despondent sigh, the red witch (Spike considered her with his head on one side, yes, that
worked) began gathering her papers together. "Yeah, stupid boys," she groused, "with their stupid inability to communicate." Stuffing the brochures into a large satchel, she sat back against a tombstone and fiddled with the pencil in her hand. "Imagine it, though," she added, "forty-nine states to visit. I bet he's seen some wonderful places."

The Slayer turned away and started kicking her legs high and forwards, alternately, while reaching out with her opposite hand to touch her toes at the top of each kick. "Don't worry," she grunted between moves. "He'll be back. He said he would."

Spike snorted in disgust. So his boy was off having an adventure. That was depressing. But with no idea of where he'd gone, there was no point in haring off, looking for him. Eventually he'd tell his friends where he was. All Spike had to do was discover when and ferret out where.

With the well of news run dry, he decided that there was no point in hanging around. The slayer was making too much noise not to scare away any potential opponents. Glancing up at the stars, he estimated that it was gone midnight, but still early. Plenty of time for a pint or two
at Willy's. He got to his feet and crossed the roof of the mausoleum he'd been using as his look-out, jumped to the ground and made his way to the gates nearest to the lower end of town.

It was while he was sitting at the bar, intimidating Willy into standing him free drinks, that a snippet of conversation from the booth behind him caught his ear. He twisted slightly on his stool, resting his elbow on the bar in a seemingly careless sprawl and studied the speakers out of the corner of his eye. They were a couple of minions with hardly a decade between them, if Spike was any judge, which he was, and they seemed to be mostly concerned with complaints about their boss. That was as interesting, in its own way, as the idea that this boss had actually found the hiding place of the Gem of Amara, because it meant he had no control over his followers. Such a weak minded leader had no business winning a prize like that.

Spike returned to his pint, while keeping most of his attention on the continuing conversation behind him, hoping for a clue as to where they were doing all the digging they were complaining about. No such luck, but they both proved very amenable to singing at the end of the night, when he followed them into the alley and
questioned them.

Three weeks later he was drilling under the base of a crypt with a jackhammer and half a dozen loser vampires who had thought they were in for a cut of the proceeds from their treasure hunt.

*****

Xander wandered into The Bronze. Once he'd had a good night's sleep, he thought, he'd go and see Giles and the girls, but at that moment, he just wanted to lose himself in the familiar noise of home, even if he wouldn't recognise any of the patrons. He couldn't spend his first night back in Sunnydale, alone in a tatty room at the Sunnydale Motor Inn. Much better to spend it alone in a crowded bar.

The fake ID he'd got in Oxnard was good enough to get him a beer. It was more for show than for drinking; with a beer in his hand, he was a man in this haunt of high school juniors.

Withdrawing from the crush of people waiting to be served, he found an empty stretch of wall to lean against and a place to put his beer down, and surveyed the
room. He'd been right, although some of the faces were vaguely familiar, he could put names to none of them. They were all so young - kids who'd been sophomores or juniors, when he and his friends were scheming to defeat the Mayor, and dying in the process.

Looking around the room, his eyes were drawn to the dark corner under the stairs where Larry and he used to hide from the girls when they were being particularly fag hagish. It appeared that others had found it now, he could just make out the darker shadows of two bodies, locked in an embrace, the pale glow of the boy's bent head and the bracelets on the girl's wrist catching the light. The sight made him feel old.

It had been a long summer and he'd achieved none of the things he'd set out to achieve, but there had been compensations. He had come back to Sunnydale with new experiences under his belt and a new level of confidence in himself. With separation from Sunnydale and all he knew, some of the pain of Larry's loss had blunted. As with Jesse, it would probably always be there, as a dull ache, but he'd come to a sort of truce with his guilt, in Oxnard. At some point, between rescuing Jimmy the dancer from a vampire attack and kissing him goodbye, Xander had realised that Larry, like
the others who had died that day, had been heroes to be honoured rather than victims to be pitied.

He reckoned that he had Wilber to thank for that recognition, more than anyone else. The old man visited The Fabulous Ladies Night Club every Thursday afternoon and between sets he'd talk to anyone who'd stand still long enough to listen. Mostly it was complaints about the retirement home his son had placed him in, or he'd rail against the President and his politics, but one day a diatribe on the cost of new shoes led to a comparison with the prices of his youth and somehow that became a tearful story of the war in Europe and what he'd seen in Germany at the end. He'd called it a righteous war, his voice fierce as he said it.

Listening to Wilber, Xander had realised that fighting the Mayor had been a righteous war, too. Without the battle of Sunnydale High School Graduation, the whole town would have been lost, and possibly the whole country. It didn't change the fact that the cost had been horrendous, but Wilber's phrase had given Xander a perspective that he'd needed to see.

A flash of blonde hair caught Xander's attention and he stood up straight, trying to see past the heads of a knot
of boys near the dance floor. He craned his neck, spotting the blond head again and following it with his eyes, until the shift of a few bodies also gave him a view of the face that went with it. What was Buffy doing here? She should be partying with the grown-ups, at the grown-up school. She turned her back to him and sat down on the battered old sofa that they'd appropriated during their senior year.

With a private grin, Xander picked up his beer and pushed his way through the crowd. Creeping up behind her, he leant over and whispered in her ear, "The whole world in front of her, and she comes back to this dive."

Buffy twisted around, her face breaking into a huge smile. "Xander!"

They spent the next hour catching up and he bought her a light beer, some sort of boutique brew made with honey which she sipped at appreciatively. The summer had apparently been slower than usual, once all the funerals were done. (Xander felt a pang for his absence, but Buffy refused to allow him to indulge in guilt, admitting that she'd only gone, herself, to support Giles.) In the aftermath of the Mayor, she said, demonic activity had dropped off to almost nothing. She claimed to have
had a restful summer. Judging by signs of strain around her eyes, the fall was not being so kind.

In turn, Xander told her the truth about his every-state-in-the-union road trip, raising more than one laugh from her, which was good to see. He even told her about Jimmy and his own one night on the stage. But once the catching up was done, he asked her about college and the reason for her appearance in The Bronze became clear. It appeared that, intimidated by UC Sunnydale, she was suffering a crisis of confidence. It was strange to hear her so despondent. She had always appeared so irrepressible to Xander. The idea that some wannabe prima donna of a vampire should make her doubt herself infuriated Xander so much that he dragged her up from her chair, out of the club and into the alley.

They spent the rest of the evening in the most therapeutic way possible for a slayer - chasing around the campus looking for vampires and then dusting their skanky asses.

By the end, it was almost like old times. Giles turned up, and with Willow and Oz, Buffy and Xander treated his late arrival in the spirit that it deserved. When Xander eventually got back to his grotty motel room, after
helping to return all Buffy's possessions to their rightful place, he was more hopeful that, in spite of the loss of the library, the Scooby Gang was still in business.

**Part Nineteen**

Spike sat back against the cave wall, pulled his right foot up onto the rock shelf in front of him, while his other leg dangled over the edge, and lit a fag. The last three weeks had been a mixed bag.

The large gang of incompetents he'd inherited from the weak-willed but well-read poser who'd called herself 'Midnight', had proved as useless as he'd expected after meeting the first two at Willy's, and he'd soon whittled them down to a more manageable six. He'd kept only the biggest two for their proven ability to dig, the ex-mining engineer, Alan, to explain the plans Midnight had drawn up, and another three as general dogsbodies.

Once the dust had cleared and he'd put a proper shift system in place, the operation went forward at a reasonable pace and in three weeks they'd covered more distance than Midnight had managed in six. Taking a long drag, he studied his labourers at their work, assessing their continued devotion to their duty.
The bull and the bear, as he named them, reflecting their respective natures (a joke for his own amusement, since he doubted they'd heard of the stock market) were putting their backs into it - shovelling earth into wheelbarrows and clearing away rocks to create a level floor for the scaffolding they'd need when they started drilling upwards. Spike had visited the catacombs in Rome, once, long ago, and this tunnel, and the cave they'd created at the end of it, reminded him of those passages, although these were not so high.

The three unwise monkeys were taking the larger rocks and boulders from the other two and stacking them against the far wall. They were a crafty trio, a useful trait in servants as long as they were pointed in the right direction, and they'd turned out to be good hunters. They followed directions well and didn't get carried away by the wildness that was so often the downfall of untutored fledges. Between them they'd kept the larder stocked and Andi, in particular, had the makings of a useful Lieutenant. She ensured that the other two behaved, with a few well-placed kicks, and she'd proven very successful in seducing reckless young men away from their friends.

Alan looked up from the plans he was studying and
caught Spike's eye. "Another two feet and then it's straight up, boss," he said.

Spike roused himself from his musings. "It's definitely the crypt, right? I'm not keen on tunnelling into someone's septic tank."

Alan shuffled his feet. And that, there, was the reason he'd never be a leader. "Yes, it's the crypt. The radar soundings are clear. The sides are thick and reinforced, but the floor's thinner, like the books said. It can't be anything else."

Spike was all too aware that it could be anything else, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He waved Alan back to work and took another drag on his smoke. Midnight had spent years researching the legends surrounding the Gem of Amara, but that didn't mean she'd got it right. There were stories galore of vampires who believed they'd found its resting place, only to fall into some sort of trap or recklessly rush out into the sun to discover their new bauble was nothing more than a fancy piece of jewellery. Spike had seen Midnight's notes, though, and he was inclined to believe that Sunnydale might be the same Valley of the Sun that the legends referred to. He'd know soon enough.
Taken together, the treasure hunt seemed to be going well. That was the good bit of the mixed bag.

Less good was his continued failure to find out anything more about Xander. The boy's parents were useless. Not only were the curtains in Xander's room permanently drawn tight, so he couldn't see anything inside, but not once, in all the times he stationed himself behind the dead pot palm on their veranda, had he overheard them mention the boy. Although, since they barely spoke to each other that shouldn't have been a surprise. After a week of lurking, he'd decided that he'd have to wait until he could catch one of them outside and ask a few direct questions. (Politely, of course; Xander probably wouldn't take kindly to Spike killing his parents. Spike could understand that; he'd be annoyed if someone offed Dru.) The problem was that once they settled in for the night, they never seemed to stir.

The Slayer hadn't proved to be any help, either. Her patrols were intermittent, cursory and, more importantly, solitary, which meant no conversation for Spike to eavesdrop on. In frustration one night he had climbed up to her open bedroom window, where he'd made the very interesting discovery that his invite, from
when he negotiated the destruction of Acatlha and the downfall of Angelus, had never been revoked. He broke in and searched her drawers and wardrobe for postcards, letters or any other clue, while the scourge of demons and other mischief makers snored undisturbed, three feet away. He could have taken her easily, but it would have been like shooting fish in a barrel, so he'd limited himself to stealing some very attractive weapons and the odd item of clothing. Back in his tunnels, when he settled down to sleep, he enjoyed an admittedly childish glee, imagining her frantic searches for the things she'd lost.

Spike took a last drag on his cigarette and held the stub up in front of his face, studying it, without really seeing it. The hunt for the gem had taken priority over everything else, especially since the previous Tuesday, when he went to the Slayer's house and found her gone and the room full of packing crates. Sitting astride the window sill, with one foot still on the roof outside, he'd cursed himself for forgetting the date; her diary during the previous week had been full of teen angst about her move up to the university campus. Ransacking the room, on principle, he'd once again found nothing. She'd even taken her older diaries with her.

Allowing the cigarette butt to topple from his fingers,
Spike watched it hit the floor of the cave and roll for a few inches. Trying to locate one person in the crowd of students on campus was impractical and it wasn't really her he was looking for. Even if he found her, the chances that she'd let fall anything about where Xander was... No, he was right - first get the gem, then find the boy.

Midnight had already dug half the distance to the target before Spike arrived. From its starting point in the caves under the destroyed school, to the crypt next to the Chapel of Rest and the caretaker's house, the tunnel was just under half a mile long. The ground was hard clay and loose rock, easy to clear and requiring very little in the way of support, as long as it didn't rain. Progress had been smooth and steady. And finally, after three weeks of hard work, they were there.

Spike lifted his left foot and ground out the still smouldering butt. Since they'd reached the crypt's outer wall, he'd ordered a lock down, allowing only Andi out to fetch food, and after four uninterrupted days with his 'gang', as Alan called them, he was just about ready to tear the heads off the lot of them. But since they were still needed for their muscle, he decided that, instead, he'd go and do the supply run, himself.
The campus had been a good hunting ground in the past and initially he thought it was good luck that led him to the house with the huge invitation to a party strung across its front. Later, he'd curse himself for not considering the way freshers' week stretched into freshers' month, but that was later.

He slipped inside and scouted out the internal layout, while scanning the crowd for the kid who was standing alone by a wall. There was always at least one and they were generally easy marks. Spotting a girl with the air of a perpetual wall flower, he grabbed an abandoned drink and made his way over to her. A bit of charm and a few compliments soon had her going with him, willingly, in search of the punch bowl he told her was laid out in the kitchen. As they passed the utility room door, he crowded her inside.

Fifteen minutes later he was back at the party looking for his second mark; the one he'd take home for the others. Again, luck seemed to be with him as he paused in the doorway to the common room and a lovers' tiff played out, right in front of him. A hissed exchange of reproach and disingenuous innocence was followed by the bigger lad watching forlornly as his boyfriend marched off with another man.
The jilted lover was already somewhat drunk and inclined to be obnoxious with it, but it didn't take Spike long to persuade him that there were plenty of other fish left in the sea. A kiss, a bite under the pretence of necking, and Spike had a friend in need of an escort home.

That was where his luck turned. They'd almost made it out when they ran slap-bang into the Slayer.

She was just coming in through the front door, nestled snugly under the arm of a callow youth with a calculating eye. Since none of them were looking where they were going she almost knocked Spike and his prey over.

"Spike?" she gasped.

'Damn!' he thought, but he didn't let his discomfort show. "Hello Buffy. Fancy meeting you here. This the new boy?" he drawled, making a show of looking her escort up and down and sketching a sneer to demonstrate his opinion. "Now ain't this interesting? Almost like a double date."

The boy child at her side pulled himself up to his full, gangling height. Had to give it to him, he did his best to
sneer right back. "That's your date?" he asked. "He looks like he started the party a little early, huh? I'm Parker."

"'Course you are," Spike agreed. He turned to the Slayer. "I like him. He's got... what's the word? Vulnerability."

She positively snarled, "And you haven't changed. Put that guy down. Now!"

Throughout the exchange, Spike was reviewing his options. He hitched his lost supper upright, as if he was going to refuse the Slayer's order and as soon as he saw her eyes narrow in response to that, he threw the limp body at them both, using the push to provide him with the impetus to spring over the back of the couch on his left. As he ran towards the large window and gathered himself for a curling leap that would take him through, he heard her urgently order someone to, "Stay here!" The rest was lost amid the shattering of glass and the general hubbub of startled party goers.

He landed on the lawn and rolled to his feet. Running was the sensible option, but now she knew he was in town and he was torn between that and standing to fight. All those nights when she'd slept, innocent of his presence, had fuelled in him a desire to see what a dance
with her would be like. He stopped behind a large bush by the front path and when she came tearing out of the house at her usual reckless pace, he swung out his arm and backhanded her across the face. She didn't go down, but she did come to a very satisfying stop, giving him time to gather himself into a defensive stance.

She recovered quickly, throwing a punch to his head, which he dodged. "What's the matter Spike?" she gasped. "Dru dump you again?"

She threw another punch, which he blocked against his upraised forearm, and then he went on the attack. "Maybe I left her," he replied, pleased that his voice was steady, even if that was because he didn't need oxygen to energise his muscles. It was an undervalued psychological advantage in any fight with an air-breather.

She danced back from his first punch and he saw the telltale shift of her feet that signalled an imminent kick attack. Drawing back a pace, he spared a moment to scan the area, but she fooled him. Instead of using her right foot in a kick, she slammed it down on the ground and launched herself forward, punching him in the neck. He went with the blow, rolling to the ground and continuing, heels and arse over head, back onto his feet. He took
another step back, to centre himself, and she sprang after him. He blocked her first blow, dodged under the second and replied with a punch to her midriff. She doubled over with an "Umph!" but it didn't slow her down. Within a second she was on the attack again and the dance sped up.

They'd moved away from the area of the front door, to where the footpath ran next to an extension of the house and he took a kick in his side that sent him staggering face first into the wall. He pushed himself away from it and turned, just as she brought up her hand. His face collided with her fist. He reeled away and dodged back a few paces. She paused to catch her breath.

She was better than he'd expected, better than either of his other two slayers and he was beginning to regret the pride that had tempted him into taking her on, before he had the gem. Female laughter behind him gave him an idea. He feinted with his right and followed up with his left fist into her side. Instead of closing, as she obviously expected, he backed away again, towards the corner of the building, slipping his left hand inside his coat and drawing his knife from its sheath in the small of his back, as he did so.
When a pair of girls in their party frocks rounded the corner, he was ready. He pushed the nearest one away, sending her stumbling over her high heels in the grass, while he caught the second around the chest, bringing the blade of his knife up under her chin. "Back off," he snarled.

The Slayer froze. The girl in his arms froze too, emitting a faint whimper but offering no resistance.

"Let her go, Spike," the Slayer ordered.

Crowds were piling out of the house behind her and he knew that he had to act fast, or he'd be trapped by them. He began to pull his hostage backwards along the path. The Slayer advanced to match, narrowing the distance slightly with each step. He took a quick look over his shoulder, using the movement to shift his knife hand, so the blade was resting along the side of the girl's neck and the heel of his hand against her shoulder blade. One more step and he was clear of the crowd, who had instinctively gathered around the Slayer, impeding her freedom to move against him. With a grin, he twisted his knife blade up towards the girl's ear, at the same time releasing his hold on her chest and giving her shoulder a hard shove. As she stumbled forwards, her scream was
initially one of shock, but it turned to one of pain, when
the slice to her neck registered on her brain. She landed
in the Slayer's arms, bleeding in a very satisfactory
manner, and Spike turned and ran, knowing that the
Slayer would be occupied in staunching the wound and
he'd be gone by the time she was free to follow.

He went to the docks and found a couple of foreign
sailors, instead. They were drunk and easy prey, big
enough to keep him and one other going for at least a
week. By that time, he should have his gem.

It was an hour shy of dawn when he re-entered the
tunnel, a sailor over each shoulder. They were beginning
to regain consciousness, so he handed them over to the
bull, who could be trusted to obey orders to the letter, if
only because he lacked the imagination to do anything
else. Not really a keeper, that one; the bear would be
less cheerfully irritating.

He was making his way to the dig face when he had the
sudden thought that finding out where the Slayer and
the Red Witch lived on campus would be easy, if he
broke into the accommodation office. They were sure to
have records of who lived where. Once he knew that, he
could both spy on them for news of Xander and avoid the
Slayer's patrols. And with the gem in his possession he could do the spying at the times she would least expect.

Inspecting the progress his worker bees had made in his absence, he thought about supplies and how long they'd last. End of this shift, he decided, once they'd moved a few more feet of earth and got the scaffolding up. Tucking his hand in his pocket, he closed his fingers around his stake.

Part Twenty

Xander looked at the title on the spine of the book he'd picked up off the top of his pile: '????????'. He put it aside for Giles to consider, later. The next one was called 'Incendia Incitation' by some guy called Aelfhryth. Or maybe that was part of the title. It was a large, leather bound volume, with faint scorch marks around its edges. Hefting it in his hands, he considered the bookshelf in front of him and pushed it into a space between two other books with titles beginning with 'I'. Cocking his
head on one side, he considered it and frowned. "I don't get your crazy system, Giles," he said.

Giles glanced up from the page he'd been reading for the last ten minutes, when he'd stopped actively shelving books, himself, gave a sigh of exasperation and pulled Xander's book back off the shelf. "System?" he asked (rhetorically, Xander decided.) "It's called the alphabet!" Using his other hand, he forced an opening between 'Growing Your Own Psilocybe', by Thomas Adkins, and 'Allsopp's Compendium', and pushed the book into the space.

Xander grinned. "Huh. Would you look at that."

He'd intended to spend only one day with Giles, drinking English tea and helping him shelve the books rescued from the high school library that were still piled up everywhere in Giles' small apartment. He'd intended that to be the sum of his downtime. With rent due weekly, his few savings from Oxnard wouldn't last long and he needed a job. This was day two.

Giles looked at him. "Your heart's not in this, is it?" he observed with a smile. "Why don't you go and put the kettle on? You'll find the paper on the counter. I've
already read it. I'm afraid there's not much there."

Scrambling to his feet, Xander sketched a sloppy salute. "You got it, Giles."

The newspaper was indeed on the kitchen counter, already open at the help wanted section and he looked through the listings as he waited for the kettle to come to the boil. It was depressing, how Principal Snyder's prophecies were coming back to haunt him. Most of the openings seemed to require qualifications beyond a mere high school diploma. However, he found a couple of ads that looked promising, at least for the short term, until he found something better.

A week later, he decided that pizza delivery was not so bad. He had his days free to hang out with Giles, the hazard pay alone more than covered his rent at the motel and there were always tips from customers who never understood why so many pizza orders never arrived, but were very grateful when they did.

He could have worked every night of the week. The high turnover of staff made it a seller's market among the otherwise limited employment opportunities in Sunnydale. Xander decided that he could afford to
upgrade his accommodation and find himself a place of his own.

He was more than grateful for his freedom to dictate his own terms when Buffy went crazy. Soulless Buffy was not a pretty sight. As a result of the ruckus, he only managed four shifts that week.

Thankfully, Buffy's crazy period didn't last long and Willow was happier with a roommate who might have a number of bad habits, but at least could be trusted not to throw all-night parties with five thousand decibel music.

*****

Spike sent Alan through the hole first. If there was a magical trap, he didn't want to be the one caught in it. He waited, lantern in hand, and when no screams, thuds or floating dust came back to him, he hauled himself up into the crypt.

Alan was standing with his back to Spike, rummaging through a tangled pile of necklaces, bangles and other jewellery scattered across a shelf against the far wall. "This is amazing, boss," he said, without looking around. "This lot's got to be worth a fortune." Glancing back over
his shoulder, at last, he added, "but finding one gem is gonna be tricky. There was no description of it in any of the books?"

Spike gazed around the crypt. It was indeed amazing. He'd need to get his lawyers in to clear it out. Once he'd found what he was looking for. They'd take a hefty cut, but given the size of the haul, that was not going to be a problem. Alan turned back to his search and Spike watched him pick up strings of pearls and lay them aside, concentrating on the gems in single settings. That was the trouble with Alan, too clever to be satisfied with simple obedience and too stupid to hide the fact. He put his lantern down on a convenient block of stone and reached into his back pocket for his stake.

Alan's remains floated down to join the dust of ages that covered every surface. He'd been right, finding one gem in such a huge trove was going to take time. If it wasn't for his impatience to find Xander, Spike wouldn't care about that, since no one else knew it existed. As it was, he did, but it would still take time.

Alan had already separated out most of the candlesticks, strings of beads, ceremonial masks and other rubbish. Spike continued the task, throwing a couple of skulls over
his shoulder to smash on the floor. Approximately twenty minutes later he had a small pile of rings, pendants and brooches in front of him. Using a rag from the shroud on the body in the stone coffin in the centre of the crypt, he picked up an altar crucifix and placed it near at hand. One by one, he tried on the jewels, placing a finger against the cross each time. Each time, he snatched his hand away, when the holy relic burnt his profane flesh. By the time he was down to the last few pieces, all his finger tips and most of his right palm were red and blistered. He swore as he fumbled, whilst slipping an inconspicuous gold ring with a green stone onto his left ring finger. Taking a fortifying breath, he hesitated, wondering if it had all been a fool's errand, after all, then he touched the cross. It took a moment to register the lack of pain. In surprise he looked at his right hand. The blistering was gone. He was healed. With a whoop of glee he picked up the crucifix and hugged it to his chest like a woman, as he waltzed around the coffin.

Even with the evidence of the cross, Spike was still cautious. Having retraced the tunnel to the old school and clambered up to ground level, he stopped under the last section of remaining roof, in the shade, stretching only his hand out into the glaring sunlight. Nothing! No flames, no smoke, no pain. With a giddy laugh, he
jumped out from cover, into what used to be the
courtyard and, stretching his arms out wide, he spun on
the spot, his face turned up to the sky. If the fountain
had still had water in it, he'd have probably gone for a
splash, from sheer exuberance.

Eventually, he calmed down, belatedly grateful that no
one had been near to see him being so undignified. He
also realised he was hungry. The last few days of
concentrated effort, with only Alan to do the work, had
been conducted on a starvation diet. Finding someone to
eat was the first priority. Then he'd find the college
Accommodation Office, locate the witch and find out
what she knew of Xander.

Hunting in daylight, he discovered, required different
techniques from hunting at night. For one thing, there
were far more people on the streets. His first attempt to
simply grab someone and drag them into an alley, caused
an uproar that required his swift departure from the
scene. It was as if the prey knew that they were safe in
this, their natural environment. His second attempt was
more successful. Playing the lost stranger in town, asking
for directions, he seduced a helpful older man into
showing him the way and jumped him as soon as they
were alone.
Wiping his mouth on the man's shirt, Spike decided that it was just as well he'd always been adaptable. Culture shock like this would be the undoing of a lesser demon. It was not only the behaviour of the prey, the whole world looked different in daylight, more real, in a way that TV and the movies could never hope to mimic. Spike found himself constantly distracted by the vivid colours of the most ordinary, everyday objects. It was like being alive again. And the clothes... Artificial light never made their colours glow so brightly. For the first time in decades, he felt like the Victorian he'd been when he was a man - disorientated from being transported from an existence surrounded by drab vegetable based dyes, into a more exciting, chemical world. The walk to the college campus was almost too short; there was so much to take in.

A sign, just inside the gates, told him where the accommodation blocks were and the Administrative Offices. As he headed in that direction, he considered whether threats or charm would be most effective. Would the staff hand over the address of a student to a concerned relative who came bearing bad news? Maybe he'd simply scout the place out and stage a break in, after hours. He snorted, silently; or maybe not. Threats and violence it was then.
With a nod of satisfaction, he swung around the corner of one of the dorms, and collided with someone coming in the opposite direction. They both reeled back, the young man staggering slightly on his feet. It took Spike an unbelievable moment to recognise his assailant as Xander. As large as life.

"Xander!" he blurted. "You're here!" A second thought occurred to him. "Why weren't you at home when I called?"

"Er, I don't live there," Xander replied. He sounded bewildered and he stared at Spike blankly. "Who are you?" he asked. As if his eyes were just coming into focus, Spike saw the moment of recognition. "Hang on... Spike? But..."

"'Course it's me. Who else would it be? I've been looking for you."

Xander began to back away. "But, but, daylight," he stuttered, looking wildly between Spike and the sunlit campus.

It was then that Spike finally had time to notice
something very strange. Where was the expected warm
glow at seeing the boy? Where was the surge of
adrenaline and lust? Shock held him frozen in the middle
of the path, as Xander edged slowly away from him. He
refused to acknowledge the sense of loss he didn't feel,
for the non-appearance of an urge to grab the boy, wrap
him up in a fluffy blanket and take him away, somewhere
safe, but there was no denying the sense of
disappointment, the flat feeling that was forming like a
lead weight in his gut.

Xander's eyes stopped flicking around and fixed on

Spike whirled around, in time to see the Slayer stop
walking and turn towards them. She appeared to have
just come out of the dorm. At Xander's shout she headed
immediately in their direction. "Spike!" she snarled.
"What are you doing here?"

"More to the point," Xander asked. "What are you doing
here, during the day?"

The slayer paused and frowned. "Yeah! What's with
that?" She turned to Xander "And what are you doing
here?"
"I was looking for you. We were at Giles' place, watching TV." He grinned. "I know, feel the wonder. There was a news report about a cave-in and Giles got very excited. I came to tell you it needed investigating." He looked over at Spike. "But I'm thinking we already know the answer."

"Not all of it," she objected. She squared up to Spike who had decided to let them work through their befuddlement, while he worked through his, and had taken up a position leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

Seeing her shift her focus, he decided to take the initiative from her. "Remembered I'm here, have you?" he asked. "So, now what do we do?"

Xander looked from one to the other of them. "I don't know how you're doing this, but we stopped you before and we'll stop you again."

Spike grinned at him and held up his left hand. "I do love this world," he said. "Sun beaming down from the sky, in a nice, non-fatal way. I can't wait to see if I freckle." He stood away from the wall when the Slayer ran at him. "Now, now, Slayer," he warned. "No need to get
excited."

Although he saw the punch coming, he didn't bother to dodge. The blow caused him to stagger, but he didn't go down. Instead, since he hadn't been trying to avoid her attack, he was able to put all his strength into his own punch. She went flying and landed on her back on the grass.

Xander ran to her side to help her up and Spike hesitated. He didn't know why the feelings he remembered so clearly from their night in the hotel were not there, but he didn't want the boy in the middle of a fight with the Slayer. She apparently felt the same because she pushed Xander away and got to her feet unaided. Xander started fumbling in his jacket pocket while the Slayer advanced on Spike again.

With Xander safely on the sidelines, Spike stepped forward to meet her. The blows she landed still hurt, but that was nothing. He knew she couldn't damage him in any permanent way and that gave him an advantage in the fight. She hit him twice in the face, with a fast right-left, but he planted another blow that sent her right back on the ground. He jumped forward, intending to pin her down, but she got her legs up in time and kicked out,
planting her feet squarely in his gut. He flew backwards and hit the wall.

While he was catching his metaphorical breath after that exchange, he heard Xander call out, "Buffy!" and out of the corner of his eye saw the boy throw something. The Slayer caught it and immediately came at him. He leapt forward in counter-attack, and landed straight onto the stake she was holding out in front of her.

They both froze and he saw the Slayer's shoulders relax, waiting for him to burst into dust. He grinned. "Oh, do it again," he taunted. "It tickles." He gave her a leer. "You know? In a good way."

The Slayer pulled her stake free and they all watched, fascinated, as the wound in his chest closed up and healed, until there was no sign that it had ever been there.

Spike lifted his left hand again and wiggled his ring finger. "The Gem of Amara," he said, following up immediately with a back-handed blow to her face.

Xander had been edging towards them, as gobsmacked as the Slayer by Spike's new healing ability and the Slayer
went crashing into him. "Xander, get back!" she snarled, giving him a shove that knocked him over.

Spike growled and sprang forward. He threw a punch which she blocked. Grabbing her arm, he heaved, swinging her around so she went face first into the side of the building. She used her other arm to push herself away from the wall and spun, pulling herself free of his grasp, but not before he got in a solid kick to her stomach.

She doubled over, but kept her feet. He went for her again, with a blow to the shoulder that sent her back a few yards, arms windmilling for balance. He followed up with a roundhouse kick, trying to put her down, but she grabbed his ankle and knocked him off balance in his turn. In that moment, she landed a kick to his chest that sent him spinning to the ground. He used the momentum to continue the roll, regaining his feet and tried to hit her with a spinning kick, but she blocked it against her crossed arms.

"Getting tired, Slayer?" he asked. She was certainly looking the worse for wear.

Xander had been hovering to the side throughout their
exchange, but Spike's taunt seemed to do something to him. He ran forward and Spike was momentarily distracted by the need to avoid hitting him. The Slayer took advantage of his inattention and grabbed his left arm under her right and against her chest, going for the ring.

Spike felt her fingers curl around his, forcing them straight. He lifted his right arm to elbow her, but Xander grabbed at his wrist, pulling down on it with all his weight. The Slayer almost had his ring finger separated from the others. "Take it off me this way," he threatened, "and we all burn."

She was panting heavily. "Really?" she gasped. "Let's see."

With a final tug, she dragged the ring off his finger and instantly the pain hit. The Slayer had jumped back, as soon as the ring was off and Xander released him immediately after. The pain in his face was agonising and he was dimly aware of smoke beginning to rise from his hands. He looked around, wildly, and spotted a manhole cover under a wide spreading tree. Running, he made it to the shade and pried the lid off, slithering head first into the cool, dark, if smelly safety below.
As he made his way through the sewers and tunnels, nursing his burns, he didn't think he'd ever felt so totally flattened. A meal would go a long way towards healing the physical hurt, but the emotional confusion was still overwhelming. The fact that when he saw the boy, he didn't feel what he'd expected, was like a bereavement, and once again he cursed Dru and her meddling spells.

So many changes and shocks in such a short time was more than even his resilience could stand against. He didn't know which was worse, the gaining and immediate loss of the sun, or the finding and immediate loss of Xander. At least he now knew that Xander was home. All he had to do was figure out what he wanted to do about it. And find a way to get his ring back.

*Note: Some snippets of dialogue from episode 4.03 - In the harsh light of day*
The Slayer and her gang were nothing if not predictable. Within ten minutes of the sun setting, Spike was in the courtyard outside the Watcher's flat, peering in through the window by the door, and there they were. Stepping back, he scanned the outside of the building. Above him, a wooden balcony that had to belong to the Watcher's place stretched right across the front. Squinting up between the railings, he could see a glass door and, further over, the dark arch of a window embrasure.

He pulled the strap of his lightweight crossbow over his head, so that the weapon was safe on his back, bent his knees and launched himself up into the air. Grabbing the handrail, he pulled himself over and crawled across to the door. The room beyond was dark, but it appeared to be the Watcher's bedroom. Crouching low, he made his way along the balcony to the window and peeked over the sill. The main room of the flat was laid out below him, with only the staircase banister rails to obscure his view.

His expectation, that he'd have to smash the glass in order to get a clean shot, proved unfounded. The latch was loose and easily jigged with the point of his knife. Easing the window open, he looked down.
The Slayer's gang were huddled around a coffee table in front of the fireplace, deep in discussion and, judging by the mugs and plates scattered around, they'd been at it for some time. Right in the middle of the table sat his ring. No one was looking up in his direction.

As he unslung his crossbow and extracted a couple of bolts from the quiver on his belt, Spike gave thanks for their apparent inability to make a decision. After the stress of waiting, unable to reach them, and the nightmares he'd suffered that they'd have already got rid of his ring, at last he felt some of his customary confidence return. Cocking the crossbow, he nocked a bolt into place.

Inside the room, Xander was sitting in a comfortable looking chair next to the fireplace. The Watcher was perched on a dinning chair at the opposite end of the coffee table, giving Spike a perfect sight on his head and chest. Between them was a sofa, where the Witch, the Slayer and a boy Spike didn't recognise, sat. Judging by how close the Witch was sitting to him, Spike guessed that the unknown was her boyfriend.

The first shot had to be for the householder and, as long as he struck true, he'd then be free to enter. The second
bolt he laid ready on the window sill, for the Slayer. He reckoned he could get two shots off, before any of them would react. Unfortunately, that would still leave three and judging by Xander's behaviour at the campus he had to assume that the boy would fight. Spike knew that he needed to feed, in order to heal, but retrieving his ring was too important for any delay, so he'd be fighting at half strength. He pulled out two more bolts and laid them on the sill.

"It doesn't look like much," Xander observed, his voice carrying clearly up to Spike's window.

Spike raised the crossbow and took sight on the Watcher's neck.

The Watcher leaned forward in his chair, studying the ring without touching it, his movement spoiling Spike's shot. "It might not," he said, sitting back up. Spike once again centred his aim. "But it's still very dangerous. And we have to destroy it."

That was what Spike had feared. He didn't want to start a relationship with Xander in the aftermath of a massacre. That sort of thing had a way of carrying over, beyond death. Since he had no intention of driving the boy mad,
he didn't want any resentment clouding his new childe's heart, but if it meant saving the ring from destruction, he'd do it and deal with any fallout when it came.

He took up the tension on the trigger with his finger, but before he could fire, the Slayer stood up, blocking his shot again. With a silent curse he released the pressure. She walked past the Watcher and started to pace back and forth in front of the fireplace and Spike hesitated, wondering if taking her out first would not be the wisest move. The Watcher would be sure to jump to his feet to go to her, if she fell. "No. We don't destroy it," she said.

Allowing his arm to drop, Spike listened.

The Witch nestled into her boyfriend's side in their corner of the sofa and he lifted his arm to rest it around her shoulders. Xander was watching the Slayer and Spike couldn't see his face to read his expression. Eventually, the Watcher spoke. "Buffy, any vampire that gets his hand on this is going to be essentially unkillable." He paused but the Slayer just looked at him. After a moment, he slumped in his chair. "Oh," he said.

With a vague wave of his hand, the other boy offered, "I have that gig in LA. I could swing by." He said it as if it
somehow followed and Spike studied his profile, but was unable to read any relevance into the statement.

Apparently there was some because the Slayer turned to him with a grateful smile and thanked him. Spike was still in the dark, however, and he didn't like it. What the hell did LA have to do with his ring?

Xander seemed equally confused. "What's going on? What's in LA?" he asked.

Spike couldn't hear exactly what the Witch said when she leaned across her boyfriend to reply, her voice was too soft, but he thought he caught the name 'Angel'.

Right. Angel had moved to LA in the summer. Willy's bar had still been buzzing with the news when Spike first arrived in town. Xander didn't look too happy, but Spike knew that he'd never had much love for Spike's grandsire. It was something else they had in common.

The Watcher was frowning, but it didn't seem like he was going to put up a fight and the Slayer's voice was firm when she said, "He should have it."

Spike unnocked the bolt from his crossbow. The Watcher
would never know how close he'd come to death, nor how the Slayer had just saved his life. If they were going to give the Gem to Angel, Spike could collect it after he'd finished his business in Sunnydale. He slung the crossbow over one shoulder and slipped the bolts back in their quiver. Below him, the group was already making the small movements that indicated the meeting was about to break up. He'd arrived just in time. When Xander left, he would follow.

First, he'd find out where Xander was living. Then, he'd find something to eat, and third, he'd get Wolfram & Hart to retrieve his treasure. Only then would he go and deal with his grandsire. And when he went, he'd have his childe at his side. With Xander's inside knowledge of how the Scooby Gang operated, getting the Gem from Angel would be child's play, literally.

He stood up, and away from the window. Pausing, he took a moment to study Xander. "Don't worry," he whispered. "Once we've had our chat, it won't matter what Dru did. You'll be mine, and you'll love it."

There was a tree by the side of the road outside the Watcher's gate which would provide good cover, until Xander came out. Spike climbed back over the handrail
and jumped down from his perch.

Before he left the courtyard, he paused to take one last look through the window by the door, to judge how long they would hang around, now that the Slayer had finally made her ruling. Xander had stood up and had his coat in his hands. The Slayer was still over by the fireplace and the Watcher was in the process of hauling himself to his feet.

A strange crackling noise, like static, sounded behind him and he'd started to turn, when he was hit by something. Then he was falling and the pain was as bad as the burns from the sun. Dimly, he was aware that his arms, his legs, his whole body, were twitching and shaking. Blue flashes obscured his vision and he lost consciousness.

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Oz looked up. "What was that?" he said.

Looking around the room and seeing nothing alarming, Xander asked, "What was what?"

"I thought I heard something. Outside."
Buffy walked cautiously over to the door. She paused to listen, but shook her head. "I don't hear anything."

Leaving Willow on the sofa, Oz joined her and put his ear to the door. "A sort of... scuffling," he whispered.

They were all on their feet by this time and Xander went to the weapon's chest Giles kept on the floor by his desk. He opened it and pulled out a single handed crossbow and a quiver of bolts. Standing up, he threw them across to Buffy, who caught them deftly. She primed the crossbow and nocked a bolt. Handing the quiver to Oz, she signalled him to stand back and opened the door, peering around the edge, crossbow at the ready. The rest of them stood frozen, as if afraid to make a sound, as they watched her. Xander realised he was holding his breath and let it out as slowly as he could.

After a moment, Buffy relaxed and opened the door wide. "There's nothing there," she said. "Oh, hang on." She disappeared into the courtyard, returning a moment later with two crossbows. "That's odd," she said, examining the extra weapon. "This is mine. I lost it about a month ago. One minute it was in my room, the next..." She shrugged.
"It went 'poof'?" Xander guessed.

"Well, sorta. I don't remember losing it." She shrugged again. "I guess I must have. Oh well, I have it back now. Whoever had it is gone. There's no one out there."

"Maybe it was a peace offering," Willow suggested.

Somehow Xander doubted that, but Oz had relaxed and Buffy had declared an all-clear, so he pulled on his coat. "Okay, you party people," he observed, rubbing his hands together. "Some of you slackers might only have your beds to look forward to," he ignored the glance Willow and Oz shared and the slight smirk on Buffy's face, "but I have to get to work." He patted his back pockets to check that he had a spare stake and cross. "Catch up later, yeah? Giles, see you tomorrow?"

Giles nodded his agreement. "Yes, certainly. Good idea. Tomorrow," he said, looking at the others and placing heavy emphasis on the last word. If he'd been less polite, Xander thought he'd be making shooing motions, he looked so relieved that they were finally leaving.

Willow gave a little giggle and Oz's lips twitched. Crossing back to the coffee table, Oz scooped up the ring. He
slung an arm around Willow's shoulders and together they all piled out of Giles' apartment and up the steps to the street. The other three clambering into Oz's van to head back to the campus and Xander waited until they'd pulled away, before he got into his own car and drove the short distance to Dino's Pizza Place to begin his shift. He still wasn't sure how he felt about Spike being back in town, but if he worried about it, he knew he'd never do anything. Tomorrow, he decided, he'd start his hunt for a new place to live. In the meantime, he'd keep his stake and cross close at hand.

*Note: SPart Twenty-Two*

Sitting on the bed in his shabby motel room, Xander ate his supper. He was acutely aware that he needed to get a place of his own, before he ended up as depressed as the furnishings, and during his shift he'd spent some time calculating his resources. It would be another two weeks before he'd have saved enough to put down first and last on an apartment, even if he worked more hours. Until then, he was living in a room that required no invite. It was a scary thought.

Having made his last delivery at 1:15, he had hung around and helped Mr Donato tidy up, to avoid having to come back to the motel. He was bone tired, but he knew
that he couldn't afford to go to sleep. Once the sun was up it would be safe, but until then... Reaching out with his free hand, he checked again that his cross and stake were close by. They were, nestled by his hip where he could grab them easily.

A perk of staying back and doing the boss a favour was that Mr Donato had given him the leftovers to take home. And eating helped him stay awake. And since he was staying awake... Taking a bite out of his pizza and leaning back against the headboard, he stared blindly at the picture of the little gypsy girl with the big, fat tears rolling down her cheeks on the opposite wall, while he tried to put his thoughts and feelings into some sort of order.

Spike had said he was looking for him. Buffy hadn't arrived until after that exchange, though, so the others didn't know about it. During the course of the long afternoon at Giles', Xander had thought about telling them, but a small part of him resisted the role of damsel in distress and a very big part of him didn't want to remind them about his night of madness in junior year, if they didn't need to remember.

And maybe they didn't. There hadn't been any sign of
Spike during his shift. Every time he'd got out of his car, he'd checked the area with his cross in his hand, before he even picked up the delivery box.

Maybe Spike hadn't meant it. Maybe it was surprise at seeing Xander on the campus that made him say anything. He took another bite, tearing through the tough crust, and gave a silent snort. The real surprise was that Spike remembered his name.

When he came back to town during senior year, Spike had ignored Xander, even while they were fighting off a crazy vampire attack outside the magic shop together. There hadn't even been a raised eyebrow in acknowledgement of their one-time intimacy. Spike had focussed all his attention on Buffy and Angel, when he wasn't being distracted by the Mayor's vampire henchmen, trying to kill him.

Xander remembered the gleam Spike could get in his eyes when he was enjoying himself. He'd had it when he was mocking Buffy's strange relationship with Angel. He'd had it... no he wasn't going to think about that.

After the magic shop, Xander had been convinced that Spike wanted to pretend they'd never met, let alone
done... stuff. They'd fought together. They'd ignored each other. Then Spike had gone, leaving Xander, Buffy and Angel standing in the wreckage of the shop.

They'd tried to tidy it up a little, once Oz and Larry came back with Willow, having found her by scent (and wasn't that a freaky thought?) After that, Buffy and Angel had gone off to do whatever it was they did together, when they couldn't actually do anything. Oz had taken Willow home and Larry had dragged Xander to the Bronze, where they'd had a flaming row about something; Xander couldn't remember what. With a pang of familiar regret, he realised that that was the night when they'd both begun to accept that being the only gay kids in school, didn't mean they were any good for each other.

But that wasn't the point. The point was that even at the end of junior year, when the Acathla thing went down and they'd met outside the mansion, Spike had behaved as if they'd never met. He'd been cool. Friendly enough, in an I'm-a-killer-and-I-could-snap-you-like-a-twist sort of way, but cool. And he'd done the same when he came back six months later.

So why had he acted differently that morning? Replaying the latest encounter, Xander tried to remember the
exact words Spike had used and the exact tone of his voice. He hadn't sounded threatening. It was like he was happy to see Xander. He'd almost sounded eager. He'd said he'd been to Xander's parents' house!

Xander resolved to go and see his mom as soon as he woke up, just to check she was okay.

It didn't make any sense for Spike's strange behaviour to be caused by the ring, or related to him being out in daylight. Xander simply couldn't think of anything else that might have changed. That left him in an exposed position, with an inconsistent vampire on the loose.

Maybe he should say something.

During the afternoon, as they endlessly discussed the ring, Xander had considered begging for a place on his couch, from Giles. He'd even opened his mouth to ask, but then he'd pictured the two of them living together. He figured it would take less than two weeks, probably less than one, for them to drive each other crazy. That alone was sufficient reason for him not to impose. Having Giles' apartment as a place to visit during the day was too valuable to risk spoiling it.
Sitting on his bed, munching his now cold pizza and waiting for the sun to rise, Xander wondered if Giles had forgotten about junior year, or whether he simply assumed that it was old news. If Buffy had given a full account of the night they fought the Mayor's vampires, Giles probably thought there was nothing to worry about. Xander had believed the same, until this latest meeting.

He really, really didn't want to say anything, but if Spike started stalking him again... Except, Spike was inconsistent. He'd haunted Xander's backyard for weeks, and then he'd disappeared. He'd pretended they'd never met before, and then he'd come back and greeted Xander like an old friend.

But Spike wasn't the type to hesitate. Xander was pretty sure that if Spike wanted to kill him, they'd have had a confrontation at some point during the evening.

Maybe he'd done another switch and Xander was worrying about nothing.

And it wasn't as if he knew where Xander was living. As long as he took precautions when approaching the motel, Xander thought he could get through two more
weeks okay. His life for the past three years had hardly been risk free.

Outside the thin curtains of his room, the faint first light of dawn was finally beginning to lighten the sky. Xander chewed through the last few mouthfuls of pizza and got up to throw the box in the garbage. As he got undressed and crawled into bed, he decided that he'd keep careful watch, and if he caught any sign of Spike in the shadows, he'd go straight to Giles to ask for asylum.

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Spike came to consciousness slowly. The first thing he was aware of was that he was lying on the ground and he had no memory of how he'd got there. He hurt. All over. In Spike's experience, if he woke up not knowing where he was, it was usually not a good thing. His innate awareness told him that the sun had risen, but he had no idea of how long ago. Since the last thing he remembered was waiting for Xander at the Watcher's place, just after sunset, that suggested that he'd been unconscious for at least eight hours. He'd obviously been knocked out by something, which also suggested that he was now some sort of prisoner.
He opened his eyes to a searing white glare. It was so bright, he couldn't bear to look, so he shut them again and concentrated on listening, while he collected himself. No one was actively trying to wake him up, so he felt relatively safe in continuing the pretence of unconsciousness. If he was lucky, he might manage to gather some useful information.

At first, the only sounds he could hear were a faint whirring, like that made by a ventilation fan, and the buzz of multiple fluorescents. Feigning a partial return to consciousness, he allowed his head to flop to the side and twitched his left foot, then went still again. This time, when he opened his eyes just enough to see through his lashes, he still saw only white, but it didn't blind him. After a moment, he made out lines marking the edges of panels on the walls, tiles on the floor and the stronger line where the two met. It wasn't much to go on, but it told him he was in some sort of purpose-built facility. A view that stark had to be deliberate.

Unfortunately, the lack of any solid objects was not giving him enough information to make an assessment of his situation. With the pain in his head slowly easing to a dull throb, he was contemplating the idea of letting go of pretence and taking a proper look, when the sound of
footsteps heralded the appearance of a man, who walked across his field of vision. Judging by his height, he was less than ten feet away, yet he didn't spare Spike a glance. Either he didn't know what Spike was, or he was confident that Spike was no threat. He walked stiffly, like someone who had been drilled and Spike was reminded of a soldier on patrol. That could be a serious threat, given his condition.

Once the man had passed out of sight, Spike opened his eyes properly and rolled onto his side. Getting up was difficult; he was even weaker than he'd realised. Whatever he's been hit with, on top of the injuries he'd suffered while exposed to the sun, had left him dangerously weak. He managed to clamber painfully up onto his hands and knees, and then flopped over so he was sitting on his arse, supporting himself with his hands braced behind him on the floor, while he looked around. At a guess, he was in some sort of holding cell - white floor, white translucent ceiling, which was also the source of the bright light, and three white walls. He couldn't see a camera, but that didn't mean there wasn't one. Light this strong suggested some sort of observation was in place.

Where the fourth wall should be, there was a sheet of
glass, as he discovered to his disappointment when he crawled over to it. Touching it, in an attempt to help himself up onto his feet, resulted in an electric shock that sent him reeling back to the floor.

He lay still and closed his eyes again. This close to the glass wall, he could hear more - the echoes of the soldier's footsteps, which suggested a long corridor, the sound of a door closing, more footsteps coming from the opposite direction, and voices that grew more distinct as they approached. There were two of them, a man and a woman. The woman's voice was clipped, as if she was accustomed to being obeyed, or at least listened to. The man's was deeper and held a note of respectful hesitancy.

Spike closed his eyes again, expecting them to be coming to see him, but they stopped before they reached his cell. There was a pause and then the woman spoke. "The arms," she said. "They're powerful, but I believe we can do better." There was an indistinct murmur of agreement from the man. "This one can join group 7A," the woman said.

"Certainly," the man agreed. "Yes, it will be a good addition to that study group. Saunders has been begging
for a new subject, since last week."

The woman chuckled. "Well, let us hope that this will keep him busy and out of my hair." There was a pause before she added, "And the new one?"

"In the next cell, Professor."

The footsteps resumed, very close now and Spike relaxed all his muscles, allowing his joints to go loose, once again pretending unconsciousness.

"Hmm. How many of this species have we picked up, to date?" the woman asked.

"Sixteen, Professor, plus this one."

"And were any of them in such poor physical condition?"

"No, ma'am. This appears to be unusual." The man paused and when he continued, he sounded thoughtful. "Maybe a weak specimen, an outcaste from his social group?" he speculated. "There is some suggestion of pack behaviour - the first five were captured together."

That elicited a huff which sounded distinctly impatient.
"Dr Briggs, that must remain speculation. I should not have to remind you that we cannot extrapolate from such a small sample. And given the way they turned to cannibalism, before we discovered their essential food source, I am disinclined to believe in a cooperative social structure."

The man's voice was suitable chastened when he replied, "Yes, ma'am, of course."

For a few moments there was silence again, until the man tentatively offered, "He is in very poor condition, but interestingly, he seems to be familiar with some sort of primitive weaponry. He had a number of arrows on him when he was captured."

The woman made another hrumphing sound. "Any sign of a bow?" she asked.

"No and the arrows were short. Maybe he used them as stabbing weapons?"

That suggestion was met with another sigh, more resigned this time. "All right, I'll play your game," she agreed. "I concede that this species has language and wears clothes. Human made clothes, which they no
doubt scavenge or steal. But I find it very hard to believe that any species of HST is capable of a high degree of sophistication or possesses superior reasoning powers. If they did, given their physical strength, humanity would not be the dominant species on the planet." She stopped but the man didn't say anything in reply. "These arrows you speak of," she continued, "which I wish to see, by the way, might well have been something else it collected, without knowing their proper purpose."

"Yes, Ma'am, possibly," The man was still being respectful, but her concession seemed to have given him some courage, because his voice was firmer when he said, "but I have read Colonel Brewer's 1943 report."

The reminder was apparently not appreciated because the woman sounded annoyed again when she replied, "True. Although we have no evidence that that example was not an aberration. It is unfortunate that so few files survived. The disrepute that the DRI fell into when the Manhattan Project became fashionable requires that we be even more stringent in our methods, Dr Briggs." She didn't wait for his agreement, sweeping on with her next thought. "Give it whole blood. Last week, Dr Takashi made a speculative suggestion of accelerated healing in this species; this will be a useful test. If it turns out to be
true, it might open up a whole new area of study."

There was another moment of silence, then the footsteps resumed, walking away. Spike listened for as long as he could still make out the words, but they seemed to have dismissed him from their minds, once he was no longer in their sight. Meanwhile, he was seething with anger. 'Bastard Nazis!' he thought.

Part Twenty-Three

When Mr Donato's one, regular, day-time staff left, Xander jumped at the opportunity to take on dayshift, in addition to his evening delivery work. It meant he was working from 11:30 in the morning until after 1:00 at night and as a result was living in a state of semi-permanent exhaustion, but every time he looked at the growing total in his checking account, he knew that it was worth it.

The other downside of his increased hours, besides
tiredness, was that he hadn't seen Willow and Oz for over two weeks and only saw Buffy if she swung by the restaurant during patrol, which she'd only done twice. It was a surprise, therefore, when Oz wandered in, late one afternoon.

"Oz, my man," Xander called, before Oz even reached the counter. "Whatcha doing?"

Oz raised an eyebrow. "Buying pizza?" he suggested. A faint smile tugged at his lips in response to Xander's mock frown and he relented. "I'm helping set up for a Halloween party. A scary house needs top notch sounds."

Grinning Xander asked, "And the sound system needs pizza?"

"Well, of course. Want to come?"

"To the party?"

"Sure. You get to dress up. It should be fun." He scanned the menu board behind Xander. "Two family size pepperoni, please."

As he boxed up Oz's order, Xander thought about the last
time he'd dressed up for Halloween. He thought about his rent and his need to get out of the motel. Hiring a costume would cut into his savings a little, but glancing over at Oz, he figured that the gesture was important enough to cover the outlay.

Handing Oz the boxes and his change, he nodded. "Let me check that Mr Donato can get cover, yeah?"

Oz nodded back and turned to leave. "Sure, man. See you at Willow's at 7:00, if you can make it." The sound of the bell above the door echoed in the silence he left behind.

Mr Donato was happy to give Xander the rest of the day off. "You deserve a break," he said. "You work too much. I'll get my nephew to cover. He just sits around, doing nothing, eating my sister out of house and home. She says he's a student, but I don't see much studying going on. He can do an honest night's work, for once. You go, have a good time."

At such short notice, there wasn't much to choose from in the costume shops, at least, nothing that Xander wanted to risk turning into. But then he had a brainwave while walking past April Fools and as a result it was 007 who turned up at Willow's and Buffy's dorm room door.
at quarter to seven that evening.

In retrospect, Xander gave thanks to all the powers that were, for Buffy's impetuous nature. He doubted that they'd have got out of the party house with their sanity, if she hadn't been with them. It might have been Oz who spotted the book with the symbol in. It might have been Willow who found the reference to the fear demon and translated the text, but it was Buffy who decided, regardless of what anyone said, that she wanted a fight. Xander didn't think he'd ever been more grateful to her for not listening to the cautious voices of reason.

Xander was no fool; he knew what it meant that his worst fear was becoming invisible to his best friends. They were moving on with their lives and, while he might be earning a salary, he knew that he wasn't doing anything that could be called a career. And that was part of the problem. The whole idea of a career was a scary concept. It conjured up images in Xander's mind of bank loans and utilities bills and worrying about health care. He was standing on the edge of a cliff and whatever he decided, would fix the pattern of the rest of his life. The safe world of high school (true, even in Sunnydale) was gone and he was stuck facing too many possibilities and not enough choices.
He knew that he didn't want to spend the rest of his life delivering pizzas, but he was gripped by a sort of mental paralysis - fearful of the future, if he did nothing, but equally terrified of failing, if he took a step into the world of adulthood. The need to make a choice loomed over him, like a huge, stinking cloud of dread and that was what the fear demon had tapped into. Gachnar had taken what was inside him and given it a cutting edge.

Exams had always affected him the same way. In the weeks before, when he knew he should be revising, he was always frozen. Willow tried to help, first with encouragement, later by nagging. Neither approach achieved anything, except temporary rifts in their friendship. She might take credit for the fact that he graduated at all, but Xander was more inclined to believe that he'd done it in spite of her, rather than because of her.

The argument with Giles, the day after the party, was a bit like those explosions of pre-exam nerves. The future had caught Xander in its headlights, just like exams used to do.

When he went around to Giles' apartment, as he did
most days before work, he didn't realise how tightly wound he was. He enjoyed his visits. They got him out of the motel and gave him something to do with his mornings. Over the weeks, they'd sorted through the library books, which were now either shelved, or boxed and labelled, and that daily task had been replaced by drinking tea and idle conversation. Xander suspected that Giles was feeling at a bit of a loose end. It appeared, from what he said, that he'd hardly seen Buffy since the day of the ring.

On the morning after Halloween, Xander was a little earlier than usual, but Giles didn't seem to mind the interruption while he was eating his breakfast. He went straight into the kitchen to make more tea, while Xander sat at the counter and gave him the full scoop on the events of the night before.

"You'd think college kids would have more sense than to invoke fear demons by accident," he finished.

Giles put the kettle back on the stove, picked up the tea mugs and turned around, bringing them over to the counter. He pulled out his stool and sat down opposite Xander. "And what makes you think that academia and common sense are in any way related?" he asked,
opening a jar of marmalade and spreading a spoonful onto a slice of cold toast. "Toast?"

Shaking his head to the offer of a second breakfast, Xander replied, "But UC Sunnydale's a good school. That means you have to be pretty clever to get in."

"So is Oxford a good school," Giles observed, taking a sip from his mug and peering at Xander over the rim.

Xander was at a momentary loss, not seeing the connection. Then it dawned on him. "Ah," he said.

"Ah, indeed," Giles agreed. "Believe me, there are times when I would trade all my, so called, academic intelligence for a better portion of common sense."

Frowning, Xander objected, "But common sense doesn't get you a good job. You need a college degree for that."

Giles put his mug down and studied Xander thoughtfully. "Xander," he said, and just by the way he said it, Xander knew that he'd triggered Giles' teacher reflex, "you may not have hit the honour roll, but you did well in the practical subjects: woodworking, drafting and such. Have you considered developing those skills further?"
His voice held that sympathetic note that never failed to annoy Xander, the one that his math teacher had used when asking if Xander enjoyed working with his hands. He bristled. "Because those classes so weren't invented to be the consolation prize."

Giles frowned and hesitated. "What were your favourite subjects at school?" he asked. "Bearing in mind that I already know your grades." He smiled and the smugness in it fanned Xander's resentment.

Sitting up, he scowled. "Which is what makes that question so totally unfair."

Pushing his plate aside, Giles picked up his tea again and gave a small shrug. "You simply need to find a job that suits you," he said. "One that allows you to develop your natural talents."

It was as if he was mocking Xander for his inability to see something that should be as clear as day. Xander felt a pressure building in his chest that was almost painful in its intensity. "And what if I don't have any?" he asked.

Giles pushed himself back from the counter, so he was
sitting up straight on his stool. "I'm sorry," he said coolly. "I was only trying to help. But if you want to spend the rest of your life delivering pizzas, I'm sure - "

Cutting him off, Xander snapped, "I don't!" He glared at Giles. "But I don't want to be talked to like an idiot either!" He saw Giles' eyes widen and his mouth open, but he ploughed on, refusing him a chance to speak. "Yes, I enjoyed drafting and woodwork and technology," he said, slamming his mug down and standing up. "I even liked Ms. Beakman's American Literature, but so what? I never got more than a D minus from her." Grabbing his jacket, he stalked over to the front door and wrenched it open. Without looking back he fired his parting shot: "I have to go. I have pizzas to deliver!"

Behind him, he heard Giles call out, "Xander, I'm sorry..." but what ever he was sorry for was lost to Xander, when he pulled the door closed behind him.

The clear, bright morning did nothing to lighten his mood, nor did the quiet, sunlit streets he walked along while waiting for it to be time to go to work. All they did was remind him that everybody else in the world had better things to do than spend their days wandering aimlessly around town. They were all in their busy
offices, chasing their busy careers.

Once he got to work though, the need to smile and be polite to the lunchtime crowd eventually forced him into a better frame of mind. By the end of his day shift, while he sat in the kitchen with a cup of coffee and a bowl of Mr Donato's pasta, he was willing to admit that Giles hadn't really said anything that he hadn't thought for himself already. By the time he got back to the motel that night, he was feeling a little ashamed of himself.

The next day, he considered not going to see Giles, but that seemed a bit petty. All the same, he knocked and waited for Giles to open the door, instead of walking in unannounced. If Giles' welcoming smile contained more than a hint of relief, they neither of them mentioned the fact. Instead they drank tea and talked about the last year of high school, finding more than a few incidents that they could both laugh about, in retrospect.

When they reached the end of the year and spoke of the final battle, Xander recognised the pain of responsibility Giles carried behind his eyes, because it so closely reflected his own, and the final kernel of resentment from the day before melted away in the face of it.
As he was leaving, Giles offered him a copy of the morning paper, saying that he'd already read it and Xander might as well take it to read during his break. It was folded open at the help wanted pages. Xander suspected that, in the absence of Buffy to guide or library books to sort, Giles had decided to make Xander his next project. It was officious, maybe, but there was also something comforting in it. Xander grinned and accepted the paper.

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Spike was bored. He was more than bored; he was furious, frustrated, in pain and bored. He'd lost count of the days, somewhere around day five or six. With the constant light and no way to keep a record, he only had his innate awareness of the sun to mark the passing of time. Unfortunately, with the drugs they gave him to knock him out between studies, he was never sure how long he'd been asleep, each time he woke up.

When he'd first heard of sensory deprivation as a form of torture, in the forties, it had been in the context of darkness, but after a few days he decided that constant light could be at least as effective. The ceiling of the room he was in was the same white panelling as the cell
they'd had him in before, but whereas that area had
smelt of many demon species, this room smelt of nothing
but human sweat, cold metal and burnt flesh. The
monotony was mind numbing, with only the hourly visits
from the scientists to break it up. Strapped to a table, not
even able to move his head because of the clamps on
either side of it that held him still, he came to welcome
their arrival, just to hear another voice, even if they
never spoke to him.

From what they'd said to each other, he'd gathered that
during the first round of burn and measure, they'd been
concerned that he might die and ruin the results. The
fact that he had no vital signs making it difficult for them
to tell if he was still there, until they saw his throat
respond to the blood they forced down him. He tried
playing dead, in the hope that they'd toss his body out
somewhere, from where he could escape, but in the
middle of day four there was a shift in their handling of
him. They became more confident and he learnt that
they had seen a vampire go to dust. There were some
harsh words for the scientist who had disposed of a
'perfectly good specimen' who he had thought was dead,
when he obviously wasn't. The soldiers were sent out to
make sure that 'the specimen' hadn't escaped into the
community and there was a notable reduction in tension
when it was reported that 'Hostile 9' had been tracked down and dispatched.

After the first two days, Spike slipped into gameface and stayed that way. A human appearance had failed to elicit any sense of commonality from his captors and gameface didn't require the slight effort that maintaining his human mask did. By day three, his fangs were so deeply imbedded in the rubber gag they used to both keep him quiet and to facilitate the dispensing of measured quantities of blood, that he wasn't even sure they'd come free if he did change. He could feel the brush of air at the tips, where they'd penetrated through to the feeding hole in the centre.

The scientists talked amongst themselves with remarkable freedom. There was Briggs, who he had nicknamed the Weasel, another who looked like Van Gogh in his 'self-portrait with pipe', and the last of the regulars, who reminded Spike of a soppy spaniel to look at, but was anything but spaniel-like in fact. In addition, there were a number of technicians who Spike only got glimpses of because they spent most of their time at the back of the room. Between themselves, they discussed the depths and diameters of the burns inflicted on his flesh and the time it took for each to heal, but they also
chatted more generally, about their other experiments and about the facility itself.

Finally, there was the Witch, a very different sort of witch from the Slayer's sweet little friend. When she was in the room the conversation followed her lead and she seemed to be excited to have discovered such a large population of vampires she could draw from. Not that she used that term. She blamed vampires' ability to camouflage themselves, what she called their 'mimicry of human appearance', for the fact that her teams had not recognised them as 'hostiles' until recently. It appeared that it was his lack of a heat signature that had given him away. There was nothing Spike could do about that, although he spent some of the boring hours when his only company was the pain of their latest branding, to speculate about making clothes out of electric blankets, and other, similarly impractical devices. The rest of the time he spent in imagining the day he'd be in a position to turn the tables on his torturers.

The Witch would be his first target. She was in charge and the fact that she never wielded the branding iron herself, only made her guiltier in Spike's eyes. She would learn what it meant to be at the mercy of someone who knew human anatomy well enough to maximise pain,
without ever running the risk of killing.

The Weasel would be next. Spike spent hours remembering exactly how many extremities could be cut from a human body and cauterised, before the body gave up the fight for life: fingers, joint by joint, then toes. Hands and feet could be removed, if you gave the body time to recover between surgeries. Lastly he'd cut off the bastard's gonads and stuff them in his supercilious mouth, but he wouldn't kill him. No, Spike fully intended to leave the bastard like that, tied to a table, while he went and made a phone call to the ambulance service. He didn't care if the FBI mounted a nationwide manhunt, he'd know that the Weasel was living with the knowledge that he'd eaten his own balls.

The Spaniel and the Artist, he'd burn, turning the branding iron on the branders, slowly, inch by inch until their entire bodies looked like they'd been broiled. In all cases, the most important thing to Spike was to leave them alive. Alive and raving about inhuman monsters, the FBI would discount their testimony.

The fact that they spoke so freely in front of him, confirmed for Spike his suspicion that he would be 'disposed of' once they were done with him. In that
respect, it was almost a relief each time he woke to find himself still tied to the metal table and a white coated torturer with an electric branding iron, hovering over him.

They fed him immediately after each application - pigs' blood, cows' blood, sheep's blood, occasionally and oh so thankfully, human blood, both whole and in its separate constituent parts. Then they measured the diameter of the burns on his chest, every hour until they healed. After that, he'd have a reprieve, until they came back to repeat the process.

The day he woke up to find a larger than usual gathering in the room and a more muted level of conversation, he felt a tendril of fear curl up his spine.

The Witch appeared at the edge of his field of vision. "Very satisfactory," she remarked, staring at a clipboard in her hand, which he knew was covered in the measured moments of his pain, all scientifically tested, one variable at a time. She looked up and glanced around the room. "I think we're done here, gentlemen. This one can go back, until it's reassigned. We've gathered useful data, but we need to expand the study to other subjects."
She signalled one of the technicians over to the head of the table and there was a soft clunking sound as the brakes on the legs were released. Then the table, with Spike on it, was wheeled out of the room and into a long, white ceilinged corridor. Another technician and the Spaniel each took hold of a corner by Spike's feet to guide the table's direction.

"Is it safe?" the technician in front asked.

The Spaniel looked at him across Spike's feet and pursed his lips. "None of them are safe," he warned, "but we think this specimen is a particularly weak example. He was in very poor condition when he came in, which doesn't suggest he has very good survival skills."

They turned a corner, pushed through a set of double doors and Spike gave silent thanks for the olfactory cacophony of multiple demon species, confined in too small a space, that assailed him. He was back in the corridor with the holding cells. He still couldn't see anything to either side, but there was no mistaking that smell.

The table stopped and the Spaniel pulled a key card out of his pocket and walked out of sight.
The technician at Spike's head turned to follow, asking, "Do we leave him on this? Is he safe to undo?"

Because Spike was listening, he recognised the faint scratching sound of the card being swiped through a reader. "Wait a moment," the Spaniel said, reappearing on the last word, "we'd better be cautious." He picked up a small box from between Spike's pinned down knees, opened it and withdrew a hypodermic. "Just in case," he said, pushing it into Spike's neck and depressing the plunger.

Note: In spite of extensive googling, I couldn't find a list of subjects taught in a typical Californian, publically funded high-school, or any high-school. From various careers advice sites, I inferred the existence of the subjects Giles and Xander name, but if I got them wrong (for 1996-9) I would welcome corrections.

Part Twenty-Four
Xander collected his keys and moved out of the motel with sigh of relief, dumping his boxes at the apartment on his way to work. He'd taken the day off and was planning to give Mr Donato warning that he wanted to drop dayshift entirely and go back to only working deliveries, now that he'd got his place. He also wanted to ask for the next night off, so he could invite Giles, Buffy, Willow and Oz over.

It was as he was approaching the front door of the restaurant that a clatter, like multiple trash can lids falling, caused him to stop and then turn into the alley that ran down the side of the building. Placing his feet with careful deliberation, rolling his weight from heel to toe, he peered into the darkness and pulled his stake out of his pocket. All he could see at first was a dumpster and a sharply defined bar of yellow light spilling out from the open kitchen door. It was not enough to see by, presenting a glaring contrast that made the shadows beyond its reach appear even more impenetrable. He walked forward, very carefully.

He was a few feet short of the dumpster when he heard a scuffling sound from beyond it and a muffled Italian curse. Palming his stake, in case Mr Donato had simply dropped something in the dark, he rounded the end of
the dumpster. In front of him was the denim covered back of a tall man who was curved over a smaller body that he had jammed against the wall. The sounds of feeding were unmistakable.

A pair of hands flapped uselessly at the vampire, slapping at his upper arms, but that was all that could be seen of the victim. Xander raised his stake and took the last two steps that brought him into range. Pausing for a moment to make sure his aim was true, he brought the stake down with all his strength. The momentary resistance provided by the denim gave way to the still disconcerting sensation of it slicing easily into the vampire's chest cavity. There was a pause and then a faint whooshing sound as the vampire dissipated into a cloud of dust, leaving Mr Donato to slide slowly down the wall to the ground.

A flood of abruptly unnecessary adrenaline threw a wave of dizziness at Xander and he dropped into a crouch, as much because he couldn't stand as to allow him to see Mr Donato better. "Mr Donato?" he whispered, tapping his boss gently on the cheek. "Mr Donato, are you okay?"

Mr Donato stirred weakly. The wound wasn't bleeding much and Xander suspected that that might not be a
good thing. He pushed himself back to his feet and ran through the back door, into the kitchen and to where the telephone hung on the wall.

Grabbing the phone off its rest, he dialled 911. "I need an ambulance at Dino's Pizza Place," he gasped, as soon as the operator answered him. He replied to her questions as succinctly as he could. "Blood loss. Yeah, stabbed. Looks like it. I just got here. In the alley down the side. Thanks. Okay." Putting the phone back on its rest he cast a quick glance around the kitchen. It all looked tidy. It appeared that Mr Donato had been interrupted just as he was beginning to set up for the evening shift. Xander went back out to the alley, to try and keep Mr Donato awake and to press on the wound, until the ambulance arrived.

It was ten o'clock when he walked back through his new front door. It felt like it should be almost morning, but he'd only spent a couple of hours at the hospital and it hadn't been much of a detour, to take the keys thrust upon him and go to check that the shop was properly locked up after his hurried exit with Mr Donato in the ambulance. He'd have to go back in the morning, to put a notice in the window and phone the other two guys who worked there, to tell them that the restaurant would be
closed for a week. The doctor had made it clear that Mr Donato needed bed rest and it looked like he was going to do as he was told. He'd suffered a mild heart attack as a result of shock and blood loss, the doctor said, adding that it should be a warning to everybody to be careful when handling sharp kitchen implements.

Xander collapsed on his sofa and lay still, sprawled out like a starfish as the tension of the evening gradually seeped out of his bones, leaving him lax and tired. He wanted a drink, but didn't want to get up to fetch one. He needed his bed and was plotting the easiest mean of getting there when the realisation hit him that he had not only got the night off that he'd wanted, but in addition he was facing a week with no income.

Rubbing his hand over his face, he decided that he couldn't think about that until he'd got some sleep. Heaving himself up, he took a moment to gaze around his living room, admiring the clean walls, the cheap but serviceable furniture and the view over the town to the hills beyond that filled his windows. Then he hauled himself to his feet and went to fall into bed.

The next morning, he slept very late, waking up stiff in every joint and for the first time he acknowledged the
physical toll that living at the motel had exacted from him. He had to go out to buy milk before he could even make himself a cup of coffee, but he wasn't tempted by the enticing smells wafting out from the Espresso Pump. He wanted to get back and make his own coffee in his own kitchen.

After a breakfast of more coffee and puffed wheat, it didn't take long to unpack his few belongings. In addition to the stuff he had from his road trip, and the bits and pieces he'd bought over the preceding week to furnish his kitchen, there were only the books he'd retrieved from his mom, when he visited to check she was okay on the day after The Ring.

Once everything was tucked neatly away and after carefully washing his mug and cereal bowl, Xander grabbed his keys and took extra pleasure in locking his front door on his way out to see his mom, to tell her where he was now living.

Two hours later he was back with his car piled high with the contents of his old room and a few bits of furniture that his mom had thrust upon him. She seemed to have the idea that surrounding himself with the things from his childhood would make him feel more at home in a
new place. He didn't have the heart to tell her that most things she had decided were essential for that, were things he'd mostly grown out of. He couldn't imagine when he'd want to display his old superman comforter on his new bed or hang the model spaceships from the ceiling. Most of it went straight into the hall closet.

He spent the afternoon shopping for glasses, more plates and flatware, soda, English tea and snacks and picking up menus from his favourite takeaways. He decided to offer his first guests a Chinese banquet. For reasons of loyalty, he didn't feel comfortable offering them pizza, with Dino's being closed.

They arrived bearing gifts - Giles brought a pop-up toaster, Oz and Willow, a pair of exotic throw cushions and Buffy gave him a framed photograph of the three of them, to remind him they would always be friends, she said.

The food arrived without incident, brought by a guy Xander knew vaguely from crossing paths with him on deliveries, and he took it back into the kitchen. "Someone should set up a union of Sunnydale fast food delivery workers," he observed. "To keep an eye out for each other."
Giles looked up from where he was pouring out glasses of soda. "That's a good idea, Xander, maybe you should."

Xander shook his head and laughed. "Nah, I'm not going to be doing the job long enough. But I'll mention it to a couple of the guys I see around."

"You're getting a new job?" Willow asked, pausing in her task of laying out plates.

"Thinking about it." He shared a grimace with Giles. "There's not much out there, though."

Buffy looked up from investigating the contents of the bags. "You should come and have a look at the posting board on campus," she said. "There's always jobs going there."

They took their seats at the kitchen table and began to serve themselves. Giles reached for the tray of ribs. "The sort of work being offered to students is hardly what Xander will be looking for," he pointed out.

Buffy acknowledged the justice of that with a shrug, but it gave Xander a thought. "Actually, that's not a bad
idea," he said. "I need something very short term, since Dino's is closed for a week."

Willow was immediately curious, which led to Xander telling them the story of his rescue of his boss and that, in turn, led to Buffy's latest slay behind Fischer Hall and from there the conversation veered, via a short discussion of the campus study facilities, into academic spheres. As they ate, Xander watched his friends chatting about various professors and what they were learning. Buffy and Willow waxed lyrical about their psychology class. Oz was more restrained in his adoration of Professor Walsh, but became almost animated when expounding some theory about superegos and the id. Even Giles was able to take an active part, asking questions that caused Oz to think carefully before answering. Xander sat back and watched, happy to see Giles so obviously in his element, even if he was not particularly familiar with the latest thinking on the subjects they discussed. For himself, he basked in the knowledge that, even if they were moving on with their lives, they were still his friends and, at last, he was pulling himself free from the paralysis that had gripped him in the preceding weeks. Now that he had made a public declaration of his intention to find another job, he felt that he had already taken the first step towards
achieving it.

He slept for eleven hours straight that night.

The next afternoon, Buffy's comment about the notice board led him to the UC Sunnydale campus and sure enough there were plenty of help wanted notices. He'd noted down a couple of numbers before the one for a bartender at the campus pub caught his eye. That looked ideal. The age limit barred many students from applying, but his Oxnard ID card would make short work of that problem. A bar job on campus would also give him a legitimate reason for being there and maybe a chance to see more of his favourite girls, and Oz.

If he'd known that as a result he'd spend the last part of the evening, three days later, with Giles, trying to find cave-Buffy, he might have reconsidered. On the other hand, if he hadn't been there, it could have been so much worse.

Thankfully Buffy recovered quite quickly, certainly more quickly than her partners in drinking crime. Unfortunately, Xander was out of a job again, since the pub had burnt down in the confusion.
Spike ignored The Witch and the Weasel with their clipboards, behind him, and worried at the hard, white paint with the tip of his fingernail, until he could see that he'd left a permanent mark - the fourth in a row down the edge of a wall panel at the back of his cell. Four days since he'd woken up to find himself back on the floor. Four days of no distractions, except the regular patrols by soldiers who never looked inside the cells as they passed. Two days since he'd had anything to eat.

For all his seeming inattention, Spike was listening carefully. "It appears that the operation was successful this time," the Weasel observed.

The Witch made a thoughtful noise. "Not what I intended for this subject. For the record, I don't appreciate having my specimens hi-jacked without my knowledge. I want to see Dr Angleman's theatre notes, as soon as we get back, so I can study the exact procedure he used." A pause was followed by her continuing, more thoughtfully, "But as you say, it has survived the operation, which goes some way to compensate for his high-handed behaviour."

There was another short pause before she sighed and
said, "We need more test subjects. Alpha Team are the most successful. Make a note to change their patrol to the areas in quadrant C."

There was no reply, but Spike could imagine the Weasel scribbling away at his papers. "Finally," she added, "I want Angleman to do a thorough scan, to check the incision has healed, before he attempts activation."

"Certainly, Professor."

"If that's clear, I think we can declare the prototype ready for testing. And from what we've seen, retrieval afterwards should be clean."

The Weasel's voice was hesitant. "Assuming it survives," he suggested. "Clothes don't appear to do so."

"Ah, that's been demonstrated, has it?"

"Yesterday, while you were in DC. We postulate a flash release of energy at the moment the system disintegrates. We're hoping to test the theory in controlled conditions, as soon as we have more subjects."
Spike could hear the smile in The Witch's voice and it didn't sound pretty. "Well, it is a prototype. Angleman will have to do his best to retrieve it intact, but that's a concern for later. The important thing is to find out if it works."

"And after activation?"

"Restraints and a suitable goad should work"

"It's a weak specimen, are you sure it will react?"

"Given sufficient incentive, I have no doubts." Another pause, longer this time, during which Spike resisted the urge to turn around and check what they were doing, was followed by an obvious change of topic and Spike guessed that they were done with him. "The gamma five group," The Witch asked, "what progress did you make with them, yesterday?"

They started walking away and Spike crawled along the side wall, closer to the glass front of the cell so that he could hear them, but there was nothing in their exchange that sounded relevant to his situation. When they finally passed beyond earshot, he settled back against the wall to review what he had just overheard and add it to what
he'd picked up already, in the hope of making some sense from it all.

He was still weak. The blood he'd been given in the first two days after waking up had hardly touched the sides. He'd been surprised by how much he'd needed, just to heal from a few burns, but the situation wasn't yet critical. He'd gone for two weeks before, during very lean times. This was different, though. Like all predators, his body functioned best with a regular intake of food and in the past he'd been able to sleep through the day, but sleep was difficult when he was penned up at the mercy of the enemy and the stress conditions were wearing away at his reserves.

In addition to steadily increasing hunger, for the first three days after his return to his cell, he'd also suffered from a strange listlessness that he'd been at a loss to diagnose. Furious as he was, he'd not had the energy to rant and scream, or to smash the cell. It would have been difficult to do, but if he'd been at the top of his game he'd have managed it.

It was his next-cell-neighbour who'd supplied the clue. Spike had been lying on the floor when shouting impinged upon his awareness, rousing him from his semi-
dreamlike musings. "No!" the voice yelled. "No, I know what you're doing. I don't want it!"

Such a noise was so unusual in that place, that it caused Spike to open his eyes. There was a distinct note of desperation in his neighbour's voice. He sounded like a man pushed to the limits of his endurance, or maybe a few steps beyond.

After what felt like an age, during which the guy next door continued to rant and rave, Spike raised his head off the floor. "Shut the fuck up!" he yelled.

For a blissful moment he thought it had worked, but then the voice came again, closer this time, if slightly softer. It appeared that by acknowledging the guy's existence, he'd inadvertently encouraged him to try for conversation, which was the last thing Spike felt like engaging in. He was mildly surprised that the screams hadn't raised a more general uproar from the occupants of the other cells.

"You don't understand," the guy called. "If I drink it, it'll knock me out and then they'll take me away, and then, and then..." He ended on a wail. "I don't like being hurt."
Pushing himself up, so that he was sitting, leaning against the wall, Spike sighed. "You pathetic whiner," he snarled. "Will you just shut the fuck up? I'm trying to think here."

"Can't think. It's in the air. All around. You breathe it in and you don't even know. I thought I was alive and I tried to die. I stopped breathing but it just made everything clearer. Just made it hurt more."

He sounded totally crazy, but Spike was fluent in crazy and he picked out the salient points from the guy's ramblings. It was enough to prick his interest. "What don't you want, mate?" he asked, rolling to his feet and walking over to the join between the dividing wall and the glass front of his cell, from where the voice seemed to be coming.

"The blood." That made sense. Spike already suspected that the blood was occasionally drugged. He'd simply needed it too much to care.

"What else?" he asked, putting as much authority as he could muster into the question.

His neighbour responded to the tone, confirming Spike's guess that he was a vampire and probably a young one.
"It's in the air. They keep us quiet. But it's sitting there."

"What's sitting there?"

"All red and warm."

"Blood?" Spike guessed.

"I'm so hungry," the guy cried. "They starve you until you're ready to chew off your own arm, then they drop it on you and it's sitting there. And I'm so hungry," he wailed again.

There was a scrabbling sound and Spike shouted out, "Wait!" but the vampire didn't reply. Spike strained his ears and he could hear a faint whimpering, then silence.

He went back to sitting against the wall. Ten minutes later a couple of technicians arrived with a trolley and took the guy away. He didn't come back.

His words made Spike think, though, and he spent the rest of the day consciously not breathing. It was against all training and habit, which was geared towards helping a vampire blend in with the prey population, but it was still a semi-conscious reflex, so Spike stopped doing it
and sure enough he felt some of the strange lassitude fade and an increase in energy, in spite of the hunger.

Once he thought of it, it seemed obvious to suspect a drug in the air filters. The cells were not full, but there were too many demons who were natural enemies penned up in this one corridor. Under normal conditions, if such could exist in this place, the air should be full of growls and screams. At the same time as it infuriated him that it had taken him so long to catch on, it also amused Spike that the designers of this prison never considered the possibility of inmates who didn't need to breathe. He began to plan.

ome snippets of dialogue from episode 4.03 - In the harsh light of day

Part Twenty-Five

Xander didn't hear how serious the mess between Willow and Oz had got until Oz turned up on his doorstep to say goodbye on his way out of town.

Just home from a day of hard casual labour on a construction site, Xander desperately wanted a shower, but all such mundane concerns fled from his mind and he gaped at Oz. "You're what?" he asked.
"Leaving."

Pulling the door wider, he jerked his head for Oz to enter. "But, but, I don't understand," he stuttered.

Oz took five steps into the room before turning around to face Xander. "I just came to say goodbye," he said. "I wanted you to know because Willow... She'll need you."

He was already eyeing the door behind Xander's shoulder, as if trying to work out the easiest way to get past and back out of the apartment. Still frozen to the spot, Xander stared and after a moment he bowed his head, lifting his hand to rub at his eyes. His whole body seemed to slump. "It's not an easy decision, Xander," he said, looking up at last.

"Yeah, okay, I get that. But what happened?"

"The wolf happened." Oz paused for a moment, considering Xander, and then he nodded, having apparently come to a decision. "When did I last see you?" he asked.

"Last week. Wednesday, at the Bronze."
"Yeah. There's been a full-moon since then."

Alarmed, Xander took a step towards Oz before he realised he'd done so. "Willow?" he asked.

Oz stared at him, then his eyes widened. "Oh, no man! No! Willow's fine." Another pause. "Physically."

Shucking off his flannel shirt and throwing it over a chair, Xander ushered Oz towards the kitchen and made him sit, before going to the fridge to see what he had to drink. Peering inside he realised he was out of anything suitable for a grown-up type discussion, so he poured them each a large glass of soda.

Oz had sunk into his chair and was sitting with his hands in his lap, staring at nothing. Xander placed one glass on the table in front of him and sat down opposite. He gestured towards the glass. "Sorry. It's all I've got," he said, cupping his own glass in both hands.

Oz shrugged. "Probably just as well. I'm driving."

"Right. And why is that, exactly?"
Oz spoke softly and Xander had to lean forward to hear him properly. "You remember that band? The one that was playing on Wednesday night?"

Putting down his glass, Xander asked, "Does this have anything to do with why Willow came to grill me on," he raised his fingers in air quotes, "What Men Want?"

Oz looked up from his contemplation of the bubbles in his own glass and a slight smile tugged at his lips. Xander had never seen a smile so solemn and full of regret, before. "She did, huh?"

"Yep. And I told her to talk to you."

"Thanks."

He didn't seem inclined to say anything further, so Xander pushed. "The lead singer," he asked, "were you noticing her?"

Sighing, Oz pushed his glass aside. "Veruca," he said. "She's a werewolf." He paused again before correcting himself. "Was a werewolf. I killed her."

"Oh my god! Oz! Are you okay?"
Oz shook his head. "No. Really not. But she was going to kill Willow and..."

"I understand." They sat in silence for a while, Xander occasionally sipping his soda while Oz turned his glass round and round, making patterns of condensation on the table top.

Eventually Xander asked, "So you're leaving?"

"Yeah. I've got to. I'm not safe. Veruca was right about that." He looked up at Xander and his eyes were pained. Not angry, as he'd been when Wesley argued against doing the trade with the Mayor for Willow's life, but truly anguished. "She said I was hiding. That I am the wolf. That if I denied it, I'd just make it worse. Harder to control. Until I can't do it anymore. I'm... I..."

"You're scared?"

"Yeah, man. I'm fucking terrified." He put the palms of his hands against the edge of the table and straightened his arms, as if he were about to get up. "I have to get away from people until I can figure it out."
Xander nodded. "You okay for money?"

"Yeah, thanks. I've got it covered."

There didn't seem to be anything more to say.

After Oz had gone, Xander sat at the table for a long time, thinking about love and friends and monsters and the trials of loving monsters. Then he went and took a shower, before heading out to visit Buffy and Willow, just because he hadn't seen them for a few days.

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Spike watched the technicians from under slitted eyelids as they entered his cell. One of them picked up the empty blood bag from the floor by his side and shoved it in his pocket. They each grabbed one of his arms and dragged him out into the corridor, but he waited until they'd lifted him onto the gurney before he made his move. When one of them reached down to pick up a trailing leather strap, intended to secure his arms and chest, while the other walked to the foot of the gurney, he lashed out with his fist, catching the first one under the chin and sending him staggering backwards for a dozen steps before he collapsed onto his back on the
floor. Kicking his legs, Spike both caught the other on the shoulder and gave himself the momentum to roll off the gurney, onto his feet.

The second one hadn't gone down. He'd crashed into the wall and was now shaking his head to clear it from the impact, even as he dug in his pocket. A moment later he had a syringe in his hand and was advancing towards Spike with suicidal intent. His own suicide. The one Spike had knocked down had rolled onto his hands and knees and was starting to clamber to his feet. Neither of them had yet called for help and Spike had no intention of letting them do so. He had to shut them down before they realised that the universal assumption of his strength and skill was totally at fault.

The one on his feet was obviously expecting Spike to back away and cower. Instead he closed. Ducking under the hand with the syringe in it, Spike got his right hand around the guy's throat and grabbed the wrist of his syringe wielding hand with his left, pushing the arm wide. Then he spun them around. Over his prisoner's shoulder he saw that the other guy was on his feet again and was staggering towards them. Spike applied pressure to his prisoner's throat and wrist until he gave a strangled scream and dropped his weapon, then Spike released his
wrist and brought both his hands up to the man's head. With a vicious twist, he broke the man's neck.

Throwing the body aside, Spike spun on the balls of his feet, bending down as he did so to snatch up the syringe from the floor. Continuing the spin he brought up his arm, just in time for the second technician to run straight onto the point. He went down like a felled elephant.

It was the act of moments to rifle through their pockets until he found the key cards they'd used to open the door to his cell. Stuffing one in his own pocket and keeping the other in his hand, he used it to unlock the double doors at the end of the corridor of cells. Beyond was another corridor but Spike didn't hesitate; he ran for it. He'd spent the last eight hours remembering every detail of his journey from the lab where they'd burnt him, to the cells, and if he knew anything, it was that the labs would be at the centre of the complex. He headed in the opposite direction.

Two more security doors opened to the technician's card before his luck deserted him. He'd just entered a lobby area when a bell and a light on the wall to his left signalled the arrival of a lift. The doors opened and two men in full combat gear stepped out. Since he was mid-
escape and they felt secure in their own environment, he had a momentary advantage and he made the most of it. Launching himself at them, he knocked one back into the lift with a satisfying crash, while he bounced off the wall next to the lift doors and using that as a springboard, spun himself around, lifting his leg in a roundhouse kick that caught the second in the gut. The soldier doubled over under the impact, but didn't fall. Not until Spike brought his fists, clenched together, down on the back of his neck, with the full force of his body behind the blow. That one was now out for the count, but the first one was staggering to his feet.

The lift was a trap, but where there were lifts, there were always stairs, so Spike spared a second to scan the lobby. The most likely door was the one to the right of the lift, so he edged slightly in that direction. When the second soldier came at him, with his tazer extended before him, Spike danced back, drawing him on. The soldier fell for it, breaking into a charge so that when Spike dropped flat onto his back, the soldier stumbled and overran him. Spike kicked upwards, catching the soldier on the unprotected underside of his balls and he gave an agonised scream, collapsing in a useless heap at Spike's side.
Spike rolled onto his feet and dragged the soldier out of the lobby and into the bottom of a stairwell. The walls were unpainted breeze block, the floor was concrete, as were the stairs which were covered in a fine layer of cement dust; this was obviously an emergency exit, not one that was much used. Looking up, the stairs seemed to extend for a long way. Given that, he didn't have time to feed and takeaway would slow him down, so regretfully, he broke the soldier's neck and shoved the body into the space under the bottom steps, out of immediate sight. Since they'd were not dressed for internal patrol, he figured that they must have come from outside and it appeared that they'd needed a lift to get down to the main level. Spike began to climb.

He'd climbed six flights of stairs before he found another door. Cracking it open, he peered through the gap. Another hallway. At that moment a security klaxon began to sound. Someone had probably found the soldier in the lift lobby, or spotted the technicians on the cameras that Spike had never located but was convinced were in the cells. There was no sound of voices coming up from below, so hopefully they'd believe that the other soldier had been taken hostage.

Looking up he could see that the stairs stopped after one
more flight. They would be waiting for him up there. He was surprised that they weren't already on their way down. Slipping into the hallway, he ran, trusting that he was going in the right direction. Ahead of him was a large steel door, closing off the corridor. There were no side doors. This felt promising.

Behind him he heard the echoing sound of heavy feet on the stairs. He reached the door and slammed the key card through the slot. With a click the lock disengaged and he tore open the door, spilling out into the dappled sunlight of a wooded area. Keeping as much to the shade as he could, he ducked and wove between the trees.

Part Twenty-Six

He'd been running for more than two miles before Spike found himself in familiar surroundings, all the time avoiding the sun and dodging the soldiers who pursued him. It was not until he almost stumbled down a bank and out onto Crawford Street itself, that he realised
where he was. From there, it was a simple task to make for the nearest cave entrance and lose the soldiers in the labyrinthine tunnels that wove their way beneath the town.

The manhole cover behind Willy's bar was the Sunnydale equivalent of Grand Central Station, the amount of traffic it got, and Willy was, as usual, happy to stand Spike a pint or two. So, he caught his metaphorical breath and waited for sunset before leaving to find a proper meal.

An old man healed the last of his wounds and after dumping the body into the storm drain, where the local weeviler pack would probably find it, he bounced on the spot to test his flexibility and set off for the campus and its accommodation office. The Red Witch would tell him where Xander lived. She'd have to.

Breaking into the office was easy. Working out how to make the computer tell him what he wanted to know, was a little more difficult, but not beyond the powers of a vampire who had always kept up with the latest technological developments. Getting into the dorm was easy too. Students were always so bloody careless and trusting. Throw them a smile and a casual, "How y’doin’, mate," and they never questioned your right to tailgate
them in through the door.

It appeared that the Slayer and the Red Witch shared a room, so he approached with caution. The Slayer should be out patrolling, but there was never any banking on routine with this one, as he'd found out to his cost too often. There were students everywhere, milling around, chatting in groups, getting ready for a night out with their mates, or slinking into their rooms with piles of books if they weren't that lucky, or that popular. Thankfully, the Slayer was not among them and the Red Witch made his task doubly easy by wandering out of the bathroom, into the hallway, almost in front of him. Apart from the fact that he was revolted by the ridiculous pyjamas she was wearing, covered in grotesque, multi-coloured ponies, he was ready to believe that luck was still running his way.

She turned towards him as he stepped into her personal space. "Spike!" she yelped. She tried to dodge around him, but he blocked her easily. "What, what do you want?" she asked, eyes as big as saucers and attempting to back away, but hitting the wall instead. When escape failed she paused, took a deep breath and gathered her wits. "Do you want a spell?" she asked. "Because I can do that. I mean, if you, if you want?"
In spite of her terror, her coolness as she attempted to bargain, reminded him why he'd always liked this one of the Slayer's friends. "No, I don't want a spell," he replied. "I want information." He took hold of her upper arm, to keep her in place. "Invite me into your room and I'll give you a choice," he offered. "I'm gonna kill you. No choice in that. But if you tell me what I want to know, I’ll make sure you don’t stay dead."

She looked up at him with an almost comical expression of horror on her face. "That’s not really an incentive," she objected. "Dead is still dead and turned is still dead."

For a moment, Spike was so surprised that he was distracted from his primary objective. "Who told you that?" he asked.

"Um, er, Giles?"

Watcher lessons, Spike thought, so full of assumptions. Rather like the military in that respect. Smiling, he decided to spare a moment to educate her. This was a place of learning. Anyway, it was insulting, having people wandering around in such ignorance. "He fed you a line, pet. Vampires aren't some sort of cheap possession or
any form of animated dead. Have you seen a zombie? Ugh! All string puppet moves and bits falling off." Her eyes were getting even bigger as she listened to him. "No," he explained. "Vampires are demons. We just happen to have been born human."

She looked around the hallway and he saw her note the quality of any assistance she could possibly call upon and he saw her discard the idea. Looking back up at him she began to argue. "That’s, that’s very interesting," she said. "But the texts are pretty clear. The human dies and the demon takes possession of the dead body."

"I don’t care what the bloody Watchers’ texts say. I’m telling you – " He cut himself off mid flow as light dawned. He could almost sense the light bulb above his head "Now, now, none of that," he said. "You’re playing for time, aren't you? Is the Slayer due back soon?"

"Um, well, I... No! I mean, yes! Very soon! Maybe right now, in fact," she replied, craning her neck to see past him. She relaxed rather abruptly. "Or, or maybe these commandoes might get you first."

"What?" Spike spun around and sure enough a knot of men in khaki were entering the hallway from the stairs.
"Bugger!"

Without any warning the lights went out. Even the emergency lights failed to come on and with only a couple of skylights, as far as the human's were concerned, the corridor was cast into pitch darkness. Immediately there were cries of alarm from the students who started fumbling around, trying to find their way out.

The potential for mass confusion and injury among the legitimate residents didn’t feel like a move the Slayer would make – give her her due, she always preferred to fight her opponents, face-to-face and one-to-one, at close quarters. Maybe he'd been wrong in his initial assumption that they were all working together.

Students were stumbling around, trying to find their rooms, but there was no panic yet. That could easily change though and when Spike saw that the soldiers were moving towards him, he decided that it would soon do so, especially if given a little help. He shouted, "Shit! It’s a fire!"

Immediately the fumbling figures stopped fumbling and started running. And crashing. The more cool headed
found a wall and began working their way along to the exit doors at each end of the hall. The more panicked, or just plain stupid, were barging around, catching hold of anyone they bumped into.

The soldiers moved with a sureness of foot that suggested night-vision goggles, which put them on an even par with Spike and all of them emperors in the kingdom of the blind.

Behind the two gun-wielding grunts Spike spotted a taller man who had taken up position against the wall. He had the air of an officer and he was staring down at something he held in both hands. "Activation," he announced and Spike wasn’t sure if it was a command or an observation, but in case it was a command, he let go of the Red Witch, ducked and rolled across the floor.

The soldiers continued to advance with their rifles raised and held at eye level. As he came up onto his feet again, on the opposite side of the hallway, Spike noticed that one of them kept his gun trained on the Red Witch. The other was tracking Spike's movements.

They were obviously homing in on him, so he grabbed a passing student and got behind her, hoping to mask his
lack of heat signature with her body. Meanwhile the initial chaos was turning into a full-blown panic with students stumbling and grabbing at each other. It would only take one of them to fall, trip a few more and the potential for serious injury increased dramatically. Spike reached out a foot and caught at a passing student's ankle. Sure enough, he went down with a yelp.

The soldier stepped around the fallen student, still making a beeline for Spike. Spike tossed the girl at him and ducked behind someone else. Gripping his new cover by his shoulders, he whispered, "Wait until it calms down a bit. Then we’ll head for the door."

The boy wouldn't be able to see anything of Spike, but he nodded obediently, obviously reassured by anyone who sounded calm. "O-okay," he agreed.

"Secure the corridor," the officer commanded. "No one gets out."

If Spike has wanted to create a faster mass exodus, he couldn’t have done a better job.

The soldier had set the girl on her feet and moved her aside. He'd also slung his rifle over his shoulder and
drawn a hand gun. He began to close on Spike.

Spike positioned his shield against the wall. "Stay there," he instructed and turned to throw a punch at the soldier.

The pain was agonising, sending him staggering almost to his knees.

"It’s here," the soldier shouted and through the lancing fire in his head Spike felt a hand grabbing at him.

"Bag it and tag it," the commander ordered. "We’re out of here."

Another voice called out, "Sir, the civilian? Could have been turned."

"Bring her too."

Every time Spike tried to push the man off, or punch him, the pain in his head paralysed him with its intensity. There was a high pitched scream that Spike recognised as the Red Witch and the soldier who had hold of him was distracted for an instant. Spike wrenched himself free and staggered over to the wall, his shoulder hitting a fire extinguisher.
The boy, otherwise known as 'the heat shield', turned towards him. "Is that you?" he asked. "Are you alright? Is it safe to move?"

"Bit busy here, mate." He gave the boy a shove towards the soldier. "But head that way and you'll be fine."

The soldier gave a shout of alarm when the boy collided with him and raised his hand gun. Spike grabbed the extinguisher, to throw, but only had time to hold it up in front of his face before the shot was fired. That the soldier would shoot in such a confined space, with so many civilians around, was a surprise. That the bullet missed the boy was probably a result of good training. That it punctured the fire extinguisher, immediately releasing clouds of ice-cold vapour, was sheer bloody luck. Taking advantage of the inadvertent camouflage, Spike raced to the stairwell. Behind him he heard the Slayer's voice raised in furious protest, but he didn't stay for the show. He was out through the doors at the end of the corridor and away.

The last thing he heard was the officer's almost desperate cry of, "Abort!"
Xander stood with Buffy and Willow, watching as some high-up guy from the university made a speech. He had an appointment with the site foreman for a job, but now couldn’t get past the official tape to where the construction workers were all standing. If he’d arrived half an hour earlier, he’d have been over there and had the whole of the ceremony to sell himself and his skills (admittedly not many more than a willingness to do almost anything, with enthusiasm) and himself to Joe Wheeler. With that thought came the rueful acknowledgement that it was possibly just as well he was stuck on the spectators’ side of the tape. He’d have less time to ruin his chances if the interview was more rushed. Hopefully, the letter of recommendation from Steve, the foreman at his last site, would be enough for Joe Wheeler to give him a chance. He no longer had the urgency of needing a new job, because Mr Donato had reopened Dino's and Xander was working regularly again, but the break had proved to him that there were other things he could do and he'd enjoyed his two days of casual labour on a construction site.

He watched the ceremony and got ready to intercept Joe Wheeler as soon as the speeches were over. Or maybe
he should wait until Joe had everybody sorted out and working. Yes, that would be better. It wouldn’t be good if Joe’s first impression of Xander was of someone who got in the way.

Finally the Dean stood back and, as the small crowd applauded, Xander took hold of the tape so he could duck under it, but the pause was only to allow a professor to come forward, in turn, to make her own speech. Xander relaxed again.

The professor started off by talking about the old cultural centre but Xander stopped listening when she compared it to a child growing up and moving on. A guy in an orange t-shirt at the front of the group of construction crew caught his eye and he spent a pleasant few minutes considering the beauty of the male form instead. Beside him Willow snorted. "What a load of horse hooey," she said. Xander turned to look and was immediately began to calculate his chances of a clean get away if he ran; he recognised the glint in her eyes.

Buffy didn't seem to do so. "We have a counterpoint?" she asked.

It was all the invitation Willow needed to launch into her
From Buffy's slightly stunned expression, Xander guessed that it was the first time she'd been exposed to the Rosenberg Thanksgiving Rant. At least she seemed to recognise it for what it was. "Okay," she said when Willow finally wound down. "So, for some of that you were channelling your mother, weren't you?"

Ducking her head Willow admitted, "Well, yeah, sort of. That's why she doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving or Columbus Day. I know it sounds a little overwrought," Over her head, Xander caught Buffy's eye and they shared a grin. "but really, she's...She's right.

Giving her a one-armed hug of solidarity, Buffy made what peace she could. "Yeah. I guess I never really thought about it that way." She sighed. "Anyway, with Mom at Aunt Darlene's, I'm not getting a Thanksgiving this year. I don't even get to do the traditional 'take the last six week's worth of dirty laundry home', thing."

Smiling slightly, Willow shook her head sympathetically. "It's a not fair world, alright."

An idea apparently struck her a passing blow, because
Buffy brightened and exclaimed, "You know what? I should have my own thanksgiving. I can cook the meal, just like my mom does, have all you guys over. It'll be great!"

"But, but, Buffy," Willow objected. "Weren't you listening? Thanksgiving's a sham. It's all about death."

Her protest made not a dint in Buffy's cheerfulness. "I know. Yes, it is a sham, but that doesn't mean it can't be a sham with yam.

"Oh no, you're not gonna jokey-rhyme your way out of this one. You agreed with me."

"No I didn't. I sympathised. And..." Buffy's voice turned whiny and pleading. "I want it. Isn't it like what Professor Walsh said about sense memory? I smell a roasting turkey and I'm eight years old. I liked having that to look forward to and everything's so different now."

Watching Willow's face, Xander saw the moment that Buffy's plea got through. "Well," she replied, reluctantly, "I suppose there could be slight yams."

A delighted grin spread across Buffy's face, but she was
smart enough to know that she still needed to enthuse Willow. "We could definitely use a little comfort food," she wheedled. "I bet Giles doesn't have any plans. And Xander," she added, turning to him, "you always avoid your family gatherings, don't you?" Thankfully, she didn't wait for a reply, because although Willow might not be objecting at that moment, he suspected that any enthusiasm from him would set her off again. He gave a vague wave that they could interpret as they wished and turned back to watch orange t-shirt guy, while the professor concluded her speech. Buffy would probably win the argument; Willow had never been very good at standing up against other peoples' wants and her objections to Thanksgiving had always had an element of justifying the inevitable about them.

Meanwhile, the Professor was about to finish. "And thus, a symbolic beginning," she announced, picking up a shovel and stepping down from the stage to shift a small heap of earth from one spot to another.

After that the professors and the other dignitaries withdrew and the workers moved onto the site. A group of men dismantled the stage and carried it away. A backhoe loader trundled forward and a couple of men with traditional shovels started digging where the stage
had stood. Xander kept his eyes on Joe Wheeler, watching him direct his men to their tasks, and on orange t-shirt guy.

Behind him, Buffy and Willow were still talking and it seemed to Xander's inattentive ear that Buffy was also concluding her pitch. "We can have our own, chosen-family feast, because really, pilgrims aside, isn't that the whole point of Thanksgiving?" She gave Xander a nudge. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Hmm? Yeah, sure," he replied, admiring the way orange t-shirt guy's arm muscles bulged as he forced the blade of his shovel into the ground and levered the earth free.

"Thanksgiving dinner at your place, then," Buffy announced. "Pie, roast beast. That's very kind of you."

"What?" Xander asked, spinning around. "But, you said... No! I, I... I don't have any stuff to cook with. New place. Un-stocked kitchen. Un-stocked with any of the cooking utensils required for cooking large beasts."

Willow patted his arm, a pitying expression on her face. "It's okay, Xander, we'll help. All you'll have to do is clean up after."
"What? No! Umm... Giles!" he exclaimed. "He's been living in that apartment for years. He must have a fully stocked kitchen. We should go to Giles'."

Buffy looked at Willow. Willow looked at Buffy. They nodded in unison. "That's actually not a bad idea," Buffy agreed. Xander slumped with relief. She punched his shoulder lightly and he mock staggered. "I'll go and give him the good news, after class," she said. "Speaking of which..."

Looking at her watch, Willow frowned. "Yeah, I've gotta run if I want a front seat for 'Social Dynamics and the Dominant Paradigm'," she said. They turned away, leaving Xander to thank goodness for his own quick thinking and to return to admiring the view, until Joe Wheeler was free. The last thing he heard as they walked away was Buffy's laugh when she quizzed Willow on the idea that her class would really be so full that even the front row seats would be taken. It was good to see that Willow was finally recovering from Oz's desertion.

If Xander hadn’t been watching, he’d never have noticed what happened next. The guy in the orange t-shirt was standing on his shovel, forcing the tip into the ground.
Xander turned away to check on Joe Wheeler again and in the moment that it took to do that, orange t-shirt guy was gone.

Xander sprinted over to the hole that had appeared in the empty stretch of the site where orange t-shirt guy had been, waving his arm to attract the attention of any of the other workers. By the time he reached the lip, a few other men had joined him in raising the alarm and were running towards him, but they were still a distance away. Xander lay down and stuck his head over the edge of the hole. The only light was from behind him, so he couldn’t see much, but he thought he made out a patch of orange on the floor of the hole.

"Are you okay?" he yelled.

There was no response. Xander looked around. The only way down appeared to be to jump. It didn’t look too difficult though, so he shimmied around and crawled backwards over the edge.

Landing in a crouch on the surprisingly flat floor, Xander took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the gloom before he looked around and saw the guy lying on his side, his arms splayed and one leg bent in an unnatural way. He
crawled over to him and checked that there was nothing blocking his nose and mouth, and that he was breathing. He wasn’t going to attempt to move him.

Looking up he saw a couple of heads silhouetted against the sky. "Call 911," he shouted and can you send me down a flashlight? He’s broken his leg, but he’s breathing okay."

It took twenty minutes for the paramedics to arrive with a stretcher and another half hour for them to get the guy out. Long before that he regained consciousness and Xander did his best to keep him calm, in spite of the pain he was in.

When Xander finally got out of the hole, Joe Wheeler was busy shutting down the site and talking to the police, so Xander didn’t have a chance of speaking to him. He went home to wash and change before starting his pizza delivery shift, instead.

*Note: Some dialogue borrowed from episode 4.08, Pangs.*
Xander wasn't sure if waking up feeling ill on Thanksgiving morning was a curse, or a reprieve. He and Willow had promised to help Buffy with her plan to host a Scooby meal and he was supposed to meet them outside Giles' apartment at 9:30. His clock read 9:00 in big glowy red numerals but his attempt to sit up resulted in dizzy failure, so he closed his eyes and waited for the moment to pass.

The insistent ringing of the phone roused him and he fumbled blindly for the handset of the bedroom extension, more to shut it up than to talk to whoever was on the other end.

It was Buffy. Of course it was. Who else would it be? "Xander, where are you?" she asked as soon as he croaked a half-hearted 'Hello'. "No, I know where you are, but why are you still there? You were supposed to meet me at Giles'."

"I know. Sorry."
"Well, it's okay, because I have to do some shopping, so I'll swing by and we can go together."

"Err..."

"See you in a few," she finished and she was gone.

Xander let his hand fall, the handset still grasped slackly, against his chest. He turned his head and stared at his clock. 12:15? How did that happen? Fumbling the handset back into place, he rolled out from under the covers and onto the floor, on his knees. He had to use the edge of the bed to help him stand, before he staggered down the hall, bracing himself against the wall with both hands.

After taking the latch off the front door, he fell into the recliner chair that his mom had forced on him and closed his eyes again. His boxers and t-shirt were stuck to his skin with sweat, but he was shivering. Curling up in the seat and resting his head where the arm met the chair back allowed him to drag a corner of the throw he'd used to cover the chair down over one shoulder. It didn't really help, but he was too tired to stand up and pull the rug free.
When Buffy arrived, what seemed like only moments later, she took one look at him and decided he was very ill, which was something he could have told her, if she'd asked. She also decided that he couldn't stay safe in his own apartment to die quietly. It said something for the state of Xander's brain that he hardly objected when she wrestled him into a pair of sweats and forced his shoes onto his feet. It probably said even more that he didn't protest when she grabbed his car keys off the kitchen table.

The doctor she dragged him to, was no help. All he could tell them was that Xander was very sick and had too many symptoms to measure. He wanted to check him into the hospital and was already reaching for the phone to call an ambulance when Xander managed to croak out his refusal.

Buffy looked like she was ready to argue the doctor's case, but Xander glared at her and she apparently got the message. She hauled him back out of his chair. "What, then?" she asked, an impatient snap in her voice.

"Take me home?" he begged.

Instead, she took him to Giles. He staggered in through
the door, one arm around Buffy's shoulders, but he managed to keep his feet, so he was counting that a win.

Giles looked up from his seat at his desk and immediately jumped up. "Xander, what's wrong?" he cried, hurrying forward to help.

Sheer terror at Buffy's driving had shocked some alertness into Xander, so he was able to make what he thought was a very coherent reply. "No insurance," he said.

Helping him across the room, Buffy and Giles lowered him onto the sofa. "The doctor couldn't figure it out," Buffy explained. "He's got a whole load of symptoms that don't add up."

Giles went into the kitchen, returning a moment later with a bowl of cold water and a cloth. Perching on the edge of the sofa, he dipped the cloth in the bowl and laid it across Xander's forehead. "You should be in a hospital," he observed.

Xander waved his hand weakly, dismissing that suggestion. "I don't really feel that bad."
"Well, you look awful. Lie still and I'll get you some Tylenol."

Choking the tablets down, Xander lay back with a glass of water by his side. At some point, Willow arrived with peas and spent some time fussing and worrying over him, until he closed his eyes in self defence, after which she went to the kitchen and had a fiercely whispered conversation with Buffy. Buffy, herself, was in full organisation mode - planning shopping and cooking arrangements, as well as freaking over the instructions in the cookbook, which she obviously didn't understand. Xander was simply relieved to be left in peace.

Giles seemed to have resigned himself to his fate as host and alcoholic lubrication appeared to be playing a part in him achieving that state. He kept the cloth on Xander's forehead damp, but for most of the next hour, alternated between sitting in the chair next to the fireplace, reading, with a glass clutched in his hand and jumping to his feet every time Buffy or Willow returned, apparently to save his kitchen from destruction. That happened a lot, more than gathering the ingredients for a single meal should require. Bits and pieces of their conversations registered on Xander's brain.
It appeared that there had been a murder, or possibly two; there was something about a priest. Buffy, it seemed, was investigating, in between shopping and freaking. Xander's own connectedness to everything fluctuated, but he was dimly aware of a big debate about Native American rights, and possibly bats.

During one of the lulls, Giles came over and sat on the coffee table by Xander's side. "We think we've discovered what is wrong with you," he said.

Xander opened his eyes. The Tylenol had apparently helped a little, because he didn't feel quite so light headed. Giles placed a mug down next to him, took the cloth and wet it again, before laying it back across Xander's forehead. "There appears to be a vengeful Chumash spirit loose in Sunnydale," he explained.

"A what-mash? And it made me sick? Why?"

"We think it was trapped in the old mission you discovered yesterday."

Bracing his hands against the cushions, Xander forced himself back along the seat, until he was reclining against the arm of the sofa. "Old mission?" he asked. "What old
mission? I don't have a mission, that's Buffy."

Giles smiled. "I'm not so sure about that," he said. Picking up the mug, he passed it to Xander. "Here, drink this," he instructed. "The honey will soothe your throat." He went on to explain what was going on, all the stuff that Xander had missed. "Which is why there is really no point in taking you to the hospital, after all," he concluded.

Xander was still stuck a few sentences back. "I have syphilis?" he asked.

"Among other things."

Letting his head fall to the side, to rest against the back of the sofa, Xander took a deep breath. "Oh great," he said. "Isn't that just dandy?"

Giles' hand was warm on his shoulder. "We'll sort it out, Xander," he said firmly. "Don't worry, when the spirit is banished, all your symptoms should clear up."

Forcing a smile, Xander promised, "Going to hold you to that."

Smiling back, Giles patted him awkwardly with the hand
that still rested on his shoulder. "Okay," he agreed.

If he had been intending to add anything, he was interrupted by the door opening to Buffy's and Willow's return. "No luck finding Hus," Buffy reported.

"That's our Spirit guy?" Xander asked. "But you are going to find him, right? And slay?"

Willow crossed the room and frowned down at him over the back of the sofa. "We can't do that," she objected. "His people were wronged."

"He gave me syphilis!" Xander looked over at Buffy, who had perched herself on the arm of the chair Giles had been sitting in earlier. "You have to slay him."

Buffy pulled a strangely anguished expression, half way between sympathetic and reluctant. "Yeah, that's sort of the question before the court."

"Question?" Xander asked. "Why is there even a question?"

"Well, there are two sides to it," Willow explained.
"Two sides to slaying him?" Xander looked at each of them in turn. Buffy shifted awkwardly and stood up, turning her back. Willow stared at him with her chin up. Xander gritted his teeth. "Speaking as the representative from syphilis, I vote, 'kill!'"

Willow actually wrung her hands together. "It's not that simple," she said.

Breaking in, before Xander could respond with the rightful indignation her prevarication deserved, Giles observed, "We've never faced this sort of spirit before. We really don't know what will kill it." He paused, and Xander followed his gaze to Willow's rebellious expression. "Figuratively speaking," he added. "Or bind it, or whatever. Yes, Willow, we have heard you on the subject."

"But I don't think you listen," Willow muttered.

Buffy interrupted their staring match by running away, mumbling something about condensed milk, and Willow followed her. Giles went after them and tried to remonstrate. It all got very heated again with Giles talking sense, as far as Xander was concerned, Willow being stubborn and Buffy hovering between them,
desperately mixing potato mash in a bowl. Xander sank back against the cushions and tried to block them all out, while he processed the fact that his best friends seemed to feel more sympathy for a dead man than for him.

He was hardly aware of the knock on the door, or the abrupt shift in the atmosphere when it was opened. He certainly didn't recognise the voice of the man outside, at least not when he said, "Help me," although something stirred his memory when he went on to yell indignantly, "Oi! What part of help me do you not understand?"

"The part where I help you," Buffy retorted.

Surely that couldn't be Spike, pleading? "Come on, I'm parboiling out here."

Apparently it was, because after some bargaining, Buffy invited him in by name. Spike added to the volatile mix was more than Xander thought he could handle. He closed his eyes and dragged a cushion over his head to shut out the sound of the new argument.

He must have drifted again and wasn't sure how much he missed, but it was quieter when he pulled the cushion
away from his eyes. Spike was standing by his feet, looking down at him. He sounded subdued when he said, "You look like shit, mate."

Xander started to scramble away, but Buffy came to the rescue and dragged Spike over to a straight backed chair, forcing him to sit while she tied him up with a long length of rope that Giles produced from somewhere.

"Hey! That pinches," Spike protested, which got him no sympathy. "I came to you in friendship." Buffy gave him a look that would have had Xander quaking in his boots. Why couldn't she turn that sort of determination on this Hus guy? What Spike was doing in Giles' apartment, Xander couldn't imagine. He was inclined to believe he was a fever dream, but pinching his own arm didn't make him go away. "Well, all right, seething hatred," Spike allowed, "but I've got useful information and I feel I'm being mistreated."

Buffy tied the last knot and stood back with her arms crossed. "So tell me everything you know."

Spike sounded distinctly sulky when he replied, "I'm too hungry to remember everything."
"Then sit," Buffy retorted.

Xander pulled his feet inwards and swung around so he was sitting on the sofa. "Does he know about Hus?" he asked.

Buffy shook her head. "No, he's offering info on the commandos."

"Oh." Xander lost interest and let his head rest against the sofa back.

"Hang on," Giles exclaimed. "That might be important."

"What?" Buffy asked. "The commandos?"

"No, command structures. The victims. Apart from Xander, and we presume the man he rescued, Hus has targeted authority figures - Father Gabriel, the curator of the cultural centre. Who else fits the pattern?"

"The dean?" Buffy suggested. "Dean Guerrero. He's the king of us and he was at the ceremony."

Nodding, Giles agreed. "Yes, a likely candidate. We should warn him."
Glancing across at Spike, Xander intercepted a strange look directed at him. He turned away and considered the question of standing and walking any distance. Unfortunately, yet another argument had sprung up between Willow and Buffy about, once again, whether Hus should even be killed. Willow had apparently been searching for spells to fix mystical syphilis, instead of the research she was supposed to have been doing, into ways to kill dead Chumash spirits and Buffy appeared to have reached the end of her tolerance tether.

Of all people, it was Spike who brought it all to a grinding halt. "Oh, someone put a stake in me," he cried.

Unsettled, for reasons he didn't want to examine, Xander was feeling grouchy enough to reply, "I vote for that."

Spike shot him a venomous look, which oddly settled Xander slightly, but otherwise took no notice. He stared directly at Buffy and Willow. "I just can't take all this mamby-pamby boo-hooing about the bloody Indians," he snarled. "You won, all right? You came in and you killed them and you took their land. That's what conquering nations do. You had better weapons and you massacred them. End of story!"
Xander wanted to cheer, but that would have undermined his stand on hating vampires in general and this one in particular. Spike's diatribe seemed to have had an effect though. Willow made a last bid for talking to Hus, but Buffy finally came down on the side of slayage.

"You exterminated his race," Spike added, pounding any last objection to dust under the sledgehammer of his logic. "What could you possibly say that would make him feel better? It's kill or be killed here. Take your bloody pick."

"Fine, ok?" Buffy shouted. She put down her bowl of mashed potatoes, adding more quietly, "But someone still has to go warn the dean."

"I'll go," Willow offered. "I need the air."

"Not alone," Buffy said. "We'll all go."

Spike stared around the room, his eyes coming to rest on Xander. "Leave that one. He looks like he's ready to drop any minute and I think I can eat someone if he's already dead."
That didn't make any sense to Xander, but it did force him to his feet. "I'm coming too," he decided.

"Someone had better stay, to guard the prisoner," Giles said. "I'll keep on looking for a solution, at the same time."

So they left on their ultimately unnecessary and embarrassing mission. The only really odd thing, besides the fact that Willow ended up with a slice of pie, was the appearance of Angel. The girls went into the dean's house, leaving Xander on guard outside, on the grounds that he might scare the residents in the wrong way. At first Xander thought it was more syphilitic delirium that had Angel suddenly appear in front of his face.

"You look like shit," Angel said.

"Funny, Spike said that too," he replied.

That got a puzzled look from Angel, who stared at him speechlessly, while Xander wondered at his own subconscious that would conjure first Spike, then Angel, when he was feeling so close to death. Except, Spike was real, wasn't he? Xander looked at Angel, trying to work
out if he was real, as well.

"All the Chumash weapons are missing from the cultural centre," Angel said. "Something's up. Where's Buffy?"

Xander gestured over his shoulder. "Trying to warn Dean Guerrero."

"It's not the dean he's after." Hallucination Angel sounded exasperated; maybe he was real. "Hus is a warrior. To a warrior, the leader means the strongest fighter. He's formed a raiding party and he knows where she's supposed to be." And he seemed to be making remarkable sense, which wouldn't tend the verdict either way, except that Xander wasn't sure that he was capable of so much coherent reasoning.

At that moment there was a click behind him and Xander spun around, and almost fell as the world kept spinning, but it was only Buffy and Willow backing out of the door. "We gotta get back," he said, as soon as they reached the street. Angel had disappeared. "I had a vision, or a realisation, or something, and Hus is a warrior, so he'll go after the warrior here and that's you," he explained, pointing at Buffy.
Buffy looked alarmed, while Willow looked impressed. "Of course," she said. Turning to Buffy, she gave her a shove. "Run, we'll catch you up." Buffy hesitated for a moment. "We'll be fine, as long as you're not with us," Willow assured her. "Run!"

Buffy ran. Xander and Willow hurried after her, although he needed her help to stay upright.

When they got back to Giles' place, there was a battle in full fight. Willow grabbed a shovel and started hitting on a guy with a bow and war paint. Xander put his head down and simply charged at another, getting him in the midriff and knocking him down. He landed on top of his victim, who immediately tried to get his hands around Xander's neck. Xander attempted to roll off, but all at once the body disappeared, fading away like a dusted vampire, only without the dust and he fell six inches to the ground. His elbows and forearms protected his face from the concrete and he lay still for a moment, simply enjoying having a clear head and non-achy limbs.

A pair of feet appeared in front of his face and he looked up, smiling at Willow.

"How do you feel?" she asked.
"Like someone magically cured me of syphilis," he replied, pushing himself up onto his feet.

Willow snorted. "I'm glad," she said. "But it doesn't make it right."

Throwing an arm around her shoulder, Xander gave her a hug. "Nothing about this was right," he agreed and she looked up at him from under her lashes, offering him a tentative smile before turning into him and burying her face in his chest.

He brought his other arm around her and hugged her tight. After a few moments, her arms circled his waist and she hugged him back.

Xander nuzzled her hair and placed a kiss on her crown before lifting his head to look around. The courtyard was empty. The door to Giles' apartment was open and Xander could see inside. Spike was sitting facing the door, tied to his chair, and Xander was taken aback by the expression of fury on his gameface. Pushing Willow gently aside and herding her into the apartment, Xander kept himself between her and Spike's angry gaze.
Part Twenty-Eight

Xander sat drinking his tea, across the desk from Giles, while Willow had her books spread out on the sofa behind him. He was supposed to be researching too, but since his research technique in this case was limited to scanning the pages for a particular combination of squiggles, he didn't think that slacking off for fifteen minutes would seriously hamper the search. Buffy, meanwhile, was in the bathroom, attempting to grill Spike for information on the commandos.

"Tell me again why you decided to chain him up in your bath tub?" Xander asked.

Looking up, Giles sighed and the way his lips twisted was more of a grimace than a smile. "Because the alternative was having him chained up in here and he was driving me crazy."

Xander nodded. "Yeah, okay. I get that."

Buffy was quite audible down the length of the short hallway and she was beginning to sound exasperated.
The interrogation didn't seem to be going her way. "So... you saw their faces but you can't describe them," she stated (loudly).

Giles went back to his book, resting his elbows on the desk on either side of it and placing his hands over his ears. Xander sympathised.

In contrast to Buffy, Xander had to strain to hear what Spike said. The tone of his voice as well as his words seemed to indicate that he was enjoying himself. "Well, they were human," he said. "Two eyes each, kind of in the middle."

There was a crash and Xander half started from his chair, but Giles held up his hand. "Don't bother," he said, shaking his head. "That would be the other reason for the bath; it's difficult getting blood out of this carpet."

"She's beating him up? But he's chained, he can't fight back."

"No, I don't think it's deteriorated that far yet, but I'm fast running out of mugs. I'm simply grateful that the bath is enamel; I don't think plastic would stand up against the impact of crockery, let alone crashing chains."
If those two don't kill each other soon, I might be tempted to lend a hand."

"Which one would you take out first?" Xander asked, and Giles' eyes crinkled in real amusement.

Any reply he might have made was forestalled by Willow standing up and coming over to the desk. "What about a truth spell?" she suggested. "I'm not positive it would work on a vampire, but we could try." She laid a book in front of Giles and pointed at a section of text that looked to Xander like a recipe in a cookbook.


Studying Willow's face, Xander missed the happy glow she used to get whenever she received praise for her work. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her smile that happy-Willow-smile.

"Looks pretty simple," she said, craning her head around to read over Giles' shoulder. "Do you have everything?"

"I believe I might be out of motherwort," Giles replied,
his voice preoccupied as he read, "but I think I have everything else to hand,"

Willow looked at her watch. "The Magic Shop's closed today, but I have no classes tomorrow morning. I could come back then. I'll get some on the way?"

Giles placed a bookmark on the page before closing the book. "If you wouldn't mind. That would be most helpful."

Picking up her bag, Willow nodded. "Alright. I'll be back in the morning with donuts and motherwort. I'd better get going."

Giles got to his feet. "I'm sorry, do you have a class? You shouldn't have stayed, but I am very grateful to you for finding this; I would never have thought to look in Philbert's."

"No problem." She slung the strap of her bag over her shoulder and walked to the door, saying, "Bye, Xander," over her shoulder. Giles followed her to see her out and she turned, leaning around him to add a shouted, "Bye, Buffy! I'll see you at home."
"Wait," Buffy yelled back. "I'll come with you."

A moment later, both girls were gone and the apartment was quiet. For approximately five seconds.

"Hey, someone come and put the telly on," Spike yelled. Xander looked around the room and sure enough the TV wasn't there any more. "You gave him the TV when you chained him in your tub?" he asked.

Giles shrugged. "It keeps him quiet," he said, taking his glasses off and laying them on the book. Xander took that as his cue to leave too. With a sympathetic grin at Giles, he made his escape.

Wednesday nights were always slow in the pizza delivery business and he spent much of his shift reading the paper. The construction project for the new cultural centre at UC Sunnydale seemed to be starting up again, after what the paper described as 'the unfortunate incident that befell Professor Gerhard, the original driving force behind the project'. The article skimmed over that, concentrating on the facilities that the new Cultural Partnership Centre would include, under its motto of 'Bringing Cultures Together To Learn From Each Other'. He wondered if the editor was on the payroll of
the mayor. There was nothing obviously evil about their latest elected official, but there was no doubt that the Sunnydale cover-up was still in place, whether through design or habit.

The rest of the time he spent wondering what Buffy thought they were going to do with Spike. He could understand the need to get whatever information he had out of him, but what would they do after that? The idea of killing him when he was helpless felt wrong, but the alternative appeared to be keeping him chained up in Giles' bath tub and he couldn't see that working either.

The next afternoon, when he opened the door to Xander, Giles looked rumpled and tired. "My blasted house guest kept me up half the night, yelling," he explained. "Goodness knows what the neighbours think. Listen, Xander, do you mind keeping an eye on him for a while? I need to go to the magic shop and possibly to the university to pick up Willow. For the truth spell. She said she'd come over, but.."

"Sure, no problem," Xander said, although the prospect was strangely troubling. He'd been very carefully avoiding any contact with Spike, unless buffered by either Giles or Buffy.
"Great, thanks. There's blood in the fridge, mugs in the cupboard and straws on the side, if you would take him some?"

Giles didn't wait for a reply, he was out of the door before Xander had even opened his mouth. With a sigh, Xander went and found a clean mug. It had 'Kiss the Librarian' on the side and he'd never seen Giles use it, which was probably just as well. Pulling a carton of blood out of the fridge, he poured some into the mug and added a straw.

Pushing open the bathroom door, he took one step over the threshold and paused. Spike was indeed a sorry sight. His t-shirt and jeans were stained with what Xander assumed was blood. His hair was a mess, he had heavy chains around his ankles and wrists and Xander could see broken shards of crockery in the bath under his legs.

He didn't look up when Xander entered. "About time," he grumbled. "Hope you got it warm enough, this time." Then he did look up. "Oh," he said.

"No one said anything about warm," Xander replied. It was odd seeing Spike like this. He didn't look anything
like the slick and sexy vampire who'd haunted Xander’s dreams in high school.

"Of course I want it bloody warm. What? You think it's not shit enough, that you have to feed it to me cold, as well?" He stared at Xander as if waiting for an answer, but Xander didn't have one. "What are you looking at?" he snarled.

Xander had waited years to be asked that question. For once his brain connected to his mouth and he felt a thrill of satisfaction. "Not sure, I think the label fell off."

Spike pulled a disgusted face. "Ha, bloody ha," he replied, sarcasm dripping from each syllable. “That my lunch? Gimme it here."

Xander cocked his head to one side. With Spike being snarky, the momentary sympathy he'd felt, fled. “Here,” he said, thrusting the mug towards Spike.

Spike raised his arms as far as the chains would allow, demonstrating that he would not be able to lift the mug to his mouth, even if he could reach it. Xander let out a put-upon sigh and placed the mug between his hands, straightening the straw so that he could get his lips
around it. Spike looked up at Xander from under his lashes as he drank making what Xander was convinced were deliberately disgusting noises – like a kid with a milkshake. When he’d finally finished, he released the straw. “Why are you here, pet?” he asked. “Where’s the Watcher?”

He didn’t sound snarky any more, but Xander wasn’t going to walk into any verbal traps he might be laying, so he made sure to sound disgusted when he replied, “I got to babysit, while he goes shopping.”

Spike frowned and the viciousness returned to his voice. “You didn’t go to college, did you? Got nothing better to do with your day than hang out with an old has-been librarian?” He sniffed. "Loser!"

Xander’s hackles rose. “He's not. And I’m not! And yes, I do have a job.”

Spike was their prisoner; there was no need to be cruel, but sometimes it wasn’t a matter of need. “You're one to talk about losers; I hear you’re impotent now,” he taunted, grabbing the mug out of Spike's hands and beating a strategic retreat.
Giles didn’t get back until almost six o’clock and Xander spent that time in the living room. Spike was quiet for the first hour and somehow that made Xander feel worse about being mean to him. After a while, though, he started yelling, wanting the TV on. Xander wrestled with himself for about two minutes, then obliged, casting the apartment back into glorious peace and giving Xander a direct demonstration that Giles had not moved the TV into the bathroom so he could watch his favourite shows whilst having a soak.

When Giles returned, he was alone. It was time for Xander to leave to go to work, but he hesitated, unsure what was wrong, but recognising that something was. Giles waved him off. “No, no, I’m fine. Maybe a little tired. And a little concerned about Willow. She seemed... Well, she’s usually so reliable. I’m afraid I didn’t really help.”

“I’ll look in on her tomorrow,” Xander offered, gathering up his jacket and stealing Giles' newspaper.

He didn't spend any time that evening thinking about Spike. Not a moment.

He also didn’t need to seek Willow out the next day,
because she came to him. It was great having a place where friends came to visit. Xander poured them both a soda and ushered her into the living room. What wasn’t so great was that she was obviously upset, although it took a while to get to the reason she had decided was her problem. “I’m mad at Buffy,” she explained. “We were in the middle of a very important conversation and she ran off. It just shows – Spike's more important to her than me. She really should marry him and clear the air already.”

“Spike?”

“Yeah. Giles called. He escaped, or something. I told her not to worry; she’d find him in no time. And she did.”

“He escaped?”

“Yeah." She looked up at Xander and her eyes widened. "Oh no! Not you too? Can we stop talking about Spike? I’m sick of talking about Spike. I’m sick of talking about Spike and soldiers and demons and not knowing what to do and not knowing how to make things right again. I just want everything to be right again.”

Xander put his soda down on the floor, got up from his
seat on the end of the recliner chair and joined her on the sofa. He put an arm around her and pulled her into a hug, although she resisted. “Hey,” he whispered, “I know it's hard to see it right now, but I think what you're feeling is because of you and Oz, not because of Buffy or Spike, or anyone else.” He gave her another squeeze. "I know it’s hard, but eventually you'll meet somebody else, and then it'll be better.

Willow had begun to relax into his embrace, as he’d hoped she would, but towards the end of his motivational speech she stiffened again and pushed away. “Yeah, ‘cause most relationships are so wonderful," she said scornfully. "I don't think so. I think we're all doomed to badness.”

“We're not doomed.”

“Oh, yeah? Where’s your evidence? Look at your bio. You’re alone. And when you do get a date it’s either an insect or a Mummy. Or Larry. And I know he's dead and I shouldn't say things like that, but he was a jerk too. Face it, you're just as doomed as the rest of us, except you’re a demon magnet.” With a sniff of disgust she got to her feet.
The thing about Larry was way harsh and Xander bristled. “Sorry I said anything,” he snapped. "I was just trying to help.”

It was like Willow hadn't heard him. She started to pace. “You’re as bad as Buffy,” she said. Xander could hear the angry tears in her voice. "All she thinks about is Spike. Oh my god." Spinning around she placed both fists on her hips and glared at him. "You dated Spike, too, in junior year.

Xander glared back. “I didn’t date him! It was a spell. A spell that went horribly wrong." Feeling foolish sitting down and having to look up at her, he stood. "And Giles got rid of it," he added. "All of it.”

As if she'd only just noticed his irritation, Willow abruptly wilted. “Yeah, I know," she said. "I’m sorry. I, I guess I’m cranky girl today. I, I... tell you what, I’ll just go.”

Xander tried to persuade her to stay, but it was clear she could tell he was having trouble meaning it. She put down her glass, which she had held on to all through their argument and gathered up her bag. Xander could read the signs: having vented at him, she was now determined to indulge in a fit of guilt. Although he felt
bad about it, he was relieved to see her go. She was his friend and he ought to be able to be there for her, but a Willow who had decided that she'd done something wrong, was even more wearing than an angry Willow. When full of remorse, she had a tendency for over-the-topness. Xander let her leave and hoped for brownies. He knew he’d been right in his advice, but he also knew that that didn’t matter, if she didn’t want to help herself.

It was only in hindsight that the rest of the day made any sense. While he was running down the street, chased by half a dozen growling, scaly and occasionally snot firing demons, he had no time to think up reasons for why he found himself ambushed every time he turned a corner. He assumed it was a Sunnydale wide phenomenon, so he headed to Giles', to raise the alert and set the awesome Scooby machine in motion.

Arriving to find Buffy deep in quiet conversation with Spike whilst holding a pair of cake decorations, caused him to pause, but he still didn’t appreciate the true awfulness of the situation. With some difficulty he managed to get her attention and gasped out his news. In response, Buffy was characteristically blasé, but more so. And then it turned out that Giles was blind.
"Blind?" Xander asked, aghast. "Where is he?"

Buffy waved a careless hand and a small plastic man. "I think he went to bed. Said he couldn't take it anymore. I told him I'd get the Tagas Root tomorrow."

Her attitude was all wrong, more than verging on the weird. She set the plastic figurines aside and Xander saw them clearly for the first time. Before his brain could process the fact that the girl figure was wearing a long white dress, Buffy broke his brain. "He's really not getting into the spirit of our wedding," she said, walking over and slipping an arm through his, hugging it to her. "I asked him to give me away and he said yes, but..." She trailed off as a new thought apparently occurred to her and she almost bounced in her enthusiasm. "Oh, oh, Xander." She grinning up into his face. “Will you stand up for Spike?"

Spike took a step forward and for a moment Xander thought he was going to grab Buffy. “Hey!” he objected. “Don’t I get a say in this?”

She released Xander's arm and turned around. “But honey, you don’t have any friends, so who would you ask?” Spike stared at her, at Xander, then down at the
floor. He muttered something, too soft for Xander to make out. Not that it mattered, because Xander was incapable of thought. Buffy apparently took it as agreement, because she was all smiles again and went on to her next point. “And we need to talk about invitations. Do you want to be William the Bloody, or just Spike? Because either way, it’s gonna look weird.”

Spike raised his head. “Whereas ‘Buffy’ has just that touch of classic elegance,” he suggested sarcastically.

Drawing herself up to her full height, Buffy glared right back. “And what’s wrong with Buffy?”

“It’s a terrible name,” Spike snarled.

Buffy threw a punch at his shoulder that didn’t look completely like fun. “Hey! My mother gave me that name.”

“Your mother. Right, well that explains it.”

“Don’t you dare start on my mother.”

“Like you show her any respect.”
“Well who was your mother, anyway?”

“My mother was a saint.”

“She’d have to be, to put up with you.”

“If you feel like that, maybe you don’t want to get married.”

At which point, Buffy crumbled, rushing towards Spike. “Oh Spike, I’m sorry," she cried. "I, I didn’t mean it.”

Spike met her halfway. “No, no, I’m a bad man. I’m sorry, princess. Take no notice of me. You're an angel for doing all this; it's such a big thing to organise.”

“It's okay, honey. Women are good at this sort of thing. Which is why you should leave it all to me.”

There was kissing. Xander turned away, horrified. “Oh, god, can I be blind too?” he asked the empty fireplace.

Buffy apparently heard him, because she broke away from Spike and wailed, “Why does nobody understand?”

Recapturing her hand, Spike bent down and dropped a
kiss on her palm, before reassuring her. “Don’t worry, kitten,” he said. “They’ll come around.” He looked over at Xander and a speculative gleam appeared in his eyes. “In fact,” he suggested, “Did you ever hear about the Nisho clan? They practice polyandry. I'm suddenly seeing the attraction.

"Poly what?"

"After all," Spike continued. "Monogamy's for humans. A real demon..."

Xander caught on at about the same moment Buffy did. He opened his mouth to object, but Buffy beat him to it. "Eww! No! Not at our wedding. How could you? Don't spoil it, Spike. It's our special day."

"Night," Spike corrected, but he sounded regretful.

"And you," she added fiercely, turning on Xander. "Don't you dare try to steal my boyfriend, or I'll, I'll..."

Spike interrupted her, "Okay," he agreed. "I'm sorry. Whatever you say, Princess." He patted Buffy's hand and she was all smiles again, her jealous outburst apparently forgotten in a moment. Picking up a notebook and pencil
from the table, she sucked the end of the pencil as she studied what looked like a list, before ticking off a few items from the top.

Spike continued to study Xander. "You look different," he observed.

"Yeah? Well, so do you. Last time I saw you, you were covered in spilt blood."

Spike gave another sigh, less regretful and more nostalgic. "Yeah," he said. "Good times. But the little woman here insisted I wash. Even took my clothes and cleaned them for me."

The reality of the conversation crashed in on Xander and he thought he might have staggered under the blow. "You're really getting married?" he asked. The day couldn't get much stranger, so having a civilised conversation with Spike was all part of the strange.

Spike shrugged. "Seem to be. She's keen, anyway. But, gotta admit, I look at you and I'm suddenly wondering..."

A memory surfaced from the back of Xander's brain. "Oh no!" he groaned. "Married. Yes, yes, that's it."
Spike perked up. "Yes?" he asked.

"Yes!" He took in Spike's hopeful expression and back-peddled. "No! No, no, no. Demon magnet. It's Willow!" Spinning on his heels, he ran to the stairs, "Giles!" he yelled, taking them two at a time.

Fifteen minutes later Giles was downstairs and had pieced the last few bits of the puzzle together. "She said she'd tried to do a spell to have her will done," he explained. "And now she's out there and she probably doesn't know what she's doing."

So they went looking for her, minus Giles. Spike and Buffy spent as much time arguing about their future together and then making up with too much tongue, as they did searching. Xander was almost relieved when the first of his previous pursuers appeared to give their thoughts a new focus.

Unfortunately, he didn't arrive alone and soon there were too many for even Buffy to handle. Spike pointed at a crypt. "That one's not locked," he shouted.

They ran and piled through the door, slamming it behind
them. The demons followed and it was every man, woman and vampire to the barricades, until they broke through. Then it was every slayer to the barricades and kicking ass, while Spike and Xander did their best to dodge blows and keep out of her way.

Xander missed his footing on the earth floor and a moment later he was almost lifted off the ground by a large green thing with claws on its claws. It had one hand closed around his neck and the other pulled back, ready to disembowel him. He scrabbled at the arm that held him, dimly aware that Spike had jumped at it and grabbed the other arm, yelling curses as he tried to pull it away.

Struggling for breath, Xander was waiting for the life-flashes-before-your-eyes moment and regretting that there was so little to flash, when a crash of thunder, far too loud, accompanied by a blaze of lightning, both deafened and blinded him. The crypt was abruptly silent and Xander staggered back against the wall, blinking to clear the spots from his vision and drawing air down his mercifully clear throat. Spike fell over on his ass, his head hitting the sharp corner of a plinth with a dull thud.

When Xander looked around, the demons were gone and
Willow was standing in a corner. She gave a little wave. "Hi, guys," she said, sheepishly.

Xander got his brownies. Giles got cookies and his sight back, while Spike and Buffy both got a very public attack of disgust. But Spike returned to Giles' apartment with them, without having to be threatened, and on the way Xander found himself walking by his side, while Buffy walked ahead with Willow. "You were going to marry her?" Xander asked. It was funny now that it was over and he was no longer fighting for his life.

"Just shut up about it, will you?" Spike growled. "It's not like I wanted to."

"But that wasn't going to stop you?"

"It was a fucking spell. Spells are like that. You don't question them."

When he thought about it later, Xander blamed the lingering effects of oxygen starvation for the stupidity which led him to continue to tease. There was no other possible reason for him to say, "Sounds like the voice of experience. Happened to you a lot, has it?"
Spike cast him a sly look along his shoulder. "Well, you should know, pet. Did you question it, at the time?"

"What?" Xander spluttered. He felt himself blush. "Oh! Umm..."

"Yeah, um," Spike agreed. "Glass houses, mate. And as I remember, that one was all you."

Mortified, Xander nodded. "Yeah, it was. And I learnt a lesson too - spells are a bad idea. Very, very bad. And they don't mend things."

"Not going to apologise, are you?" Spike asked. He sounded only mildly interested in whatever Xander's reply would be.

"No, I'm not," Xander snapped.

Spike grinned. "Good," he said, pulling a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket and lighting one.

They completed the rest of the walk back to Giles' place in silence.
Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episode 4.09, Something Blue

Part Twenty-Nine

Xander was aware that he was bouncing. He opened Giles' front door, walked in and leaned back against it to push it closed, pulling his right arm out of his jacket sleeve as he did so. He’d already opened his mouth before he noticed that Giles was on the phone.

"- can't even cry. The gentlemen are coming by," Giles was saying. Xander cut off his greeting and waited to see what kind of weird had Giles reciting rhymes. "Okay, yes, I’ve got it. And that's all? Yes, it sounds vaguely familiar, like a nursery rhyme." He looked up at Xander and gave a nod, acknowledging his arrival. "You're sure it's nothing you heard when you were a child?" he asked, turning his attention back to his conversation and the note pad under his hand. "Alright. Well it could definitely be one of your prophetic dreams, or it could just be the eternal
mystery that is your brain. Yes, I'll check it out and... Yes, I'll let you know if I find something. Alright. Bye. Yes, bye." He put the phone down and gave Xander a brief smile, but turned away towards the other side of the room. "Spike," he said, "have you heard of a group called the Gentlemen?"

Spike's head appeared over the back of the sofa. "Group of what?"

"The Gentlemen."

"No."

"You’re certain?"

"Yes, I'm certain. Never heard of them. Why?" Spike stood up and Xander saw that he was holding a cereal bowl and a spoon. He raised the bowl up under his chin and shovelled what looked like blood drenched wheat-a-bits into his mouth as he walked over to the desk.

"Oh, it's probably nothing."

"Right then." Spike turned around and wandered back to the sofa to finish his breakfast, or lunch, or whatever
meal was appropriate for a vampire at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Turning to Xander, Giles smiled again. "How did it go?" he asked.

"I got the job."

"Oh, well done. I knew you could do it. They told you immediately?"

"Yeah. Joe Wheeler, the foreman, he remembered me. I never even knew he'd seen me, but he asked if I was the guy who went to rescue the man who fell down the hole."

Giles nodded and went through into the kitchen. "I'm impressed" he said when he was once more in sight. Reaching up above the breakfast bar he took down a couple of mugs from the shelf. "A man who notices and remembers things like that, is probably a good man to work for."

Laughing nervously at the memory, Xander shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "He said he noticed stuff. He made it sound more like a
threat.”

Giles waved that concern away. “When do you start?” he asked.

“Well, it's Friday today, so, Monday. 7am.”

“Congratulations, Xander.”

“Thanks.” During the slightly awkward silence that followed, Xander cast around for something else to say. He slid onto one of the bar stools and leant his elbows on the counter while Giles turned to the other side of the kitchen to make tea. “So what's going on here?” he asked. "Was that Buffy?"

Giles glanced over his shoulder. "Yes. A dream. Maybe a slayer vision, but, with luck, it's probably nothing. It doesn’t make a lot of sense." He poured boiling water into the teapot and brought it over to the breakfast bar, dragged the mugs closer and rearranged the position of the sugar bowl. Xander could swear he was actually fidgeting. After a few minutes he cleared his throat and said, "Umm, but there is something I wanted to ask you."

If the fidgeting was not enough to put Xander on alert,
the tone of Giles' voice, was. "Yeah?" he asked cautiously.

Giles crossed his arms. "Yes, um, well." His took a deep breath and his next words came out in a rush. "I'm sorry, but I need you to take Spike for a few days."

So not what Xander had expected. "What?" he asked, sitting up straight on his stool. That didn't seem dramatic enough, so he stood up, took a half step back and spread his arms. "I mean, What?"

His question was echoed by Spike, whose head reappeared over the back of the sofa. "I'm not staying with him!" he protested.

Giles ignored Spike and concentrated his appeal on Xander. "I have a friend who's coming to town and I'd like us to be alone."

As if saying the words slowly would change their meaning, Xander asked, "And you want me to take him?"

"Well, we can't just let him loose and it's not as if he's a danger to anyone." Giles shrugged, but he also looked embarrassed. "He's rather pathetic really."
That had Spike on his feet, empty cereal bowl slamming down on the coffee table. "Hey!"

Giles threw him a glance. "Annoying," he added, "but not a threat anymore."

Refusing to be distracted, Xander interrupted before Spike could launch into a defence of his big bad credentials. "So, why can't we let him loose? If he's not a danger."

"Good point," Spike agreed. "Yeah, why?"

"Because he still has information about the commandos," Giles explained. He looked at Spike again, more appraisingly. "Although he might not realise it. We need to keep him alive, at least until we know everything he knows."

Spike snorted. "Great incentive for me to co-operate, Watcher. Well done," he said.

Giles ignored the interruption. "Given his condition," he finished, "if we let him go now, he'll probably just get recaptured, or killed, and, unfortunately, we need him."
But..." he trailed off and just looked at Xander.

Xander tried to picture Giles having Spike in his home while he had a girlfriend over. It wasn't, he admitted to himself, as if Spike would be interrupting any love action on Xander's part. Xander's love life was in the doldrums. It was beyond that, it had been washed up on the shore and baked dry in the sun, ever since Oxnard. But did he want Spike staying with him? He looked over at Spike, who was still standing by the coffee table, watching Xander. His face was unreadable. Spike. In his apartment. There. It didn't feel like a good idea.

Spike turned away and sat down in the chair by the coffee table, put his elbows on his knees and dropped his head in his hands. "Oh shit," he groaned.

Xander looked back at Giles. "Alright," he said. "I'll take him." He watched Giles breathe out and turn to pour tea into two mugs. "But only for the weekend and you owe me big-time, Giles."

With a smile, Giles inclined his head. "I recognise that. Thank you."

Looking at his watch, Xander added, "But I'm not having
him loose in my place while I'm out. I'll swing by on the way home, after work. I have to tell Mr Danato I won't be working after tonight." He picked up his jacket. "Thanks for the offer of the tea, but I'd better go."

Spike lifted his head out of his hands and looked over at them. "Shame to see it go to waste," he said. "Gi's it here, I'll have it. Think I need it more than the boy, anyway."

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Xander stacked the last of his breakfast dishes on the drainer before going to bed. Straightening up, he looking across the breakfast bar into the living room.

Spike had been surprisingly compliant when Xander picked him up. He didn't even protest, beyond one attempt to shove Xander away which ended in a stifled scream of pain, when Xander tied him up in the recliner chair.

There was no denying that having Spike in his power was a rush.

Xander hadn’t thought about Spike in years. Not thought,
thought. And when he had thought, his feelings had been both powerful and mixed. The memory of the weeks that Spike had stalked him, so that he was virtually confined under house arrest, of living with the fear that one evening his mom or dad might answer a knock at the door and invite the handsome young man in, the awful weeks when Spike disappeared and Xander didn’t know where he was – whether he was watching or not - those were the memories that had made him pull the rope a little bit tighter, add another loop around Spike’s chest and make sure the knot was out of reach at the back of the chair.

And when Spike was petulant and angry, as he'd been the day before, it was easy to ignore the memories of a hotel room and a generous lover (and after a few flings with guys his own age, after Larry, Xander knew what selfish was) who focused on him, in spite of not being able to feel anything there himself.

Co-operative Spike was more difficult. While he didn't trust him any further than he could throw him, in a small, unacknowledged corner of his mind, Xander regretted his outburst in Giles' bathroom.

“Dunno why I have to be tied up,” Spike complained.
On the other hand, the major part of his mind was quite happy with the arrangement as it stood. “And leave you loose while I’m asleep? No way.”

Spike tilted his head to consider Xander and sneered, “Like I'd bite you.”

“You can’t,” Xander replied with some smugness. ”I’m not worried about that.”

Narrowing his eyes, Spike asked, “What then?”

Xander walked into the living room and looked down at his charge. He grinned. “Your idea of interior decoration,” he said.

Spike's frown deepened, but strangely his body seemed to relax and he stopped testing his bonds. However, when he spoke there was a definite snap in his voice. “You know nothing about my tastes,” he said.

Xander nodded. “But I’ve seen your dress sense.”

With a sneer, Spike made a show of looking Xander up and down. “And I’ve seen yours,” he replied.
That simply made Xander grin wider. He might not have a huge wardrobe, but he knew that what he had was okay. When he first came out, in senior year, Buffy made it her mission to improve his dress sense, his and Larry's. She'd dragged them around the mall, one terrible Saturday afternoon, until they'd both bought a few new clothes, just to pacify her. After that she shared her magazines with him, as if by admitting to being gay, he necessarily had to be interested. In spite of himself, he'd absorbed some of the basic principles. Looking down at his plain brown t-shirt and admittedly rather worn blue jeans, Xander knew that although he'd never be a fashion plate, he was also not an embarrassment to his friends. "That the best you can do?" he asked, turning away and heading for his bedroom.

Behind him there was silence, until he reached the door, then Spike called out, "Oh Xander, don't you care about me?"

Turning to look back at him, Xander sighed. Quite suddenly he was tired. "You know what, Spike?" he asked. "Why don't you just shut up?"

"Xaaannnder."
“No! Just shut up! I'm going to bed and it doesn't matter how loud you shout. These walls are thick, so I won't hear you and nor will anyone else.” He left before Spike could say anything more, retreating to his room and closing the door.

Leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor, he climbed into bed and buried himself under the covers.

*****

It took a while for Xander to catch on the next morning. He woke up, washed, dressed and wandered through the living room to the kitchen, only nodding at Spike in passing. Spike nodded back. Xander was grateful for the quiet.

In the kitchen he made coffee and it wasn't until he'd pulled down a mug, got a carton of blood out of the fridge and turned to shout a question across the room to Spike that he realised.

Trying to mime a conversation with Spike was both remarkably easy and intensely frustrating. However, his accusation that the loss of his voice was Spike's fault was
never supposed to be serious; he'd simply hoped that Spike knew what was going on.

Picking up the living room telephone extension, he dialled Buffy and Willow’s room. It wasn’t until he heard it pick up that he realised how stupid that was.

Spike was looking at him and his opinion of Xander's actions was clear from his expression. Thankfully, panic had come to Xander's rescue as often as it had got him into trouble. He pulled the handset away from his ear and tapped on it a number of times with his fingernail. Spike’s expression shifted from derisive to mildly impressed. Spike obviously didn’t know Morse code. Unfortunately, neither did Buffy nor Xander.

Giving a few more taps, Xander paused, as if listening to a reply, and then put the phone down. He grabbed his message pad and scribbled “I’m going to Giles' place.”

Spike raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly down at the ropes still tight around his chest and arms. Xander considered him, letting him stew for a while, then went and undid the knot at the back of the chair and the one holding his left arm. Spike could manage the rest himself. He left without waiting to see if Spike thanked him. He
figured it would be a waste of time.

The town was eerily quiet, as if the loss of human voices had dulled all the other sounds. The few people who were out were mostly wandering around looking lost. There were very few cars, but Xander found that he was driving more slowly than usual, his eyes constantly drawn to further evidence that the phenomenon was city-wide. On a street corner he spotted what looked like a prayer meeting. Meanwhile other people decided to cope by other means - the liquor store was open early and seemed to be doing brisk business. As far as Xander could see, everything else appeared to be closed.

The door to Giles' apartment was opened by a strange woman who looked at him blankly, until he mouthed Giles' name, upon which she shrugged and stepped back to allow him in.

Inside, Giles was sitting at his desk and it was obvious that he was feeling harassed. He had books spread out everywhere, even on the floor. When Xander waved and raised his brows, he shook his head before going back to his reading.

Buffy and Willow arrived shortly after Xander and came
armed with whiteboards and marker pens, which made communication easier than scribbling messages on paper and passing them around.

The television had been moved back into the living room and the local news confirmed that the situation was affecting the whole of Sunnydale, but not the whole state and that the army had put up a cordon around the town to isolate it and prevent the spread of the infection. It looked like the cover-up was official. Xander wondered if it was the City Council or the military who had come up with the lame excuse they were peddling.

They spent the day searching fruitlessly through Giles' books. Olivia, Giles' lady friend, had seen something from the window in the night. She drew it from memory and if she was as good an artist as the picture suggested, there was definitely something creepy going on. She also tried to help with the research for a while, but the necessity of laboriously writing down all instructions and questions made it slow work. After two hours she gave up and retreated to the kitchen to make tea. Buffy wrote out more of the details of her dream, drawing pictures in places, although the people all looked like the same stick figure to Xander, and Xander dragged the boxed up books out of the spare bedroom, in case they contained
anything useful. No such luck, as they confirmed four hours later.

Eventually, Giles pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He picked up one of the whiteboards. "You should all go home. Get some rest. Meet at UCSD campus tomorrow - try the library there," he wrote.

Buffy shook her head and took the board from him, wiped it clean and wrote, "Patrol!"

Giles looked at her thoughtfully and then gave a tired nod of agreement. She replied with a lopsided grin and grabbed her coat. She pointed at Willow and with hand signals made it clear that she would walk her home first. When she turned to Xander, he mimed driving and pointed at both of them. Buffy nodded.

After dropping Willow and Buffy at the campus, Xander realised he was reluctant to go home. Going back to Giles' was out, so he drove around town. The centre looked much as it had that morning, at first, only with more trash lying around. On closer inspection, though, he noticed the glass strewn over the sidewalk and rounding the corner onto Main Street, he saw looting in progress. He wasn't tempted to stop and interfere. Twenty yards
further on, the electronics shop had been completely cleaned out. When he passed the second car on fire he decided that even if the only thing waiting for him at home was a resentful vampire, he would be better off the streets. Turning right at the broken lights by the town hall, he hoped he had enough food at home to make a meal.

The silence in the apartment was unnerving, oppressively solid, in spite of the TV playing. Spike looked up when Xander walked in and they stared at each other. Spike’s eyes were an amazing shade of blue. Xander shook himself and pointed at the TV, then lifted his hands and shoulders in a questioning shrug. Spike's lips quirked but he merely raised a sceptical eyebrow and shook his head. Xander scowled and flipped him off which made Spike laugh silently. It was communication of a sort, although Xander wished he'd thought to borrow one of the whiteboards. Spike turned back to the TV while Xander headed to the kitchen.

The only thing he appeared to have in his fridge was blood, but he drew the line miles short of sharing Spike's supper. After a hunt through his cupboards, refried beans, tinned tuna and creamed corn made an interesting stew, and by the time he'd emptied it all into
a pan and heated it up, he was hungry enough not to care.

Spike nodded when Xander passed him a heated mug of blood, but seemed disinclined for even the limited conversation that notes or mime allowed, so Xander was left with nothing to do but think. He ate in the kitchen then joined Spike on the sofa to watch TV, passing him a beer as he sat down. The news was still telling the same story - an epidemic of Laryngitis. Xander happened to glance across at Spike just after the anchor repeated the excuse. Spike gave a snort of disgust and Xander grinned. By mutual and silent consent they decided that watching the news was worse than useless so Xander flipped channels until he found a movie, coming in just in time to catch a twenty car pile-up. It was a surprisingly restful evening.

The next day started well. The town had settled into a dull state of apathy, far preferable to the angry vandalism of the day before. The presence of the army on the streets helped with that. Giles had also found the cause of the threat. His slideshow turned out to be the high point, however. UC Sunnydale library was open and there were a surprising number of students at work, but it provided no clues as to how Buffy could get her voice
back and so defeat The Gentlemen.

By the end of the day, Xander was tired and wired. And hungry. On the way home he swung by Dino's Pizza Place and was relieved to see that Mr Donato was open for business. He bought an extra large Mega Meat and an extra large BBQ Chicken & Bacon, figuring that now was a time to have stores in reserve. Food would also give him and Spike something to focus on, other than the silence.

The silence created an atmosphere of companionable solidarity and when he'd gone to bed the previous night, his dreams had been full of images of Spike that made him uncomfortable. He really didn't want to spend another evening silently communing on the sofa. To that end, once they'd eaten, he wrote Spike a note. "I'm going out. Patrol with Buffy. Want to come?"

Spike seemed to take forever to read it and then looked up at Xander. "Okay," he mouthed, his lips twisting into a wry smile.

Buffy didn't appear to be very pleased to see them, but since she couldn't say anything, she couldn't send them away. She marched off and they followed, side by side. Xander shot a questioning glance at Spike, which he
replied to with a raised eyebrow and a smirk.

They were walking down a quiet residential street when Xander caught movement from the corner of his eye. He turned and spotted one of the creatures Olivia had drawn. It glided along, just as Giles had said, is if on rollers. Breaking into a run, he caught up with Buffy. She swung around at the sound of his footsteps and he pointed. A moment later, he was staggering back from her shove, straight into Spike's arms. His silent yell of indignation was cut short when a strange creature, like a black and white movie Quasimodo, jumped out of the bushes, right where he'd been standing, and tackled her. Spike's arms were tight around his waist, preventing him from going to her aid, in spite of his struggles.

Buffy kicked the creature to the ground but a second one appeared from nowhere, behind her, and grabbed her around the waist with both arms, just as Spike had grabbed Xander. She raised her arm and jabbed her elbow back into its face and, when it staggered, pulled herself free, swinging around to bury her fist in its gut.

Xander tried to make the same move, but Spike was too fast, grabbing his wrists to hold them still.
The creature Buffy had punched, reeled backwards and tripped over a tree root, landing on its back with its legs in the air. Almost before it had hit the ground, the first one was back on its feet and Buffy ducked under a swinging punch. She placed her hands on the ground and kicked back with both feet as she cart-wheeled past, hitting the creature in its chest and knocking it into a tree. Spike dragged Xander out of range. On her feet once more, Buffy kicked again, catching the creature in the leg with the sole of her foot and there was a sharp snapping sound. It went down, writhing and hugging its shin. Buffy ran forward and brought her foot down hard on its neck. She didn't stay to make sure it was dead. There was no need. Instead she turned on the spot, looking for the other one.

Xander looked around too and saw it running away. Wrenching his arms free of Spike's hold, he waved his arms above his head to catch Buffy's eye and, ignoring her raised eyebrows at the sight of him locked in Spike's embrace, pointed down the street at the fleeing creature. She nodded and took off after it, while Spike finally let Xander go.

He didn't stop to yell at Spike; it would have done no good. He simply glared at him and set off after Buffy.
Spike's footsteps sounded behind him and in less than twenty yards, Spike had caught up and was running by his side.

They rounded a street corner together and caught sight of Buffy about fifty yards in front of them. She was heading straight for the abandoned church with the clock tower. It loomed at the end of the dark street, looking as innocent as ever except for the fact that there was a light in the tower and the fluttering of shadows on the slats over the windows indicated movement inside. Xander quickened his pace, Spike matching him stride for stride.

By the time they reached the church there was no sign of Buffy, but there was a hole in the wall where a boarded up window had been and the sound of crashing coming from inside. Xander edged up to the hole and peered cautiously in, Spike crowding close behind him. Before his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, silence fell, shocking in its suddenness. In alarm, Xander scrambled over the lip of the hole, where he tripped over a ladder that was lying on the ground covered by a dirty tarp, and fell. Nothing attacked him and he took a moment to catch his breath before rolling over onto his back and lifting his head.
It was easier to see now that he was inside too. Buffy was standing in the middle of the room facing off with a guy Xander thought he recognised, but he'd never seen him dressed like a soldier before and he'd certainly never seen a gun like the one the guy was holding. They were both frozen, staring at each other, him with his weird blaster gun pointed at Buffy's chest, her with her one-handed crossbow cocked and ready to fire a bolt right through his eye. It looked like neither of them had stirred at Xander's noisy entrance.

When Xander scrambled to his feet, they at last moved. Slowly they both swung around to face him and he raised his right hand in a nervous wave. Breaking eye contact seemed to have snapped them out of whatever trance they had fallen into, which was lucky because at that moment a Quasimodos came leaping and bounding across the room. Buffy ducked, the soldier ducked and Xander threw himself to the ground. The creature went over his head, propelled by one of Buffy's feet and crashed into the wall. Buffy caught Xander's eye and shrugged an apologetic "Sorry" at him. He grinned back. The soldier fired his weapon at the creature as it flailed on the floor and it collapsed in a crackle of tame lightning. Xander got to his feet and looked around.
Another four of the creatures were scattered around the room. Two had obviously been brought down by arrows from Buffy's crossbow. He assumed that the soldier had accounted for the others. Against the wall on the far side of the room, a flight of stairs led up to a trapdoor in the ceiling. He pointed, trying to look his question and Buffy nodded. She headed in that direction, the soldier at her heels.

Xander cast a last look back at the hole in the wall and saw Spike gesturing to him to come out. He hesitated but shook his head. Spike started to climb in himself and Xander rushed over to stop him. "Are you crazy?" he mouthed, pointing the way Buffy had gone, miming holding a rifle and finally standing straight and sketching a salute before pointing at the stairs again. "Commando guy!"

Spike nodded his understanding and indicated that Xander should therefore come outside.

Xander shook his head. "I'll be careful," he mouthed, as clearly as he could. Spike shook his head again and moved, as if to clamber through the hole into the church. "No," Xander mouthed, physically bundling him back out. "Stay there," he ordered, pointing emphatically at the
ground outside.

Turning away, he crept over to the stairs and edged his way up, pausing when his head was level with the upper floor. A scraping sound behind him made him turn, foot raised, ready to kick his attacker back down the stairs. It was Spike. Xander took a deep breath and put his foot back down on the step. Above them, a crash sent plaster dust cascading down to the floor below.

Waving Spike to stay back, Xander turned towards the room above and looked over the edge of the trapdoor. There was a table in the centre of the room next to the mechanism of the clock, ropes hung everywhere and suspended from the ceiling above them was a huge bell.

All of that, he took in with a single glance, because his eyes were caught by the sight of Buffy being held by three of the Quasimodo creatures. Two were holding on to her upper arms and the third was almost wrapped around her legs. She was jerking at their grip, but was apparently unable to free herself. A pair of scarecrow skeletons of Gentlemen floated towards her, scalpels in outstretched hands.

Xander edged up the last few stairs, but before he could
rush to her rescue, Buffy caught his eye and jerked her head towards the table, miming the opening and closing of an oyster with her hands. Xander turned to look, searching the objects on the table: big jars with hearts in them, scraps of wood and debris, and a box. It looked like the one Buffy had drawn, from her dream. He glanced back at her and nodded, just as a burst of lightning hit one of the Gentlemen and he staggered. Another burst caught the Quasimodo holding Buffy's left arm. When it was redirected at the one around her legs she was finally able to wrench herself free. She kicked the Quasimodo at her feet at the same time as punching the one who still held her right arm. Then she swung around, sending him flying through the air, to crash into the wall. The Gentlemen stopped their advance, waiting.

For a moment, Xander thought the fight was as good as over. The Gentlemen didn't seem inclined to join in the actual fisticuffs and although scary, they looked decidedly snapable. But the Quasimodos were tough. Two of them rolled back onto their feet and swarmed her, while the third, and another Xander hadn't spotted before, turned on the soldier who, Xander now saw, was lying propped against the wall, as if he'd been thrown there, with his gun pointing into the room.
Xander took a deep breath and sprang out of his hiding place. He felt Spike's hand grab at the cuff of his jeans, but he obviously missed, because Xander was in the room, on his feet and running for the table. All around him there were crashes and bodies flying as he dodged and wove his way across the few yards to his target. He made it and picking up one of the jars containing a heart, brought it down on top of the box with all the weight of his arm and all the force of his fear and desperation.

He staggered back and Buffy began to scream. It went on and on, while the Gentlemen stood frozen and stared at her. Then the Gentlemen started to shake and a moment later their heads exploded with a sound like boiling mud. The Quasimodos sank to the floor and Xander completed his stagger and fell on his butt.

When he got himself over onto his hands and knees, he looked around and saw Buffy sitting on the floor by the clock mechanism. He crawled over to her. She gave him a tired smile and together they helped each other to their feet. For a moment they simply stood with their arms around each other, providing mutual support, until the soldier coughed to attract their attention. Xander looked at him over Buffy's shoulder, back down at Buffy and back at the soldier's impatient face. He began to laugh.
Buffy glanced around, looked up at Xander and then she was laughing too. Clinging to each other they helped each other across to the stairs with the soldier trailing behind. When they reached the room below, Spike was gone.

Much later, after they'd escaped the soldier (Riley, Buffy called him) who appeared torn between concern that they'd identified him and his need to organise a clean-up crew, after they had reported back to Giles and after he'd delivered Buffy back to the campus, Xander finally made it home. It was 2am on Monday morning and he started work in five hours.

He dragged himself up the stairs, opened his front door and walked into his apartment. It was empty. The living room, kitchen area, bathroom - all empty. The doors onto the balcony were open, but there was no one out there. He even looked in his own bedroom, but there was no sign of Spike.

Wondering at the cold, heavy feeling in his lower chest, Xander went back to the kitchen. Even knowing that Spike was gone, he kept glancing around, as if Spike would suddenly reappear out of thin air. His eyes fell on the closed door to the spare bedroom and the ache in his
chest sharpened. Hurrying over, he threw open the door. The ache faded slowly as he took in the sight of Spike lying on a nest of his spare blankets and sheets, in the far corner of the room.

Xander leant against the door jam and Spike turned his head. "Got home safe, then," he observed.

"Yeah. Going to bed now. Got to get up in four hours to start my new job."

"Bugger off then," Spike said.

Xander grinned and went.

Note: Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episode 4.10, Hush.

Part Thirty

Spike was not good company, but he wasn't bad company either. They got along okay, in a snippy way, or
so Xander thought. There were times when they simply failed to communicate; Spike seemed unable to appreciate the fact that if something went wrong at work, violence wasn't always the answer. Similarly, there were times when Xander was left speechless, staring at Spike, open-mouthed, as he tried to comprehend the logic. But those were small things, easily accommodated. On the whole, Xander didn't mind that Giles hadn't said anything about taking Spike back after Olivia left so suddenly.

He hadn't bothered to tie Spike up again, after the days of silence it didn't seem necessary, and they usually passed in the hall when Xander got up for work and Spike was heading to bed. Occasionally they found themselves together, late in the evening, watching mindless TV. Once or twice Xander thought he caught a glimpse of bleached hair when he was out patrolling with Buffy or Giles, but when he got home Spike was parked on the sofa watching TV, so he supposed that it must have been his imagination.

For the most part, they didn't talk much. "Want some blood?", "No, ta." was about as far as it went. Spike was an easy house guest. He did have a bad habit of leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor, until Xander took his
own and all the spares and locked them away. After that, Spike's towel was miraculously hung up whenever Xander went to use the bathroom. They got along.

If that had been everything, Xander would have been happy, but it wasn't. There was still an underlying something uncomfortable about the arrangement, so that, in spite of the fact that they got along, not really bothering each other, there were days when Xander dreaded getting home to find that Spike had moved out, and others when he fervently hoped he would. He figured that was the way with roommates.

Of more immediate concern was the fear that Riley would see Spike. He was hanging around Buffy a lot and since Xander hung out with Buffy and Spike seemed to hang out with Xander, Xander was in a constant state of low level anxiety. Spike didn't seem to care, but Xander suspected that was an act. There were times when he thought he saw Spike's mask slip and something hard, and ugly, and scared, and hurt peek out from behind it. He was never quite sure though, because Spike pulled his cloak of cocky self-confidence back over himself so fast that Xander was almost convinced that the moment of fearful vulnerability had been his imagination.
It was also possible that Spike's blasé attitude was down to the fact that he could always arrange 'an accident' for Riley, if he had to. He'd spent an entire Tuesday evening explaining how easy it would be. Xander didn't want that to happen, either.

Meanwhile, Buffy reported back to the gathered Scoobies (and Spike) on the conversations she had with Riley.

While it was clear that Riley wasn’t big on sharing, he’d said enough to Buffy for Xander to realise that the hunt for Spike was ongoing and Riley, for one, was not giving up. That alone made him feel that his nervousness was justified. He was thankful that Buffy was still cautious enough of Riley's motives not to say anything - she’d promised.

When quizzed by Giles about why the soldiers were so determined to recapture him, Spike was unashamed in his admission that he, "might have killed a couple," whilst making his escape.

Giles frowned. "If that’s the case," he said, "I don’t believe that Riley, or any of his colleagues, will ever give up. From what Buffy has discovered, this is a small unit
operating in what they consider to be combat conditions."

"Yeah, yeah," Spike broke in. "We all got the cheap psychology, Watcher. Band of brothers and all that rot." He gave a snort of amusement. "What they were planning? I'd plead self-defence, if I cared enough to plead in the first place." He paused and pursed his lips thoughtfully. He sounded mildly regretful when he added, "Was a waste of a good kill too, since I couldn't stop to eat them."

Giles' brows drew together. "A waste of a good kill?" he echoed. "What does that mean?"

Spike shook his head. "God, but you’re ignorant, Watcher," he said. "Call yourself an expert, advisor to the one and only vampire slayer, but you know shite about us." He gave a careless shrug and waved his right arm expansively. "The lot of you, you talk about vampires as if we were animals." Snorting again, in disgust this time, he started to pace and Xander watched in amazement as he expounded in a manner that Xander had never seen him do before. He knew that Spike told a good story and, one-to-one, he could be surprisingly informative, but to explain his species to the Slayer and her Watcher didn't
seem like normal Spike behaviour. "Sure," he said, "fledges operate on gut instinct and thoughtless hunger, but when you get older, you learn control and economy of effort and all that other boring bollocks that keeps the Rozzers off your back, so you can go on your merry for a few more decades." He rolled his eyes and Xander breathed an involuntary sigh of relief when he turned back into familiar, contemptuous Spike. "Don't know why I'm even bothering to say it," he said, his eyes sweeping around the room, pausing for a moment on Xander's face before moving on. "There's the odd crazy, like Angelus, but on the whole, we're pretty much, live and let die."

Standing in the centre of the hearth rug, he challenged them with his eyes while Giles, Buffy, Willow and, he knew, Xander himself, stared at him.

Eventually Xander took a breath. "Why do I have difficulty believing that?" he asked. "You tell lies. All the time." He paused as something struck him. "And was that a movie reference you just quoted?"

Giles nodded his agreement. "The evidence does tend against you, Spike," he said. "Regardless of the accuracy, or lack of such, of information collected over millennia by the Watchers' Council, and regardless of your claims for
age and experience, we don't forget that you reconstructed the Judge."

Spike's hesitation was almost imperceptible, but Xander caught it. "Yeah, but that was Dru's present," he protested. Glancing around the room, looking at each of them in turn, he eventually stopped on Xander, saying, "I helped stop Acathla."

Xander got up and went to stand in front of him. Fighting the grin that was threatening, he cocked his head to one side and regarded Spike. "And why do I get the feeling that you always blame Drusilla for everything you don't want to admit to?" he asked.

Spike's lips twisted with reluctant amusement and he gave a shrug. "Evil, remember?" he said, stepping back and collapsing into Giles' easy chair with careless abandon.

"Yeah, evil," Xander agreed. He looked up and Giles was frowning at him. "What?" He asked. Giles shook his head and looked away.

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When the earth quaked, Xander was at work. He was at work later, too, because it took the whole of the afternoon to tidy up the mess the quake left and then inspect the half built Cultural Centre for damage. It was a painstaking and dangerous task.

He dropped in on Giles on the way home and found him lamenting the loss of his best china teapot, but otherwise unscathed. Buffy had already called around to check on him, and to worry herself with omens and portents, before leaving to meet Willow at a campus party.

Xander looked down at his dirty work clothes. "Huh," he observed, shaking his head. "Parties in the middle of the week." No sooner had the words escaped his lips than he looked up at Giles in horror. "Did I just say that?" he asked. "Tell me I didn't just say that."

With an overly sympathetic smile Giles clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Xander," he said, shaking his head, "but you have just become an official grown-up."

Xander groaned and would have sat down to commune with his inner (and outer) teenager, except that Giles grabbed his arm before he could put his dirty ass anywhere near the furniture. With a grin Xander
acknowledged the validity of Giles' concern. "Okay, I can take a hint when you hit me over the head with one," he said. "I'm leaving."

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Walking in through his front door twenty minutes later, he was greeted by Spike, who was in the kitchen heating a bag of blood. "Watcher just called," he said. "Wants you back there, asap."

"I just left," Xander protested. "Did he say why?"

"Didn't say much, but since he woke me up, I didn't encourage chitchat."

Xander decided that even if the world was ending, again, it could wait until he'd had a shower. He also decided it was time to get a cell phone.

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Willow was sitting on the sofa looking shell-shocked when Xander arrived, with Spike trailing behind. "What's he doing here?" Buffy asked.
Shrugging, Xander said, "He followed me home, Mom."

Spike sneered. "Just came to watch the fun. See the crack team in action." The sneer became a leer. "Never know, might get lucky and get a ringside seat at your demise, to make up for all this." He waved his hand around the room, indicating the chip, the town, his situation, the apartment, the world and everyone and everything in it.

Probably saving Spike from a beating and his own home from damage at the same time, Giles interrupted. "Never mind that," he said. "This symbol, Willow, do you remember it?" It seemed that the brief calm after The Gentlemen, was over.

Willow stirred and smiled at Xander in greeting. It was wobbly, but he gave her maximum points for effort. Her voice sounded wobbly too, but she was obviously trying for normal. "Oh, oh. I drew it," she said. "Here." Digging into her pocket she pulled out a party napkin, adding with disgust, "It was carved into his chest."

Xander went to look over Giles' shoulder. The drawing was smudged, since Willow had apparently only had a felt-tip pen, but it clearly resembled an eye inside a triangle. "It’s kind of the CBS logo," he observed.
Giles snorted. "I hardly think a television channel staged this."

"Oh I don't know, the things they'll do for ratings. It's a vicious cutthroat world."

Giles turned around and Xander shrugged. "Reality TV aside..." He petered out under the force of Giles' look and held up his hands in surrender. "Okay."

Spike, who had wandered over to sit on the stairs shook his head in disgust. "This is the crack team?" he lamented. "I am so deeply shamed."

Xander grinned, while Buffy shot him a puzzled look before obviously dismissing the interruption and turning back to Willow's serviette. "I've seen that before," she said.

Half an hour later, she pointed triumphantly at the side of a mausoleum. "There."

The stars were bright in the clear sky. They were almost in the centre of the graveyard and, Xander estimated, as far from street lights as it was possible to get in
Sunnydale. The ghost of a breeze caressed his face and the silence was familiar, filled with the quiet footfalls of his friends and little else. It was good to feel comfortable with silence again.

Giles walked over to study the carving. "It certainly looks very like. What do you think, Willow?"

Willow shuddered. "Yeah, that's the one," she confirmed.

A scraping sound from inside the mausoleum disturbed the calm, causing Buffy to signal them all back while she went closer. She peered around the edge of the open door with her crossbow raised and Xander saw her brace herself, before she charged through.

Within moments there was major crashing and banging and the last remnants of peaceful fled, as Xander's muscles tensed in preparation for fight or flight. They all moved closer, but sensibly hesitated a few feet short of the door. Xander was the closest, so he took the brunt when Buffy came, literally, flying out and crashed into them. They went down like ninepins, except for Spike who dodged out of the way.

Before any of them had managed to sit up, let alone get
to their feet again, a demon came charging out, carrying a sack. It leapt in the air and jumped over them, like an Olympic hurdler, and by the time Xander had rolled over to follow its path, it was already disappearing towards the trees.

Buffy got to her feet first, took one look at the retreating demon and went back into the mausoleum. Xander used the tombstone he'd narrowly missed hitting to pull himself up and turned to help Willow. Once she was on her feet, he went over to Giles, who hadn't moved.

He was sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him, leaning back on his braced arms, staring towards the trees in the direction the demon had gone. "I think that was a Vahi demon," he said.

Jumping down from his perch on top of a nearby tombstone, Spike wandered over. "Vahrall," he corrected. "Same family, different eye ridges. Different intentions too."

Buffy reappeared from the mausoleum in time to hear that remark. She was bouncing slightly and it was obvious to anyone who knew her that she wanted to hit something. "What does that mean?" she demanded.
Spike smirked. "Means I know something and you need to be polite if you want me to tell you."

Stepping in, literally, since he got himself physically between them before Buffy could make good on the threat that her body language was broadcasting, Xander looked Spike in the eye. "If you know anything about these demons, Spike, please would you tell us?" he asked.

Smiling, Spike stood on tiptoes to catch Buffy's eye over Xander's shoulder. "See?" he said. "Not hard." Turning back to Xander he continued, "Sure, mate. Vahralli are an anachronistic lot, like many demons - always going on about how much better it was in the old days, before humans came along and spoilt their gig. You should find a whole chapter on them in Allsopp's Compendium." He turned to Giles, adding sarcastically, "You do have that one, don't you?"

By that point Giles had also got to his feet. "Of course I have it," he snapped and, proving that middle-aged ex-librarians could do sarcasm as well as any vampire, asked, "Do you feel like giving us the chapter reference too?"
With a grin directed solely at Xander, Spike replied, "Twenty three." Xander narrowed his eyes at the enjoyment in Spike's voice. Giles didn't seem to notice; he stomped off towards the gate, followed by the rest of them. Spike matched pace with Xander. "Allsopp's doesn't have chapters," he confided. "Watcher should know that."

Xander looked across at him and shook his head in awe. "You just can't let it go, can you?" he observed.

"Only fun I've got," Spike protested. He spread his arms wide and started walking backwards in front of Xander. "Look at me. I mean, am I even remotely scary anymore?"

Xander looked at him. "Thanks for the information," he said.

Scowling, Spike turned to walk next to Xander again. "You know I'm not tame, don't you?" he said. "I may be chained, but I'm not changed." Speaking more softly, he added, "If, when this chip comes out, I will turn you." It sounded like a promise. Xander put on a burst of speed and Spike let him go.
Xander caught up with Buffy and Willow in time to hear the tail end of their conversation. "...robbing the grave," Buffy was saying. "I mean literally: Amy Franks, 1924, aged nine."

"Eww!" Willow said. "Why does it feel worse because it was a child?"

Buffy shrugged. She nodded to Xander and they all quickened their pace to catch up with Giles.

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"Vahrall demons," Giles read. "Oh wonderful, more verse: Slick like gold and gird in moonlight, father of portents and brother to blight. Limbs with talons, eyes like knives, bane to the blameless, thief of lives." He pulled his glasses off. "Well, that doesn't tell us much."

Buffy looked up from polishing her long knife. "And this thing needed to steal the bones of a dead child, why?"

"It wanted to play knucklebones?" Xander suggested.

Directing a look of disgust at him, Willow froze. "Bones of
a child!" she said. "I've seen that somewhere." Getting
up, she went over to the desk and started rifling through
the books still piled up next to it, from their research
sessions into The Gentlemen. Everybody else watched
and waited, as if they couldn't do anything else until
she'd found the reference she was searching for. She
pulled a thick book free of the stack and flipped through
the pages before putting it on the floor. A second book
followed. The third, however, seemed to require more
careful consideration. "Yes!" she said. "It's here!" Holding
it open against her chest, she got up, returned to the
sofa and sat down. Placing the book on the coffee table
in front of her, she leant over and started to read. "Umm.
Yes, an ancient ritual of the Vahralli." Looked up, she
caught Giles' eye, her own widening.
"That is one freaky-good memory you've got there,"
Xander observed.
Willow ignored him. Looking back down at the page she
ran her finger along the text as she read. "It uses the
blood of a man, the bones of a child. And, and something
called the Word of Valios? It says here that it's part of a
sacrifice - the sacrifice of three."
Buffy groaned. "Let me guess; it ends the world?"


Still reading rapidly, Willow replied, "Er, well, yeah. It’s not big with the details, though. It doesn’t say how, or even what the ritual entails, exactly." Turning the page, she read for a moment longer then pushed the book aside. "That's all. The next bit is about their birthing rituals and then it goes on to related species."

"Can I see?" Giles asked. Willow handed the book over.

Focusing on the most important part of what she'd said, Xander asked, "The sacrifice of three? I'm guessing three people are going to die. Or is that two, now?"

"The guy at school," Willow said. "I heard the paramedics say he'd lost a lot of blood, but there really wasn't that much."

"So claw boy took it with him?" Buffy asked. "I'm guessing he was the ingredient, not the sacrifice. But there's still one more thing the Vahrall needs and he's not getting it. We have to find that third one, the Word of Valios, before he does."

It was Willow who voiced what they were probably all thinking. "If he doesn’t already have it," she said. "I
mean, who knows where he’s been?"

Giles closed the book and put it down. He went over to his desk and started searching through the rest of the books there.

"We have to try," Buffy said, pulled on her metaphorical Slayer mantle. "I’ll check the magic shop. Giles, do you have anything else here?"

Pausing, Giles looked up. "I, I don't know. I don't remember anything, but I hadn't remembered that. I'll look." Walking over to the bookshelf he crouched down and started running his finger along the spines.


Spike had settled in what was fast becoming his usual spot on the stairs and at this he looked up. "I'll go with them," he offered.

Buffy turned to look at him suspiciously. "Why?" she asked. "You can't fight, if anything attacks."
Spike shrugged. "No, but I can watch. And I might get a proper meal out of it, instead of that animal pap."

Once again Xander put himself between Buffy and Spike. It was becoming a habit. One he wished he could break. Going over to Spike, he dragged him to his feet. "Come on," he said. "Time to get you away from the angry Slayer." He put an arm around Spike’s shoulders and walked him across the room. As they passed him, Giles caught Xander's eye, a frown in his own. Xander pulled his arm back and gave Spike a shove towards the door. Willow followed them out.

The museum was a bust, not even a syllable of Valios, although Spike proved very useful - helping them break in. "You need to teach me how to pick locks like that," Xander said. "We usually have to force a window."

After their fruitless search of the card catalogue and the library computer, he insisted Spike secure the door when they left, standing at his shoulder to see if it was a trick he could learn easily. Behind him, Willow let out a discouraged sigh. "This is hopeless. We don't even know what we're looking for and if we don't find it, it really is the end of the world."
Getting to his feet, Spike nodded. "And we all melt in a sea of molten hellfire."

He sounded almost as despondent as Willow. He'd also helped them in their search. "You don't want the world to end?" Xander asked.

Slipping his lock picks back in his pocket, Spike turned around. "Why the hell would I?"

"Er, well, you're evil. Isn't the end of the world what all evil... umm... people, want?"

Spike shook his head. "This is Acathe, all over again. Didn't want it then. Don't want it now."

Xander studied him curiously. "Oh. Okay," he said.

Back at Giles' place they found out why their field trip had been a waste of time. "It's my fault," Giles said, lifting the icepack from his face. "I should have remembered. The Word of Valio is a talisman, not a book. I bought it at a sorcerer's estate sale, years ago. I thought it was a knock off."
Buffy joined them and they brought her up to date. She waved away Giles' guilt, telling him he could bake cookies later. "Right now, we need to act fast," she said. "Riley's out there tracking the Vahrall demon with some sort of machine that traces pheromones."

Giles looked up. "Pheromones? Did he say anything else?"

"Nothing to the point. Told me I was too serious and should lighten up."

Willow looked fierce. "The big jerk!"

"No, it's okay, Wil. I just don't have time for a relationship, right now."

"A relationship?" Xander asked. "He asked you on a date?"

"No, not today. Today he was going all psych-major psychoanalytical on me." She looked around and noticed that Willow, Xander and Giles were all staring at her. "So not important, guys," she said. "If the demon has the last bit of its puzzle, it probably has its sacrifices, too."
Giles wiped his hand over his eyes. He looked exhausted. Xander reckoned that after all the concussions he'd suffered over the last few years, he had reason.

Reaching for his glasses, Giles slipped them on. "Which means, it will be on its way to the Hellmouth to perform the sacrifice."

"The Hellmouth?" Buffy asked and Giles nodded. She stood up. "Looks like we’re going back to high school," she said. "And we need to get there before Riley. There is no way his team are equipped to deal with a threat like this."

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As they entered the blackened corridors of the high school, Xander caught up to Spike. "If Riley shows up, you hide, okay?" he insisted. "He's the kind of jerk who would stop with the world savage, just to get some revenge."

Spike grinned, his teeth catching the meagre light from Xander's flashlight. "Aw, pet. You do care."

Scowling, Xander rebutted that suggestion with what he hoped was calm and convincing reasonableness. "No, I
"don't," he said. "We need you. Giles said. You know how to get into their base and we might need to do that, soon. I don't trust them."

It didn't seem to work, or else Spike just enjoyed teasing him, which he already knew. "You sound like you care."

"The enemy of my enemy, Spike. That's all."

Ahead of them, Buffy stopped and signalled them to be quiet. She cocked her head, obviously listening.

"Do you hear anything?" Xander asked after a moment.

"I think so. Okay, when we get to the library keep a look out for victims it's keeping alive for the sacrifice. Getting them out is the first priority."

Willow nodded. "Will do."

Taking a deep breath, Buffy turned back to the front. "Okay. You guys ready?"

"As ready as we'll ever be," Xander confirmed.

With so many walls and features destroyed, it was
difficult to judge their exact location, but after a few minutes of following Buffy the sound of chanting was clear to all of them. "I think we’re nearly there," Willow whispered, "and it sounds like there's more than one of them." They continued more cautiously from that point.

The doors to what used to be the library were long gone, as were the roof, some of the walls and a large part of the floor. The room was only really recognisable by the remains of the check-in desk. Xander turned off his flashlight, leaving it there, and they crept to the lip of the hole in the floor. Below them, in what had once been the basement and the scene of Xander's face-off with Jack O'Toole, stood not one, but three Vahral demons. They were gathered around what looked like a deep fissure in the floor.

"I don’t see any sacrifice people," Willow whispered.

Buffy nodded. "But they must be around here somewhere. The ritual's not finished." She gathered herself in a crouch and added, "And it’s not gonna be," just before she launched herself onto the back of the nearest of the three, knocking it over and causing it to drop the bottle it was holding. Xander jumped down after her, picked up the bottle and rolled away to the
side of the room, out of the way of the fight.

"I've got the blood!" he called to Spike and Willow. Spike sprang down into the basement and found a clear bit of wall to lean against with a good view of the fight. Willow began the slower scramble down the heap of debris on one side of the room, where the floor of the library had fallen in. Xander got up and backed up against the opposite wall, watching Buffy.

After her initial ambush, she was now fighting all three demons at once and managing to hold her own. She kicked one to the ground and backhanded another across the room, but the third seemed made of sterner stuff. It fought back hard. Ducking under a lunge, she twisted around to punch it in the small of its back as it passed, sending it staggering away to fall to its hands and knees on the floor near the hole. It almost toppled in, but caught its balance in time. It didn't get up however, remaining kneeling at the edge of the fissure. It began to chant. The second one rushed at Buffy.

The first one, the one Buffy had knocked down, was getting to its feet and looked ready to plunge back into the fight. Xander glanced around for anything he could use as a club. He'd just spotted a length of three by four
and reached for it, when Willow ran forward. Xander cried out a warning to her, but she lunged at the demon Buffy was fighting, grabbed at the sack of bones it was holding and pulled it from the demon's grasp. Xander watched with his heart in his mouth as she darted away from the swipe the demon gave, in an effort to either get it back or knock her over, or both. A punch in the neck from Buffy brought its attention back to its biggest, immediate threat and Willow got clear.

"I’ve got the bones!" she cried. She tossed the sack over to Xander. "Here!"

He caught it, but the first Vahrall saw the movement and it diverted from its intention to join the fight with Buffy, coming at him instead. In a desperate bid to keep the blood and bones away from it, Xander threw them both back to Willow.

It was stupid, but Xander had a flash memory of two football players grabbing his school bag and tossing it back and forth like that, as he ran from one to the other, desperately trying to catch it. At that moment the Vahrall collided with him, knocking him over. He kicked out and made lucky contact with some part of the demon's body, but it didn't seem to do any good. A punch hit him in the
stomach, knocking the wind out of him. "You’ve got the wrong man, dude," he gasped. "I’ve had a lot of practice at this."

Suddenly the demon let him go and a moment later it was sailing through the air, to crash into the wall. As it began to slide down to the ground, Xander saw the leather thong and pendant around its neck, "That one's got the talisman," he shouted.

Beside him Spike was crouched over, holding his head and Xander realised exactly who had come to his rescue.

Spike's hands dropped and he straightened up. His eyes were ablaze with incredulous joy. "Yeah!" he yelled. "I’m back! And I’m a bloody animal!" He grabbed Xander, pulling him to his feet. "Let's sort these bastards out, pet," he shouted.

Xander tried to wrench himself free, letting out a grunt of pain when Spike's grip tightened on his hand. It was nothing compared to the scream Spike gave, however. Abruptly released, Xander staggered. Spike collapsed to the floor and curled up, moaning.

Looking around, Xander saw that Buffy was still fighting
one demon, but the one who had been chanting by the hole had got up and was running towards Willow who was backed up against the remains of a bookcase, clutching the bag of bones and the bottle of blood to her chest. Xander ran after it, knowing that he wouldn't make it in time. It reached out and got hold of the sack. For half a second it was like watching a bizarre game of tug-of-war, then the demon backhanded Willow across the face and she let go of the sack. The demon gave a victorious cry and spun on the spot, making for the fissure. Before Xander's horrified eyes, it leapt straight into the Hellmouth.

The earth began to shake, "The demons!" Xander shouted. "They are the sacrifice!"

The demon with the talisman was getting to its feet and Xander was the only thing between it and the Hellmouth. He braced himself.

A few yards away, Spike was uncurling from his place on the floor. He pushed himself up and seeing the demon heading for Xander, he let out a roar and jumped to his feet. Grabbing the Vahrall by the back of its jerkin with one hand, he swung around, shifting them both out of line with the position Xander was holding. The demon
tried to pull itself free, but Spike landed a punch to its jaw with his free hand. It stumbled and Spike took the opening to get a better grip on it. He lifted it up above his head and staggered towards the hole.

"No!" Xander shouted.

From across the room Willow echoed his cry. "Spike, not in the hole!"

Spike looked at her, just as he released his hold. The Vahrall fell into the Hellmouth and a few seconds later another, bigger tremor shook the room.

"What?" Spike asked, spreading his arms away from his sides in a questioning gesture. "I was helping!"

Buffy backed towards Xander, still trading blows with the last demon. "Get out of here!" she shouted, over her shoulder. "The building's going to come down!"

Willow was still sitting on the floor with her back to the charred bookcase, where the demon sacrifice had knocked her. She looked up at the remains of the ceiling, apparently assessing the imminence of its collapse. Chunks of masonry were already falling. One landed next
to her, missing her by inches. She looked at it, then at the bottle of blood in her hand. A slow smile spread across her face and she lifted the bottle as high as her shoulder, before smashing it down onto the lump of concrete. The bottle cracked, blood leaking out over the floor.

The last of the Vahralli let out an anguished cry and stopped fighting. Buffy kicked it in the gut and it staggered backwards, hitting the wall. It collapsed in a heap and didn't try to get up. Instead it curled its arms around its knees and started to keen.

A groaning sound from above caught Xander's attention. He recognised it from earlier in the day on the construction site in the aftermath of the earthquake. It was the sound of metal reinforcements shifting under pressure. A huge beam slowly pulled away from the ceiling and began to topple towards him. He dived out of the way, towards Willow who was scrambling to her feet. Buffy was standing alone, looking wildly around, as if searching for more opponents.

"Buffy, over here," Xander cried, even as he reached Willow and helped her steady herself. She looked battered and he figured she'd have a huge bruise on the side of her face by morning.
Buffy reached them and behind her one end of the beam crashed to the ground. Xander looked around, trying to spot Spike. He saw the moment the other end of the beam pulled free of its moorings, hitting Spike a glancing blow to the back of his head on its way down. He staggered and fell.

Leaving Willow in Buffy's care, Xander ran over and dragged him to his feet. "Come on," he shouted. "We have to get out of here."

Spike shook his head, but it looked like he was trying to clear it, rather than disagreeing. Xander looked back and saw that Buffy was helping Willow up into the library. He followed, one arm around Spike's waist, and they scrambled up the pile of broken concrete to join Buffy and Willow next to the check-in desk. More masonry was falling as they ducked out through the hole in the wall where the doors used to be and set off at a staggering run for the main exit.

As they put the Hellmouth further behind them, the school structure seemed to get more stable and soon there wasn't even plaster dust falling from above. By mutual consent, they slowed to a walk.
Buffy helped Willow along with an arm around her waist, while Xander followed behind, doing the same for Spike. They had just reached the corner and were about to turn into the corridor leading to the front doors of the school when Buffy stopped. Xander halted too, to avoid running into her.

"Riley," she said.

Xander stepped back behind the corner and let go of Spike, placing a hand on his chest to keep him still as he poked his head around the edge of the wall to see what was going on.

Riley was approaching from the doorway. "Well, hey! Buffy. And Willow. Jeez, what are the chances, huh?" As he got closer, Xander could see he was dressed in full commando gear, just as he had been in the clock tower. "I was just passing by," he said, awkwardly, "when I thought I heard people inside."

Willow pulled herself free of Buffy's hold and stood up straight although she kept one hand on Buffy's shoulder. "Passing by in your GI Joe outfit?" she asked incredulously.
Riley looked down at himself and Buffy gave a small snigger. "No offence, but you do look wicked conspicuous."

"I do?" Riley asked. "Um, yeah, but it’s..."

Buffy sighed. "Riley, don't. They know. I told them who you are."

"You told them? You told who? You mean, you told Willow? Who else did you tell?"

Slowly, Buffy turned around on the spot. Xander caught her eye. She gave an imperceptible nod as she continued her turn until she was facing Riley again. "Um, I, I told Giles. He's my Watcher. But he's not here, obviously. He got attacked by the demon. So it's just me and Willow, here, on this mission. Umm, but it's all under control now. We got the bad guys and stopped the apocalypse, again. And, and now we're going back to check on Giles and report back, so, um, I think we should get out of here. I'm not sure this structure's all that safe." She put her arm back around Willow, blocking Riley's view of the corridor behind her and began to shepherd her and Riley out. "Do you want to come and meet him?" Xander
heard her ask as they walked away.

Xander turned to Spike. "Well, I guess that's us not invited to another party." He studied Spike's face, noting the bruising and cuts. He wondered if he looked as bad. "We'd best get home. I'll catch up with the news from Giles tomorrow. You look like you could do with some blood and I could kill a pizza. What do you say?"


They started walking slowly in the direction Buffy had taken Willow and Riley. "What new theory's that?" Xander asked.

Spike smirked.

Note: Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episode 4.11 Doomed.
Note 2: The tPart Thirty-One

So Spike's theory had proved correct - he could fight demons, but couldn't hurt humans. In spite of Xander's protests, he'd insisted on testing the idea to the limit. Or, more accurately, testing to find its limits. Not that Xander
minded going out with Spike and standing safely fight adjacent while Spike punched, kicked and staked his way through a nest of vampires. The way Spike contemptuously snorted, "Fledges!" as he brushed the dust off his hands and coat even made Xander smile.

It was his tests against humans that bothered Xander and it wasn't because he was afraid that Spike would actually hurt anyone. Xander had absolute faith in the ingenuity and effectiveness of US technology and as far as he was concerned the case for the deterrent effect of the chip was already well proven. It was the way Spike insisted on conducting a whole range of experiments, from jumping out in front of someone in gameface to actual attempted assault, that he didn't like. He was unwilling to examine too closely whether his reaction to the more extreme ones, which left Spike curled up on the ground, groaning, while his prospective victim stared down at him in bemusement, was embarrassment, or sympathy. It might have been a reluctant mix of both.

After one of the painful ones, Spike could usually be persuaded to go home and spend the rest of the night with blood, beer and a movie, but he was still out the next night, trying something else. It took more than a week to work through his list.
Once he had established the exact limits of what the chip would allow, however, Spike dispensed with Xander's company and Xander, having been witness to every one of the experiments, was happy enough to let him go unsupervised, while he had a quiet evening alone, at home. The only downside was that after Spike's first solo excursion, he was woken up at 4am to let him back into the apartment. To avoid a repeat of that, he left a spare front door key on the kitchen table on his way out to work the next day. It was gone when he got back, which was good because Xander needed his sleep.

Xander wasn't alone in relaxing his vigilance. Giles had stopped asking him to bring Spike over when he went to Scooby meetings and Buffy had long ago given up on her attempts to get military secrets from Spike, having found what she hoped was a better source.

Since he was now pretty well free to do what he wanted, Xander kept expecting him to find a place of his own, but he was always still there, on the sofa, when Xander got up to go to work, and for some reason he also continued to trail along to Giles' place every time a meeting was called.
Xander figured that Spike had decided Xander's apartment was a cushy place to crash. On some level, he thought, he, himself, must also like the company because he never got around to suggesting Spike move out. There was something about having a roomie, he decided, that made him feel grown up and carefree, at the same time. It was like Friends, without the complex emotional attachments.

Meanwhile, in Casa De Rupert, the confirmation that Riley was one of the commandos had energised Giles. He'd started making lists of questions for Buffy to work into casual conversation, in the hope that Riley would spill a few more beans. Buffy wasn't the greatest actress in the world, when it came to words and using them, so Xander had some concerns about the feasibility of the plan. He wasn't at the meeting where Giles suggested it, though, so he just had to rely on the knowledge that Giles knew Buffy's weaknesses, as well as her strengths, and he wouldn't make unreasonable demands on her acting skills in his search for information.

The more Xander learnt about the commandos from Riley, through the things he said to Buffy, from the little that Spike told him of his time in their labs, but mostly from the stories Spike brought back from the bars and
flop houses around town, the less Xander liked the idea of the military in Sunnydale. He didn't mind the fact that they were hunting demons. That he could stand up and applaud. It was the way they went about it.

It was Spike who verbalised his doubts, one Saturday morning. Spike had come back late, just before dawn, and hadn't gone to bed. Xander woke up early for some reason and they ended up sharing a pot of coffee at the kitchen table.

"They have no honour, pet, that's what you're trying to say. The Slayer, she's always fought hand-to-hand. Makes it personal. Shows respect. But the soldiers... they're part of a machine - the same old, same old, military-industrial complex."

Xander frowned. "Buffy sometimes uses a crossbow. And there was the rocket-launcher she used on the Judge."

"Which both fire one, maybe two rounds, and then she has to reload." Spike shrugged. "I use throwing knives. Crossbows and knives, even rocket-launchers, require focus. You have to aim them. It's personal. There's no skill and no respect in mowing down an opponent with an endless magazine of rapid fire bullets, when all they
have is a crossbow or a sword."

From Riley they knew that the official name the commandos used for their operation was the Initiative. Buffy also collected a few of their acronyms, which she recounted to the gathered Scoobies. Xander got huge enjoyment from Spike's indignation at being called a sub-terrestrial. "Am not!" he declared. "I left that to Darla's sire and his generation."

But there were times when a vampire on your heels was not what you wanted. On the morning of Buffy's nineteenth birthday, Xander mentioned that he was going out that night, but he didn't tell Spike where. The chances of Spike gate-crashing the party were too great, in Xander's opinion, and the avoidance of demonic gatecrashers was one of the main aims of the gathering. Buffy's conviction that every Buffy-centred celebration had to be a spectral or demonic disaster had to be quashed and the only way to do that was by presenting incontrovertible evidence - in the form of a party.

It was still daylight when he left to help Willow set up, so he was pretty certain that Spike couldn't follow. Willow had hired a room in the Student Centre and invited all the people she and Buffy knew from their dorm, plus a
few others from class. Getting Buffy there was the most
difficult part and Xander left that to Willow, while he
passed out party hats and drinks.

Whatever she said, Buffy came to tearing into the room
and skidded to a shocked halt. Her hunter's instincts
kicked in quickly, though, and she shoved her stake in the
back of her waistband and spread her arms in one
smooth movement.

"Wow!" she cried, and Xander could almost believe that
she was simply reacting with delight to the gathered
smiles and cheers of "Happy birthday!" that he led and
partygoers immediately echoed.

He walked forward and handed her a cup of fruit punch.
She narrowed her eyes and whispered, "Cruel, Xander,"
but she was smiling too, so he grinned back at her,
unrepentant.

After that she relaxed and threw herself into the spirit of
the evening, talking to everyone and accepting birthday
hugs and kisses.

Once the party had settled into its rhythm, Xander sat on
a bench next to Giles and watched the crowd shift and
circle. They were like a different species, he thought - sleek and well-dressed, confident in their movements and loud in their opinions. He almost wished Spike was there to thrash the guy who was hanging onto the pool table and obviously thought he owned it. Looking across at Giles, he saw the same slightly bored, slightly bewildered expression on his face that he felt must be on his own. In Giles' case the feeling was probably due to age and responsibility. In Xander's, it was just responsibility. The students behaved as if they hadn't a care in the world and had never had to worry about anything. He tried to think himself into their shoes, imagining what it must be like, living off parental support, scholarships and trust funds.

Among the crowd, Willow and Buffy stood out as clearly as Xander and Giles - at least they seemed to, to Xander. Even though she was laughing, Buffy's eyes held a knowledge of choices and consequences that her compatriots couldn't imagine. Then he saw Riley. Three heads taller than Buffy, but not nearly as strong, or as experienced; his eyes also held that inner calm and certainty. Xander started studying faces, playing spot-the-Initiative-member. He decided that it was just as well he hadn't given Spike the chance to come along. Playing with the thought, though, amused him.
Spike would so totally freak them out, even if they didn't recognise him for what he was. He had an air of confidence that was similar to Buffy's, but in her it was tempered by a hesitancy that Xander could only ascribe to her humanity. There was never a doubt that Spike would act without pity or remorse. He wouldn't angst over decisions made, as Buffy did. He wouldn't consider that a human obstacle in his path had a right to be there, or even had a right to be. His amorality was totally different from the black and white view of the soldiers, if they were all like Riley, and light years away from the appreciation of grey that Buffy had acquired, ever since she came to terms with her feelings for Angel in all their complicated glory.

His musings were interrupted by Buffy bringing cake on paper plates. He stood up and took his with a bow. "Thank you, m'lady."

Grinning, Buffy shook her head. "You guys," she said.

Giles tilted his paper cup to her before taking his plate. "Happy Birthday," he said. Switching the cup into the same hand as his plate, he allowed her to give him a hug.
Her eyes were slightly shiny. "Thank you," she said.

Stepping back, Giles gestured vaguely around the room. "Oh, nothing to do with me; you have Willow and Xander to thank for all this, I believe." He smiled down into her upturned face and Xander was struck by the realisation that in Buffy, Giles saw the daughter he'd never had. "Nineteen," Giles marvelled. "It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

Buffy's eyes were solemn. "It really is," she agreed. Then she shrugged off the moment. "Are you having a good time?"

"Yes, of course." Giles glanced around again. "There's a lot of new faces here, aren't there?"

Laughing, Buffy shook her head again. "You hate it," she accused him, "but thank you for coming. It wouldn't have been a proper birthday without you."

Giles appeared touched by the sentiment and Buffy leant in close. "But I promise I won't be offended if you want to leave," she whispered. Looking across at Xander, she added, "Either of you. It can't be much fun, when you don't really know anyone."
Thankfully, Willow bounced over at that moment and distracted her, so Xander didn't have to come up with a reply.

"I see that Riley's here," Willow announced, grinning at Buffy and causing Xander to wonder why Riley had been invited.

Buffy shrugged. "Yeah. He's finally got past freaking out that we know his secret identity and he wants me to go and see their base. I have to talk to Professor Walsh first." She turned to Willow. "Can you believe it?" she asked. "Professor Walsh?"

Shaking her head, Willow agreed. "No. I never guessed. I knew she was smart, and strict," she pulled a face and Buffy made a move, as if she was going to put an arm around her, but pulled back before completing the gesture, "but I never pegged her for the head of a clandestine military organisation."

"I'm going to be secret-identity girl again," Buffy said. "I want to see what they're trying to do..." She cut herself off as a student wandered by on her way to the door. "If I can get a proper look around, inside," she concluded
more softly when the immediate danger of being overheard had past.

Giles leant towards her and lowered his voice too. "This is not really the place to be having this conversation, but do, please, be careful," he begged. Speaking even more quietly, so that Xander had to step closer to hear him, he added, "They might know that you're the Slayer, but they can't possibly know what that means."

The rest of the evening passed slowly, until Giles and then Xander did decide to leave, but it was a success, in the sense that there was no fire, kidnapping, zombie or demon attack. Xander figured they'd broken the jinx and that had been worth both the boredom and the risk.

The next morning, Xander was sitting at his kitchen table drinking coffee and thanking the gods of the working man for Saturdays, when Spike wandered out of his room. Xander looked up from the newspaper. "It says here that one of the tigers at the zoo is ill," he said.

Spike grunted. He looked up and saw Xander's expression. "Yeah?" he added.

"It says that it's pretty banged up. They think it got into a
fight with its mate."

Spike continued to look unimpressed. "Uh huh?"

"It's developed anaemia too."

"So?"

"So, you've not been drinking so much of the pigs' blood lately and you had some pretty bad scratches on your face the other night." He stared at Spike, noticing the shift in his stance. He wondered when he'd got so good at reading Spike's body language, because that was certainly a shift towards defensive. "Why, Spike?" he asked.

Joining him in the kitchen, Spike pulled a chair out from the table, swung it around and straddled it, resting his elbows on the back. "It's a carnivore," he said. "Top of its food chain. If I can't kill humans, that's the next best thing."

"It's dangerous."

"So's living." He caught Xander's eye and his expression was defiant, almost belligerent. "And it tastes better than
demon blood."

Xander folded the paper, ready to put in the trash. "Just don't kill it, okay? And be--"

Spike interrupted. "I have got some self-control, you know?" He slammed his hands down on the chair back and stood up, leaning forward over it to make his point. "Just because most of the vampires you see around here still have dirt under their fingernails, you think we're all the same." Xander stared at him, shocked, wondering why his innocent request had triggered such vehemence. "That's like judging the whole human race on the basis of a bunch of unruly kindergartners," Spike spat.

Because he was crazy and could never resist, Xander said, "But you're all evil."

With an exasperated groan, Spike turned away, "Through choice!" he said, then, more calmly, turning back to face Xander, "I understand the rules of human society. Probably a lot better than you do, since I was brought up when manners still meant something."

Xander wasn't sure how they'd got from tigers to proper behaviour, but he was relieved that Spike had apparently
calmed down as abruptly as he'd exploded. Since Spike could be very informative, if he thought that Xander was really interested, he asked, "So you choose to be evil?"

Spike gave a small, self-satisfied smirk. "I choose to do what I want. What I can get away with. Which is a lot." Sobering abruptly he corrected himself. "Was a lot," he said. As if the need to rethink his tenses had made him reconsider the whole conversation, he paused. "Hang on," he said. "What were you about to say?"

Questions like that always elicited a reflex denial from Xander. They made him feel guilty, even when he'd done nothing to feel guilty about. "Nothing!" he said.

"Yes you were. Earlier, when you were going on about the poor, defenceless tigers."

"I wasn't."

"You were." Spike began to smile. "You were going to ask me to be careful," he said. His face broke into a mocking grin. "Oh, Xander, you do care about me," he said in a stupid high pitched voice.

Xander glared. "No, I don't!"
"Do too. You care. I know you do."

"Do not! I mean, no I don't."

Spike's smile twisted into a sly leer. "Yes, you do. And I know why." He turned the chair around and sat down again, leaning across the table towards Xander.

"Remember the hotel?" he said. "Remember the night I saved you from Angelus and Dru? Remember the Jacuzzi? Remember how good it felt? Wasn't that the best sex you ever had?"

"That was the first sex I ever had. I had nothing to compare it to." Realising that that wasn't a denial, he snapped, "It wasn't even real."

Spike sat back and shook his head. "It was real, alright. The sex was. And it was good. It just wouldn't have happened without the spell."

Xander had no explanation, later, for why he didn't shoot Spike down in flames with a well chosen line about sex with Larry, or Jimmy. It was probably because he didn't think of one. Instead he asked, "Where's all this coming from, anyway? When I helped save your ass from the
Mayor's minions, you acted like you didn't remember me."

Getting up once more, Spike turned away and walked over to the sink, bracing his arms on the edge with his head hanging between them. Xander watched him in silence. There was something arresting about his taut stance that inhibited interruption, even from Xander, the king of the inappropriate mood breaker. After a few moments Spike pushed himself upright and turned around. For once Xander couldn't read his expression. Striding back over to the table, he sat down, leaning on his folded arms on the table. Xander found himself sitting back in his own chair.

"Xander!" Spike said, speaking slowly and clearly. "I didn't remember you. Not until Dru..." He paused, as if to gather his thoughts and started again. "She cast the spell, but then things changed and she got scared. Acathla was threatening to release Hell on Earth. She took my memories. She had a plan, but it all went bugger end up when the Slayer killed Angelus. She forgot she'd done it, in her usual way. Left me with no memory of you, until a few weeks ago."

He was watching Xander, as if waiting for him to make a
decision about something important.

Xander stared at him, not sure what he was supposed to say. His brain was fully occupied with rapid calculations, sifting the timeline of his memories of junior year. "You, you mean..." he eventually stuttered. "You mean, that night... when we met by the mansion and you left the gate open... you didn't know who I was?" Spike shook his head. "Oh man," Xander breathed, "that's scary."

Spike's eyes narrowed and he gave a small huff of laughter, then he sat back and preened under the inverted compliment.

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The non-rising of the demon Prince Barvain was a bust. Buffy was out being spy-girl with Riley and the Initiative, so Giles and Xander sat by the tomb, waiting for him to show. Giles was quiet, even, Xander thought, depressed, following his encounter with Buffy's professor. He hadn't said much about it but Xander got the impression that it hadn't gone well.

Xander, himself, was simply glad of the chance to sit quietly in a place where Spike wasn't, in the company of
someone who was guaranteed not to pester him for reasons why he wasn't being cheerful. Sitting around in graveyards on a Tuesday night would always be pretty depressing, but that wouldn't normally be enough to keep him quiet. He wasn't sure what was wrong with him; he just knew that he was glad it wasn't Buffy or Willow sitting next to him.

Spike had been oddly subdued since the weekend, civil enough in a very un-Spikelike way, but quiet. He wasn't avoiding Xander, but he wasn't teasing him or taunting him, either. Xander was surprised to realise that he missed it. If it had been anyone else, he would have said Spike was worried about something, but a single reference to the Initiative had set off such a diatribe of invective, he was pretty certain that whatever was bothering Spike, particularly, it wasn't that. He also wasn't sure why he was bothered. A quiet Spike should have been a good thing.

Eventually Xander shook himself free of his unprofitable thoughts and roused himself to look around the mausoleum. The whole place looked suspiciously clean, based on Xander's extensive acquaintance with Sunnydale's more salubrious tombs and by Giles' calculation Barvain was late. "Do you think Riley and his
"guys got here first?" he asked.

Giles lowered his book and looked around in turn, playing his flashlight over the floor and taking in the lack of windblown leaves and other garbage. "It's possible, I suppose," he said. He looked at his watch. "It is three quarters of an hour after Saturn's rise." The thought seemed to depress him further. He closed the book with a snap. "Go home," he told Xander. "I, at least, don't have work to get up for. I'll wait a little longer, to be certain, but I think you may be right."

It was when Spike came home, just after midnight the next night, that Xander heard the story. Spike was almost bouncing when he came through the door, more like his normal self than he'd been for days. It being a work day, Xander wouldn't usually have still been up to hear it then, but he'd fallen asleep in front of the TV two hours earlier.

Spike was full of glee for a demonified Giles, a wrecked car and the loss of dignity inherent in projectile snot. At first Xander wasn't sure if he should be horrified or entertained, but Spike's mood was infectious and once Spike had assured him that Giles was safe ("Followed him to the motel and saw him leaving in his old shape. Saw
the soldiers too, so I didn't go near." he felt free to join in with Spike's enjoyment without having to feel bad about it.

Fetching them each a beer, he made Spike tell the story in order and Spike took great pleasure in doing so, from his first meeting with Giles in Restfield, through to chasing Buffy's professor (the witch-bitch, as Spike called her) down the street, to Spike's own undercover work in a bar. When he related the car chase through the Sunnydale streets, however, Xander stopped laughing. "You could have been caught," he protested.

Dismissing his concern with an airy wave of his beer bottle, Spike snorted. "Nah! They never had a chance. Not even with me driving an old crate like that."

Xander went to bed, eventually, torn between amusement at Spike's pleasure and concern for his recklessness.

The next day, when he went to see Giles, he found Buffy already there. That was when he heard the rest of the story - Buffy's almost fatal attack, Giles' survival only courtesy of the knife not being silver, her recognition of Giles, even in demon form, and the Initiative's arrest of
Ethan.

Looking sharply at Giles, Xander thought he saw some guilt in the twist of his lips and his bowed head. Giles looked up and caught him staring so he covered his concern with flippancy. Giving an appreciative whistle, he said, "I never took you for a cheapskate, Giles, but it's just as well you skimped on the silverware, yeah?"

Giles gave him a half-hearted glare. "That is entirely beside the point," he said. "The fact is that this 314 sounds like the focus of potential unrest."

"But Ethan?" Buffy asked and Xander sighed for her clumsy single-mindedness that didn't see where other people's feelings were delicate or raw. "Can we believe him?"

Visibly squaring his shoulders, Giles replied, "Ethan is a rogue, a trickster and not to be trusted with anything of value, but he was never a liar."

Squinting thoughtfully, Xander suggested gently, "He might have changed since you knew him."

"No." Giles shook his head. "He hasn't changed. He
always caved under threat of physical violence and he still does. In any case, I saw the fear in his eyes when he spoke of it."

"I could ask Spike," Xander offered. "He might have heard something."

Which was how Xander learned that Spike had extorted money from Giles for his help. Marching back into his apartment half an hour later, he glared at Spike. "Right, that's it!" he announced, "I'm charging you rent. $200. Hand it over."

Spike looked scandalised. "Rent?" he asked. "For a few blankets on the floor? You've got a cheek."

Xander glared and flicked the tips of his fingers in a give-it-here gesture. "The money you got out of Giles. I want it, now."

Narrowing his eyes, Spike sat back on the sofa and stuck his hands behind his head, apparently at ease with the world. "Want your share, do you?" he asked.

"No," Xander said. "I'm going to give it back to him. Hand it over."
With bad grace, Spike dug in his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. "Spent the rest on fags," he muttered, passing it to Xander.

Xander smiled. "Okay, rent paid for the foreseeable future," he agreed. "Subject to change without warning, if you hustle my friends again." He fixed Spike with a hard look and Spike reluctantly nodded his acceptance of Xander's terms.

However, Spike's words had struck a chord and the next day, after returning the remaining $169 to Giles, Xander went and bought Spike a foam mattress for his corner of floor and a few sheets. Spike was still asleep when he got home, so he stored them in his own room.

He waited until Spike had gone out for the evening before dragging the mattress along the hall and into Spike's room. He cleared away the nest of bedding Spike had laid down, dumping the sheets in the laundry hamper, and put the mattress in its place. Then he looked at the new sheets, neatly wrapped in their sealed plastic bags and lying on the floor next to it. With a shrug, he tore the bags open and made up the mattress, laying the blankets Spike had appropriated on top and
tucking the corners in.

Standing back he gave a nod of satisfaction and went to make himself some supper.

When he got up the next morning, the apartment was quiet, but when he came home from work, Spike was already awake. Xander dropped his tool belt on the floor by the door and gave him a nod in passing, making his way first to his room to shed his clothes and grab his robe, then to the bathroom to shower.

In clean sweats and a t-shirt Xander padded into the kitchen where he was surprised to find Spike with his head in the fridge. He emerged a moment later with a beer in each hand and offered one to Xander, who took it on instinct.

"Thanks," Spike said. When the Xander continued to stare at him, he sighed. "For the bed," he explained. "Was a nice surprise when I got home last night."

Xander shrugged and walked over to the sofa. "The floor's pretty hard to sleep on," he said, lifting the corners of the cushions, hunting for the TV remote.
Spike leant against the side of a kitchen cabinet. "You didn't have to," he said.

"No," Xander agreed. "Ah ha!" He dug the remote out from the back of the sofa and held it up in triumph before finally sitting down and taking a sip of his beer.

With another sigh, Spike asked, "Why?" Xander looked up and Spike sighed again. He was beginning to sound exasperated. "Why did you buy me a bed? Why did you give me a key?" he asked.

"It's just a mattress, Spike. It's not like I bought you a four-poster with silk sheets."

"Doesn't answer my question. Why'd you buy me a bed?"

"Why do you care, why? I just did."

Spike put his bottle down on the work surface and walked towards Xander, hips suddenly loose so he seemed to both flow and strut at the same time. His voice dropped in pitch and volume to a purr that sounded like fur felt under the hand.

"I care," he said. "I don't care about people en masse, I
don't care about most people singular. But the people I do care about..." his lips twisted into a crooked smile that was both teasing and somehow self-deprecating. "Oh, the people I do care about... I give them what they want. I can be whatever you want or need."

Xander was suddenly back in the middle of Saturday night and all the thinking he'd not been doing since then was fresh in his mind. There were some things he instinctively shied away from thinking about, let alone talking about, so he fixed on the least personal objection. Looking up at Spike he said, "That doesn't seem fair, exactly."

Spike's brows drew together slightly and he stopped in his tracks. "Fair?" he asked, sounding nonplussed. "Why not?"

Xander took a gulp of his beer to buy himself some time. Swallowing, he shrugged and asked, "Well, what about what you want?"

Spike grinned and his shoulders relaxed. "I want you and you want me. It's not difficult, pet."

It was like being hit over the head by a clue-by-four and
for a moment Xander reeled under the impact. The entire world shifted a few feet to the left and all his memories shifted with it, so it was like looking at the last few weeks through different eyes. Everything that he'd thought and felt took on a different emphasis, a different slant. He almost said 'yes', right there and damn the consequences, but if they were going to do this, he wanted it to be on the right terms. He wasn't going to use Spike, any more than he was going to let himself be used. "But if you're always being what I want, you'll end up resenting me," he protested, kicking himself as he said it, but knowing it was the right thing to do.

Spike merely looked puzzled. "Why would I?"

"Because if you're always being what I want, you're not being you and eventually you'll hate that."

Spike shook his head slightly. "No I won't. I'll have you and that's what I want. And you'll have what you want."

Recognising a verbal impasse, Xander tried a different approach. "What do I want?" he asked.

Spike started walking again and the slink was back. "I know what you don't want," he purred. Standing in front
of Xander, he took the bottle from his hand and put it on the floor. Straightening up, he held out his hands and Xander placed his own in them, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet, so they were facing each other with eighteen inches of floor space between them. Spike kept hold of his hands. "You don't want to hurt or to be hurt," he said. "You want a lover who gives as much as they take and takes as much as they give. You don't want to be a charity case any more than you want to be used. My wants are much simpler - I just want you."

Still unconvinced, Xander asked, "And you'll change how you behave to get that?"

Spike shrugged. "I don't need to change. I'm a demon, pet. We have simple wants and we..." He broke off and considered Xander. Xander could almost see the cogs turning. He wondered if Spike had the power of thrall, because at that moment he felt pretty thralled up, but then, he reasoned, if he could think that, he probably wasn't.

Spike gave Xander's hands a squeeze. "Dru was my sire," he said, "so she set the pace. She wanted romance and flowers and lace from me. She wanted soft touches and bended knees. Angelus was her sire and he wanted the
wildcat who melted under his fucking huge, manly shaft."

Momentarily distracted, Xander asked, "Did he have...?"

"Did he fuck!" Spike said scornfully. "But that's what he wanted from Dru. From me he wanted the naughty schoolboy and the eager student, and I gave him both. Because all three of those are in me and none of them feels neglected or suppressed if another is the aspect at play. I keep telling you, I'm a demon and demons are not that complicated. We just are. The suitor, the student, the naughty child - they're just different facets. It's the same Spike jewel, just facing you from another side. They're all just me and so is this." He released Xander's right hand, reached out and cupped the back of Xander's neck. "You want someone to make the first move," he whispered. "Took me a while to figure that out. Took me too long to figure a lot of stuff out." He tugged Xander forward and Xander leaned towards him, eyes wide and flicking from Spike's own eyes to his lips and back again. Then their faces were so close together that Spike's eyes merged into one and Xander closed his own as Spike's lips touched his.

Spike's mouth was firm, but also somehow hesitant, and Xander felt his body begin to melt. Spike's left hand
slipped along to the curve of his shoulder and back and those fingers began to stroke gently at the nape of his neck. Xander pulled his other hand free of Spike's hold and laid both hands on Spike's waist. Spike's right hand mirrored the action and Xander groaned into the kiss. He felt his cock harden.

Spike took half a step forward and Xander's hands tightened. A section of his mind was aware of his elbows sticking out, but he didn't seem able to release his hold enough to slide his hands around Spike's back. Leaning forward as he was felt awkward and he needed his grip on Spike's waist to keep himself upright. He shifted his feet in an attempt to get closer, just as Spike did the same, and his left foot stubbed against Spike's right while his right foot almost got crushed under Spike's left boot. Spike pulled back with a hiss of pain.

"Sorry," Xander whispered.

Spike's arm slipped around his waist and the awkward foot shuffle began again, more successful this time, until they managed to occupy the same small space of floor without damage and they were moulded together from thigh to chest.
Spike's lips were back on his, more confident this time and he flicked out his tongue, running the tip over Spike's still, thankfully, human teeth. Spike made a sound halfway between a purr and a growl deep in his throat and his tongue came to meet Xander's, curling around it in a complex dance of slide and prod.

The hand on his neck stroked down the length of his spine and they drew away from each other very slightly. "Want you," Spike whispered. "Want you now. Come to bed, yeah?"

Xander rested his forehead against Spike's, "Yeah," he whispered back. "My bed. Now."

Pulling away he looked into Spike's eyes and Spike looked back, then he took Spike's hand and led him down the hall.

Once he opened his bedroom door, he let go of Spike and went over and sat on the edge of the bed, pulling his T-shirt over his head. He felt the mattress move as Spike sat down next to him and by the time his head was free again, Spike was already bending over, undoing his boot laces. Xander shimmied out of his sweats and boxers and pulling back the covers, shuffled up the bed and crawled
inside. Spike pulled his boots off and dropped them on the floor. He stood up and dragged his T-shirt off. The neckline caught on the edge of his hair and it stood to attention in the aftermath, held rigid by the gel he wore. He took no notice, if he even knew, and concentrated on the button and zip of his jeans, pushing them down and stepping out of them, turning them inside-out as he did so.

It wasn't stylish or classy, but it was real and once he was naked he didn't preen under Xander's appreciative gaze, he simply crawled over to Xander's side and slid under the covers next to him.

Xander got his arms around Spike's shoulders again, pulling him towards him. Spike came willingly, melding his body to Xander's and shuffling over his leg so he lay in the vee of Xander's thighs. For a moment they stopped moving, staring stared at each other, and then Spike lowered his head for another kiss.

As their lips met, Xander groaned at the sudden burst of dizzying heat that ignited in his brain. His own lips parting and his back arching off the bed, pressing his cock against Spike and Spike made a strange, strangled, whimpering sound as he pressed back.
A familiar and long missed tingle began to build in Xander's core as they squirmed and rubbed against each other, undignified and urgent with mounting need. Spike opened his mouth further and Xander felt the messy wetness of lips gone slack against his own. He wrenched his head free and buried his face in the crook of Spike's neck, clutching Spike to him. As Xander began to suck on the skin below Spike's ear, Spike growled again and Xander felt the vibration in his own chest.

Somehow they got a rhythm going, and the tingle grew to a heat that coiled in Xander's groin like a spring. He hardly had time to gasp a warning before the spring released and he arched his back again, freezing in that position as his orgasm hit him, side on like a freight train. He opened his mouth to cry out, but managed to swallow most of the sound, clamping his jaws together on a fold of Spike's skin. Spike did scream then and Xander feared that he'd hurt him, but then Spike began to jerk above him and Xander felt the spurt of more wetness between them.

He unlocked his jaw and collapsed onto the mattress, while Spike allowed his body to go slack, resting all his weight on Xander's chest.
Tentatively Xander put his arms around Spike and rolled them onto their sides. They lay there, face-to-face, while they recovered.

After a moment, Spike grinned. "We need practice," he said.

"Yeah," Xander agreed. "We'll get it right next time."

*Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episode 4.12, A New Man.*

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**Part Thirty-Two**

The evening after Buffy went out on her first proper training exercise with the Initiative, the Scoobies gathered at Giles' apartment. Apparently, Professor Walsh had been impressed by her performance. "She actually said the words," Buffy explained. "She's not big on praise, in class. And later, Riley told me that she couldn't stop talking about this move I made where I
used one of the commandos as a shield to block a tazer blast." She was pacing excitedly, her hands flying as she demonstrated moves. Giles was sitting in his usual easy chair, a mug of tea held balanced on his knee and an expression of fond indulgence on his face.

According to Willow, Riley was also impressed and was awkwardly trying to make a move on Buffy. "Are you seeing a lot of Riley?" Xander asked, casually. "Outside of training, I mean." He was perched on the arm of the sofa where Willow was sitting with her feet tucked under her, so that he could keep an eye on Spike, sitting on the stairs behind her, while he listened to Buffy's story.

Buffy stopped in front of the fireplace. Turning to face him, she gave a small, awkward shrug. "What is this, an intervention?" she asked. Xander shrugged back and Buffy pulled a face. "Maybe a little," she admitted. "But he's useful. He tells me things."

Giles coughed. "Just so long as you're careful how much you tell him," he cautioned.

Looking up from his contemplation of his boots, Spike interjected. "Yeah, 'cause I'm not so keen on him finding out where I live."
Xander saw the dismissive retort hovering on Buffy's lips and got in first. "Actually, I'm not keen on that idea, either. If they find Spike, they might decide to take me too."

He'd meant it as a joke, a simple deflection, but Spike looked up sharply, an arrested expression in his eyes.

"I don't think that we need to be too concerned about that," Giles said. "But it is true that harbouring an HST would place us on dicey ground if they discovered him."

He was studying Spike speculatively and Xander felt the need to intervene again. "And it won't be a problem, as long as he stays out of their way." He turned to give Spike a stern glare and Spike nodded in reply, his eyes serious. When Xander turned back he saw that Giles was watching them both, that same speculative gleam still in his eye. Resting his arm on the back of the sofa, he forced his body to relax and tried to look innocent.

"I haven't said anything," Buffy assured them, returning them to the point under discussion in her mission-focussy way. She walked over to the footstool in front of Giles' chair and sat down on the edge of it. "Riley's a nice
guy, and Professor Walsh is awesome, but I'm not giving away any Scooby secrets until I know more about what they're doing."

Taking a sip from his mug, Giles pursed his lips in a brief expression of distaste, either in response to Buffy's words or because his tea had gone cold as they listened to her debrief, Xander couldn't guess. Putting the mug down on the coffee table, he asked, "So what have you found out? Has Riley added anything useful during your conversations?"

"Oh, I was coming to that. I had the tour." Trust Buffy to wait until after she had described the fight, before coming out with the important news. "I actually went into the Initiative." Her voice became animated again. "I tell you, that place is huge. You'd never believe the size of it." She stood up and began to pace again, as if she needed the physical movement to properly communicate the scale of what she was describing. "They have the coolest gadgets. The entrance is an elevator that works on voice recognition. It's behind a mirror in the Frat House."

Giles sat up straight. "You mean the Initiative base is under the Frat House, under your school?"
"Yep! That's what I mean."

"My goodness!" Giles exclaimed, taking his glasses off but forgetting to polish them. "It must have taken some time to build. I wonder if it was also a part of the Mayor's long-term plans, or whether it was simply a piece of political expediency." He tapped the arm of his glasses against his chin until a cough from Buffy caused him to start and focus again. "Er, yes, so, what did you see there?" he asked.

"Not much. Just the main area, the armoury and a communications station." Buffy looked around, avoiding the corner where Spike was sprawled. "And a big area with demons strapped to tables. It looked like they were doing surgery on them." She looked a bit queasy at the memory and Xander could sympathise. Spike's face was blank. "I got a visitor's pass," she said, fishing a plastic tag out of her pocket, "and a pager." Lifting her sweater slightly, she showed them the small device attached to her belt. "I'm supposed to wear it at all times, so they can reach me in an emergency."

"Or track you," Xander suggested.
Willow looked alarmed. "Oh my god," she said. "Do you think they would?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Giles said. "But since they already know where I live, I doubt we are giving anything away by you wearing it here. I am more concerned by the possibility that it might be bugged."

Willow's eyes got huge and she clapped her hand to her mouth.

"Right, that's it," Spike announced, jumping to his feet. "I'm out of here. What you just said, before you threw in that little bombshell? If they're listening, they already know everything they need." He marched across the room, grabbed his coat from the hook and flung it around his shoulders, somehow managing to get his arms in the sleeves as he did so. Xander took a moment to admire his flair, watching with admiration as he swept out of the apartment in a swirl of billowing coat tails, leaving them all frozen in place with their mouths hanging open.

With a shake of her head, Buffy was the first to pull herself together. "There's a guy, a doctor called Angleman," she said, her voice subdued, in contrast to
her earlier enthusiasm. She looked over at the front door, which Spike had left open. "Professor Walsh said he was an expert on behaviour modification."

Xander stood up. "I'd better go and see if I can find him," he said. "If we're still around tomorrow, I'm betting they haven't gotten around to bleeper bugging." He took his jacket off the hook by the door and shrugged it on. "I'll see you guys tomorrow," he said, adding ghoulishly, "With any luck."

Spike was easily found. He was hanging out in the bushes near Giles' front steps. Xander approached him cautiously. "You okay?" he asked.

"Sure, just peachy," Spike replied. "Stupid bloody Watcher! Crazy, thoughtless bint! If I could, I'd-"

"No you wouldn't," Xander said, stepping right into the shadows of the shrubbery.

"How d'you figure that? You know nothing."

"Because I'd ask you not to?"

"And you think that matters to me?"
"Yes, Spike. I think that does matter to you." He stepped close, into Spike's space, and cupped his face in his hands. "And I'm grateful," he said, pressing a small kiss to Spike's lips. Stepping back before Spike could pull him in, or push him away, he looked around the street. "How about we go and pitch camp on top of that apartment building," he said, pointing at the complex directly opposite Giles', "and keep watch? I have my cell and if the commandos arrive, I'll phone Giles to warn them."

Spike studied his face intently, as if searching for something. "Bloody sure of yourself, aren't you?" he grumbled.

Xander laughed. "What can I say? The power of the Xan-man is legendary. One night with me and my 'fucking huge, manly shaft' and you're all putty in my hands."

Spike gave a snort of reluctant laughter. "Git!" he said, turning and leading the way across the street and around the back of the apartment complex to the fire escape.

Lying on his stomach on the flat roof overlooking Giles' front door, Xander wished only for a pair of binoculars to make the whole stakeout scene complete. Half an hour
after they got there, they watched Buffy leave and Xander took the opportunity to call Giles and tell him they were okay.

"I've checked this phone," Giles said. "It's not bugged. And we've looked in the more obvious places around the house. I don't think they can have had a chance to plant anything here, yet. If they were going to. However, I'm grateful to you for your thoughtfulness. I'll keep you informed if I find anything. Buffy was called away by her bleeper thing. She said she'll check in when she gets home, so I don't think I'll be going to bed soon. Willow is about to leave and-" Giles broke off and Xander could hear muffled conversation in the background before he returned, speaking clearly again. "She'll call me when she gets home."

A few minutes later they watched Willow emerge into the street. She glanced up at their building and gave a small wave, before turning towards Main Street and the bus stop where she could catch the late bus back up to the campus.

In spite of Giles' confidence, they kept watch through the night. Xander didn't think he would feel happy until at least twelve hours had passed.
Once he was assured that Willow had got home safely it was surprisingly comfortable, doing a stakeout with Spike. They talked about movies and TV, arguing about which were the real classics. At one point Xander got up, climbed down to ground level and found a quiet corner behind some bushes. When he came back, if he happened to settle slightly closer to Spike, so their shoulders pressed together, that was purely accidental. Spike didn't pull away.

No soldiers arrived before dawn and by then Xander was ready to believe that they probably weren't coming, but the incident had been a warning and he went to work both tired and thoughtful.

Then it all went belly up, as Spike would say. They were once again gathered in Giles' living room. Buffy had called Giles the previous night, to report how she and the Initiative team had captured a Polgara demon, whatever that was, but her current news was of a far more worrying flavour. It appeared that the professor didn't like Buffy asking questions.

"She said it was nothing. Routine reconnaissance, probably raccoons," Buffy explained, her voice positively
vibrating with anger. "Ha! It was a one-way recon. She so wanted me dead."

Frowning thoughtfully and rubbing his fingertips against his temples, Giles asked, "Is there any possibility that you are mistaken?"

Buffy shook her head. "Those things that attacked me? I saw them in the lab at the Initiative."

"You're certain they were the same ones?"

"You're defending her now? No, I'm not certain. I didn't stop to chat, Giles. But they were the same species and there were two of them and the blasto-gun she gave me went phitt!" She paused in her pacing, suddenly deflated and looked at Giles. "I threw it in a puddle of water and electrocuted them."

Giles smiled faintly. "Well done," he said.

Buffy almost growled, "But if she thinks that's enough to kill me, she really doesn't know what a Slayer is."

"A fact for which we can be grateful."
"Yeah, and I told her so. On her microphone, heart rate monitor thing."

"Ah." Giles shrugged. "Never mind, but it may have been better for her to believe you were dead."

That made Buffy pause, but before she could say anything Willow broke into the discussion. "Did, did Riley know?" she asked. She sounded scared.

Not for the first time Xander wondered if she'd been match-making. She could have been, but if she was, he didn't give her much chance of success. Buffy was still carrying the big yen for Angel and Xander couldn't see Riley as anything but re-bound guy. After this latest development, he'd cut the odds to zilch.

Throwing her hands up in the air, Buffy started to pace again. "I don't know," she said. "He wasn't there. Maggie, Professor Walsh, said they were out on patrol. She's in charge of that. So no, I don't think so." She stopped and turned towards them. With her hands on her hips she was staring at Giles, but Xander didn't think she was seeing him. Her voice was disgusted when she said, "She calls them 'her boys'! What's with that?"
From his seat, on the third stair, Spike said, "You stupid bint! It's 'cause she owns them."

Xander was sitting next to Willow on the sofa so he had to twist around to look at Spike. "That's demon logic," he objected. "It's not how humans think."

"Says who?" Spike retorted.

Ignoring their interchange, Buffy looked at Giles, Willow and then Xander. "You guys think Riley was in on this?" she asked.

Xander turned back to her, but had no answer to her question. Willow just looked miserable. Giles shrugged. "Probably not," he said hesitantly, "but, uh... it's an option we need to consider."

Buffy nodded sadly. "Yeah, I guess."

She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. "We're not safe," she said, her voice tight and angry again. "If they can come after me like that, they could come after any of us."

"Could have told you that yesterday," Spike observed. "In
fact, I think Xander did tell you that yesterday."

It was as if hearing Buffy state the possibility so blatantly, made it suddenly real. The idea that a branch of his own government might want him dead caused a cold, hollow feeling to form in the pit of Xander's stomach. His concerns of the night before had been for arrest and questioning, not murder.

Spike's voice twisted into something nasty and gloating. "If you hadn't been so damned certain your Maggie was so bleedin' awesome and your toy soldier was a nice guy. Don't know where you get off, putting all your mates lives in danger like you do."

The hollow feeling wound itself up into a tight ball of anger and Xander stood up. "Spike!" he snapped. Spike glared up at him defiantly and after a moment it was Xander who turned away. Striving for calm, he looked at the others. "We've been doing this a long time," he said, "and no one ever promised it was safe, so this is no different." Backing up until he was leaning against Giles' desk, from where he could see the whole room, he added, "It's, it's just a different sort of threat and we just need to decide what we're going to do about it."
With her hands clasped together in her lap and her shoulders hunched, Willow looked very small and young, but her voice was full of steely determination when she spoke. "Well, I'm not letting a bunch of military fascists run me out of town."

"Me neither," Xander agreed, although the feeling in his gut made his defiance sound false to his own ears.

"Certainly not," Giles said and Xander was grateful for the calm certainty in his voice.

Buffy was biting her bottom lip. "No offence, Wil, but I don't think that was ever an option."

"And I'm not going anywhere. Not until those bastards undo whatever they did to me," Spike declared. Xander closed his eyes, wishing that Spike would just keep his mouth shut. The way Buffy was acting, she was not going to cut him any slack.

Giles removed his glasses. "About that..." he said. "Spike - lord knows why I'm asking you this but, thinking about your discovery that you can fight only demons, has it occurred to you that there may be a higher purpose..?" He trailed off in the face of Spike's outraged expression.
That seemed to have come out of nowhere. Xander hoped it was an attempt to create a diversion, to allow the tension in the room to fade. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I am merely theorising," Giles explained. "The fact that Spike came to us when he found himself... er... incapacitated. I was wondering if the impact of such a, uh, a rein on his natural instincts, might allow-"

If it had been an attempt to restore calm through speculative debate, it failed spectacularly. Spike interrupted him. "I hear what you're theorising, Watcher, and I'm not having it! I don't care what theories you want to cook up, but the idea of the Initiative as agents for The Powers That Be, is sheer bloody tripe."

"The Powers That Be?" Willow asked. "What are they? You said that like they're something real."

"They are real," Spike said. "But anyone who thinks they'd intervene to steer a vampire towards some so-called higher purpose, is stark raving crazy." He gave a snarl of annoyance. "And even if they did, I don't bloody care," he said. "More interested in what's on our
doorstep than some fucking airy-fairy bastard on a fucking cloud somewhere. More interested in the idea the soldiers might do me a favour and succeed in taking you out next time, Slayer."

Xander tried to catch his eye again and failed. He didn't understand what was going on between Giles and Spike, but he had a bad feeling about it.

"You've got god-awful taste in men," Spike said, redirecting the discussion back to Riley. "Bit of a step down from Angelus, though. He could teach your soldier a thing or two about real torture."

Buffy winced and Giles snapped, "That's enough, Spike!"

"Riley's not my boyfriend," Buffy protested, "and you know nothing about Angel."

"I know a hell of a lot more about your Angel than you do," Spike said. "And I know how you felt about him. I've read your diary, Slayer." Raising his voice at least an octave, he whined, "Angel's such a hunk. Angel's eyes are so penetrating. Eek! Angel's a vampire!" then in his normal voice, "And your spelling's atrocious."
This time Giles stood up. "Shut up Spike," he said, "or I swear to God..."

Xander took a half step forwards. He had no idea if Giles had been trying to irritate Spike but the outcome was the same, regardless.

Spike grinned up at Giles. "What?" he asked. "You'll stake me? Like to see you try, Watcher."

Buffy entered the lists. She stepped up to Giles' side. "Would you like to see me try?" she asked.

Using the banister rail to pull himself up, Spike stepped down from the stairs and settled himself solidly on both feet. He cocked his head on one side. "Well..." he said, his voice mocking. "It would hardly be a fair fight, when I can't hit you, now would it? But you couldn't stop me if I wanted to take you down. It took all the resources of the US military to even slow me."

The atmosphere in the room was hard and brittle with Spike's pent-up frustration, Buffy's anger and the sense of foreboding that had slowly gathered around them all since Buffy's revelation. Xander's own anxiety cranked up another notch in the face of his own helplessness.
Giles' intervention came as a complete shock. "Quiet!" he shouted. Everybody turned to stare at him in amazement, even Spike. With a small nod, he continued more calmly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have allowed myself to be diverted. We have larger things to worry about, right now."

It was not in Spike's nature, though, to allow himself to be intimidated by a watcher. Ignoring Giles, he spoke to Buffy. "I get this chip out," he snarled, "and I'll take you up on that offer, Slayer, and we can have a proper dance." He glanced around the room and finally Xander managed to catch his eye, frowning and begging him to behave. Spike looked back at him, his lips tight, and Xander raised his eyebrows and tried to smile. It was a weak effort, but it seemed to work. Spike raised his chin, his lips twisted into a slight smile of his own and his face smoothing into an innocent expression. Turning back to Giles he said, more mildly, although still with a touch of venom in his voice, "But right now, I'm just here to help." Xander breathed a premature sigh of relief, which hitched when Spike added, "Since you can't do the job alone."

Dragging his glasses off, Giles glared at Spike. Between
gritted teeth, he ground out, "If you want to be useful, Spike, perhaps you would like to go and ask the Initiative what it is they're doing? That would be of real assistance, with the added advantage of maybe getting you killed."

Xander opened his mouth to protest, at the same time as Spike snapped, "Fine!" Glaring right back at Giles, he said, "I've had enough of this. You talk and talk and talk, but you never do anything useful. Bunch of worthless wankers!" and swept out.

Xander pulled an apologetic face, mumbled, "I'd better..." and turned to run after him. When he reached the door he called out, "Hey," to Spike's retreating back.

Spike paused half way up the steps to the street, but didn't turn around until Xander climbed right up behind him.

He didn't look angry. If Xander had to guess, he'd have said he looked tired. "Don't fret, love," he said. "I wouldn't kill her." He reached out and absently tuck a stray lock of hair behind Xander's ear. "She's winding me up, that's all. And the Watcher on top of that. I need to clear my head. I'm just going for a walk, okay? You go back to your friends, I'll come home later."
Studying him dubiously, Xander nodded. "You won't do anything crazy because Giles lost his temper?" Spike shook his head. "Okay," he agreed.

Spike kissed him. "Don't you do anything stupid, either," he said and off Xander's look, added, "I wouldn't want to miss it."

When Xander re-entered the room, feeling immeasurably calmer, it was to find Buffy on the sofa next to Willow, both of them perched on the very edge of the cushions. Giles was sitting in his chair again. "...you're quite right," he was saying. He looked slightly embarrassed. Glancing up when Xander closed the front door behind him, he asked, "Is he gone?"

Xander shrugged. "For now." He took a seat on the arm of the sofa.

Willow glanced up at him with a tight smile. The collective mood was subdued, as if Spike had taken all the life out of the room with him, which was just stupid. Giles half stood, asking, "Tea?" but subsided back into his chair when Xander and Willow mutely shook their heads.
Bracing herself, Buffy slapped her hands down on her knees and straightened her back. "So, can we discuss this calmly now the disruptive element has gone storming off, again?" she asked.

Knowing that it would serve no good purpose to point out that the spark for the disruption had come from Giles, Xander kept his mouth shut. Giles seemed glad to focus back on their original problem. "Yes," he agreed. "We do need to consider our next action." Turning to Buffy he asked, "Have you got any idea what could have happened to make Professor Walsh want to kill you?"

"Maybe you were getting too close to something," Willow suggested.

"It doesn't matter what, or why, right now," Buffy said. "We need to relocate some place where we can stay together. Then we can think about what." She looked up at Xander. "Can we stay with you?" she asked. "You have a spare room and Riley's never been there."

"It wouldn't take much for him to find me," he objected. "I'm probably already in the phone book."

"Maybe," she agreed, "but it's the best we've got. Do you
mind?"

Xander shook his head, wondering what he was going to do about Spike if they all came to stay.

Giles gathered together a change of clothes and drove the girls up to the campus so they could each pack a small bag while Xander went home, in the hope that Spike would be there before him. He wasn't, but by the time the others arrived he had worked out a plan and had even figured out how to browbeat Spike into backing up the story that went with it. As he explained to them, the girls could have the spare room, while Spike would sleep in Xander's room. He offered Giles the choice of joining them or taking the sofa in the living room. He wasn't surprised when Giles opted for the sofa.

Spike still wasn't home when they all went to bed, but Xander being the good host saw everyone settled, then struck a note on the outside of the front door, to warn Spike to be quiet.

He was roused from sleep when a cool body slipped into bed behind him and an arm wrapped itself around his waist.
The thing they had was still so new, that Xander's body was already reacting before his mind had caught up with the idea that he should wake up and enjoy it. Spike's hand began to move against his chest: gentle, tickling strokes of his finger tips, rising to circle his nipple before moving away to idly follow the lines of his ribs. Xander rolled over and Spike's hand slid around to his ass and further, into the crack between his cheeks, brushing the sensitive skin there. Xander sighed softly and grabbed the wandering hand, pulling it back between them. "Giles is in the living room," he whispered. "If we do that, there's no way I'll not wake him."

"Thought you said these walls were thick," Spike said.

Xander snorted. "I lied?" he replied. He ghosted his fingertips over Spike's cheek and across his lips. "Can we save that?" he asked. "Let me..." Skimming his hand down Spike's neck and chest, he curled his hand around Spike's prick.

Spike didn't push to issue. He wrapped his own hand around Xander's cock and began to stroke.

Lying face to face, they didn't kiss; the moment seemed almost too charged for that. Xander watched the yellow
light flickering in Spike's eyes in the dark room. He imagined that Spike could see his face more clearly than he could see Spike's and he felt his lips curve into a smile of contentment. Their hands moved in counterpoint, wrists occasionally rubbing together, and after the tensions of the evening, Xander allowed himself to float on the physical sensation.

When Spike's movements speeded up, Xander matched his pace. The pressure was building, but there was still no urgency to it, he felt a laugh begin to build in his throat and opened his mouth to keep it back. Spike shifted towards him and the kiss was such a natural move that he gasped and came, almost at once. Spike gave two more gentle strokes than pulled his hand away, giving Xander more room to work and running his palm down Xander's flank, without breaking the kiss. A moment later, he groaned and Xander felt the small kick of the flesh in his hand, then wetness spreading over his fingers.

Spike groaned again and rolled himself on top of Xander bringing his hands up to cup Xander's head. He tilted his own head to change the kiss into something deeper, his fingers massaging Xander's scalp. Xander ran his hands up Spike's sides and down his back, to mirror the gentle
clenching movement on the round flesh of his ass.

Spike pulled his head back and Xander couldn't see his expression, but he could hear the smirk in his voice when he whispered, "That works, too."

"Yeah," Xander breathed, rolling over, so Spike fell off him. "You get the wet spot," he said.

Spike grumbled something Xander couldn't hear and reached over the side of the bed to find the towel that lived there. He wiped them both off, and the mattress, then settled down, his back curving naturally into Xander's front, and pulled Xander's arm around his waist, holding Xander's hand to his chest.

Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episodes 4.13 and 4.14 The I in Team and Goodbye Iowa

Part Thirty-Three
Xander was rudely woken by Willow bursting into the room. "Xander, Xander, sorry to wake you, but-" He raised his head from his pillow and peered over Spike's shoulder. Willow was standing frozen in the doorway, her hand still on the knob. "Oh my God!" she gasped and turning towards the hallway shouted, "Giles!"

Giles replied. He sounded like he'd been in the living room, but he was already getting nearer. "What is it?"

It was probably the alarm in his voice that shocked Willow out of her immobility. "Oh my god," she gasped again, in a totally different voice, "Giles!" Spinning on the spot, she stood in the doorway and Xander thought she was hoping to physically block Giles from seeing past her. "Uh, nothing. I, uh, I was just, I mean, I've called Xander and, and I think we should go back in case they've got any more news, don't you? We should wake Buffy, too."

Xander released Spike and rolled over to his side of the bed. He sat up, swung his legs out and leaned down, searching for his boxers on the floor. Spike followed him and curled up around his back, but didn't appear to wake. Giles' voice sounded more clearly from the doorway. "Yes, certainly, but you wouldn't have called me if-" He broke off abruptly. "Oh! Okay, yes, quite," he
said. Xander resisted the urge to turn around and when Giles spoke again his voice was deliberately, and obviously, casual. "Xander, the local news has just been on and we feel it might be important. Where do you keep your teabags?"

"Cupboard above the drainer," Xander replied, dragging his jeans up his legs. He needed a shower, but he needed his armour more. When he stood up and turned around the doorway was empty.

Breathing a sigh of relief for the reprieve, he picked up his dirty t-shirt, pulled it on and went to dig clean clothes out of the dresser. He took his time searching for a clean t-shirt, until he had to face the fact that he was prevaricating. With a sigh he gathered his clean clothes to his chest and, pausing only to hang them over the rail in the bathroom, padded through to the living room.

Giles and Willow broke off their conversation when he appeared, but he simply nodded to them as he passed and went into the kitchen. Pulling tea, coffee and breakfast cereals out of their respective cupboards and milk from the fridge, he put them out on the table. "Help yourselves," he said. "I'm taking a shower before I talk to anyone." As he walked back past Willow, he offered her a
smile that he hoped was reassuring and got a watery grimace in return. He kept walking. "And if you feel like making an extra, giant pot of coffee, I'll be forever in your debt," he added over his shoulder.

He was tempted to stay in the shower for an hour, but it was an impractical plan - no matter what else was going on, they'd still be there with their questions when he came out and he knew it. If it was any one of them, he guessed he'd be the same. He felt a brief stab of anger directed at Spike for the fact that he got to sleep through it all, but if the up-coming inquisition turned homicidal it was maybe as well Spike wasn't there - a staking couldn't be taken back.

Leaving the safety of the bathroom, he took a deep breath and went to face his doom.

The sound of a female voice alerted him to the fact that Buffy was awake and up, and he hesitated on the threshold. "...heard what you said," she was saying, "but... I mean-" She was interrupted by something from Willow that Xander couldn't make out. "I know," she replied. "And I'm not saying that."

Xander thought he should probably feel bad about eaves-
dropping, but he didn't. This was a case where the end justified the means and he needed to know what he was up against. Although he couldn't hear what Willow was saying, he was grateful for the fact that she didn't seem to be crying.

"No," Buffy said. "I know that. I'm just saying that he's neutered, so he can't hurt-" Willow interrupted her with something muted in both volume and tone. "Yes," Buffy replied. "And it's been a long time since Larry." Xander had no trouble hearing her. She had become a lot more assertive and commandery since they blew up the high school and her voice carried well.

He considered that thought and realised that she'd been growing that way during senior year, too. The whole Faith thing was part of it, but so was the complicated mess that was Angel coming back. She spoke again: "Yes, I know that," she said. "Obviously." There was a touch of impatience in her tone, probably because Willow wasn't letting her finish making her point. "All I'm saying," she insisted, "is that Spike's the only guy, other than Giles, he hangs out with."

Xander snorted quietly. So he was desperate. It was better than crazy. Just.
Again Willow said something and this time Xander couldn't hear Buffy's reply. He sighed and prepared to interrupt them when Buffy said one more thing that rooted him to the spot. "No I don't! I think it's a terrible idea! I'm just saying that it's understandable he should have a fling. Spike's a very physically attractive guy." Willow mumbled something else and Buffy laughed. It sounded a little strained, but there was genuine amusement there too. "No way!" she exclaimed. Then, more quietly, but still clearly, she said, "Listen, don't worry. It'll pass. Xander's too sensible to get serious with a demon."

Xander shook his head. How he loved that woman. She'd turned his world up-side down when she entered it. She could be demanding, self-absorbed on occasion and one-eyed in defending her position when challenged, but she was also amazing, wonderful and inspiring. She was brave and loyal, to match her pig-headedness and wise at the most unexpected times. Feeling better for knowing that she was not going to attack him, and even sort of had his back, although she didn't agree with his choices, he stepped into the room.

Willow and Buffy were standing in front of the sofa, Buffy
still in her PJs, and they looked around when he appeared. Willow gave a guilty start so he smiled at her and walked quickly through to the kitchen, where he found Giles hiding.

Giles had made tea and was leaning against the counter drinking it. The smell of freshly made coffee filled the air and Xander made a bee-line for the pot. He poured himself a mug and when he turned around, Buffy and Willow had joined them.

"It could be a spell," Willow said.

Taking a sip and giving himself a moment to enjoy it before all hell broke loose, Xander shook his head. "It's not a spell."

"It was before," Giles observed. "And I blame myself for not remembering that." One look at his face made Xander wish himself back in the bathroom.

"Giles," Xander said. He could hear the slight whine in his voice and coughed before trying again. "Giles. It's not your fault. Any of it. It's not anyone's fault. It's not a fault thing."
Giles' tea mug paused on its way to his lips and he frowned. Placing the mug carefully on the counter next to him he folded his arms. "Why Spike?" he asked, going on to state the obvious: "He's a killer."

That was the big objection and Xander had no answer for it. The conversation was not going the way he'd expected. He'd expected anger and tears. He'd expected to be able to get angry himself and protect himself behind a shield of self-righteous indignation. His entire strategy, developed while he was washing the residue of Spike from his skin, was based on the idea that Willow would cry, Buffy would be angry and Giles, Giles would be implacable in his disapproval. Buffy's tolerance had cut the ground from under him, leaving him with nothing.

"Not at the moment," he agreed, "and before you say anything," he held up his hand as if to fend them off, "I know that's not an excuse. I'm not trying to make excuses, because I don't have anything to excuse."

He turned to Buffy. There was a speculative expression on her face. "Except to you," he agreed, looking her in the eye.
Buffy nodded acknowledgement. "Yeah," she said casually. "Hypocrite, much?"

Willow interrupted. "If it's magic, can you get it off?" she asked, looking at Giles.

"If it's magic, I might, with time." He smiled slightly and corrected himself: "We might." Turning back to Xander his voice hardened. "Why?" he asked.

And Xander was stumped. "I don't know," he admitted. He tried to smile. "He's sexy. And he likes me. I don't know why, but he does. And he gets me. And," he looked around at them, realising he'd been drawn off-track, "why am I having to explain myself, anyway?" He concentrated on Giles and Willow. "Did you ask Buffy these questions, when she was dating Angel?"

"You didn't like Buffy dating Angel," Willow pointed out.

"I was jealous," Xander agreed. "Do you think I haven't thought about that? But after the spell in junior year, I never said anything against Angel, only against Angelus."

"That's true," Buffy acknowledged.
"Is it a spell?" Willow asked again.

"We could do a test," Giles said. "I think that would be reasonable."


He waited until Giles had nodded his agreement before turning to the girls. "So, any other questions about my sex life before we move on to the important stuff, like why we're all hiding out here, maybe, or whatever it was that made Willow come and wake me?"

"Yes, quite," Giles agreed. He glanced over at the kitchen clock. "The news will be on again in five minutes. Why don't I make some more tea and we can see if they have any new information?"

Xander refilled his mug and as an afterthought picked up the coffee pot and took it with him into the living room. Willow and Buffy followed, Willow hovering in the kitchen walk-through, while Buffy took one look at the coffee pot and went back to the kitchen for mugs, sugar
and cream. Xander put the pot down on the coffee table and sank into the sofa to wait for the local news bulletin to start.

When it did, it opened to a smartly dressed woman who looked straight into the camera and it took no great intelligence to realise that the first item was the one that had got Willow and Giles so anxious. In a cool voice that somehow also seemed to be full of suppressed excitement, she announced the murder of a child and switched immediately to a reporter on the spot.

There weren't many details. The camera panned across a road full of flashing lights and the reporter tried to make the most of what they had. "Seven year old Toby Fletcher's body was found in the early hours by a jogger in the woods above Elm Street," he announced, "and a source in the coroner's office tells us that the boy was stabbed. Police have not yet named a suspect and the killer is still at large. Back to you Claire."

Coming out of the kitchen with his fresh mug of tea, Giles shook his head. "There's less there than there was before. Someone must have got to them and made them tone it down."
"The Sunnydale cover-up machine rolls into action," Xander agreed.

"The other report said that the body had been mutilated," Willow said, "and he'd been stabbed with something large."

Buffy had sat next to Xander on the sofa. "Spike?" she asked, incredulously, but Willow's comment caused her to turn back to the room. "Wait," she said. "The Polgara demon had a skewer in its arm and Professor Walsh insisted we bring it back alive."

Eyes widening incredulously, Giles asked, "I was simply thinking that we had another denizen of the hellmouth on the loose, but are you suggesting that she sent it after you?"

Buffy nodded slowly. "And it got distracted." She hunched forward in her seat, her eyes fixed on nothing. "How could she?" she breathed.

In a sudden burst of motion she jumped to her feet, as if she couldn't bear to sit still. Marching towards the spare room, she announced, "I'm going to get dressed and I'm going to the crime scene to see what I can find out. You
guys research the Polgara demon. I want to know where it is." Looking back at them from the doorway she added more calmly, but with great deliberation, "When I find it, I'll make it die in ways it can't even imagine.

"I'm coming with," Xander said, getting up. Buffy looked at him, "I'll take a day off work." He forced himself not to fidget under her steady regard, until she shrugged and turned away. Taking that as agreement, Xander went to the phone to call in sick. There was no one there, but he left a message on the answer machine before going back to his room for his socks and shoes.

Bending over the bed, Xander gave Spike's shoulder a shake. "Spike," he urged. "Wake up."

Spike opened his eyes. "What are you doing up?" he mumbled. "It's the middle of the day."

"Houston, we have a problem. And while I don't think Giles would come in here and stake you in your sleep, I don't feel like risking it, so wake up."

A slow grin spread across Spike's face. "Get an eye full, did he?" he asked. "Told you not to do anything stupid."
"Yes, and he's not happy. And it's your fault for climbing into bed with me. You should have known what would happen."

"I'm not ashamed of you. If you wanted to keep it a secret, you should have told me."

"And I'm not ashamed of you either, but Giles is not happy and I don't want to come home to find you spread across my sheets doing an impression of the dustbowl, so get your ass in gear so you can dodge if you need to. I have to go out." He pulled away before Spike could say anything more and walked out of the room, carrying his socks and shoes.

Buffy was apparently still getting dressed, but Willow was picking up her bag and shrugging on her coat. "I might have an idea," she said. "I'll see you guys later."

She was gone before he could ask what she meant. When he looked at Giles, Giles shook his head, "I don't know, she didn't say. Something about a girl at school and a spell to locate demons." Turning away, he walked back to the kitchen and picked up the kettle to fill it again.
Xander pulled on his socks and shoes before following him. "Umm, thanks for backing me up back there, with the divert," he said.

Giles busied himself with rinsing his mug and finding a clean teaspoon, but just when Xander had decided that he wasn't going to say anything, he turned and looked at Xander sombrely. "I'm very disappointed," he said. "Of everyone here ... you were the one... I thought you were wiser, had learnt more than this suggests." He stopped and took a breath; he almost seemed to give himself a shake. "But you were right, we do have more important things to worry about at the moment than your ill advised fling with a neutered vampire." The sound of a door closing interrupted him and he looked past Xander to the living room. "If you're going with Buffy," he said, "you'd better go. Try not to get into any more trouble."

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There was an ominous quiet about the streets. It was not the eerie quiet of the day The Gentlemen stole everyone's voices, but a tense, waiting quiet, as if the residents of Sunnydale were holding their collective breath. As Buffy and Xander walked towards the town centre, they saw the occasional pedestrian and private
car, but there didn't seem to be nearly as much traffic as Xander would expect on a normal weekday morning.

Turning a corner they got a possible explanation for why. Ahead of them a small convoy of military vehicles was pulled up at the side of the road. On the sidewalk, a soldier was holding a gun on an elderly couple who cowered away from him. Another soldier, an officer, was in the old man's face, shouting. Buffy broke into a run and Xander did his best to keep up.

The officer was holding some sort of device which he ran up and down the man's body from a distance of about twelve inches. "Stand still," he ordered.

Buffy interrupted as soon as she got close enough to be heard. "Hey, leave them alone," she shouted. "What are you doing?"

The officer turned on Buffy. "Stay out of this," he snarled.

"What are you doing to this man?" Buffy asked again.

They were closer now and Xander could see that the couple were scared but didn't appear to have been
physically harmed.

"Nothing," the officer said. He turned back to the couple. "You can go." It was more like an order than a pass.

The man immediately took his wife's arm and they hobbled off as fast as they could manage.

Xander had bent over to catch his breath, resting his hands on his thighs, but he looked up at this. "Are you crazy?" he gasped. "You can't just stop people in the street like that."

The officer hardly spared him a glance. He understood who was the dangerous one of the two civilians challenging him and he kept his attention on Buffy. Xander guessed that he knew who she was from her brief tenure as an official visitor to his command. "We can and we will, until the threat is contained," he said, pointing his detector at Xander. The soldier redirected his rifle towards Xander and Xander stood up straight, feeling his back stiffen with apprehension. The officer looked at the screen on his device and gave a grunt. "He's human," he said.

"What threat?" Buffy asked.
Having apparently verified Xander's humanity, the officer lost interest in them. "Get out of here," he ordered, walking towards the vehicle at the head of the convoy.

Buffy looked like she was going to continue to argue with him, but Xander grabbed her arm and held her back. "We need to report back to Giles," he urged.

She pulled free of his grasp, but made no further attempt to follow the officer to his jeep. "No, we need to see if there are any clues in the woods and we need to find Riley," she said. "He'll stop this madness. He has to."

"Okay," Xander agreed, "but I'm not letting you go alone."

"Xander," Buffy said. She was still watching the soldiers and her voice was firm. "You should go and report back and see if any of this," she waved her arm to indicate both the army vehicles and the scene they'd just witnessed, "has made it onto the news yet. I don't mean to be harsh, but what can you do to help here?"

"I can be here," he insisted stubbornly. "If any of the soldiers was in on a plot to kill you... It'll be more difficult
for them to do anything with a witness. So if you won't go back, let's go for a walk in the woods."

The military convoy pulled away and the elderly couple turned the corner at the end of the street and disappeared from sight. Buffy looked up into Xander's face, her lips pursed as she studied him. He straightened his back and did his best to stare her down. Eventually she nodded. "Okay," she agreed. "But stay behind me and let me do the talking if we run into any more of them, okay?"

Xander nodded back. "Okay," he agreed.

It only took ten minutes to reach the bottom of Elm Street and begin the climb towards the woods. After another ten they rounded a bend, passed a number of police cars and topped a small rise.

Ahead of them stood another figure in full combat gear, rifle held at rest. It was Riley. "Buffy," he said flatly when they drew close, "and Xander."

Twenty yards behind him a couple of men appeared from the trees carrying bags of equipment and loaded them into a police van. The back door was slammed shut and
Riley turned his head sharply to watch.

Buffy stopped walking and so, so did Xander. "Hey," she said.

Riley didn't respond. It was as if he'd used up all his limited politeness in his abrupt greeting. He looked at them impassively.

"Look, I'm sorry about yesterday," Buffy continued. Xander could see that Riley's attitude had surprised her, but she persisted. "I was a bit shaken up by Professor Walsh trying to kill me."

Hitching his rifle in a seemingly casual move that left it pointing only slightly off to their right and in a position nearer to ready, Riley spoke, his voice almost equally casual, "Forrest said you were using me to infiltrate our operations," he said. His voice became harder and more interrogatory when he asked, "Are you a spy?

Xander wanted to laugh, but Riley seemed too on edge. Buffy took a step backwards. "I was trying to find out what you were doing," she admitted, throwing a perplexed glance at Xander.
"But not spying for anyone," Xander said. "Not spying for the enemy, or for a foreign government. Just spying for herself."

Riley ignored him, keeping his eyes fixed on Buffy's face. "Maggie, Professor Walsh, she's dead," he said.

It was like all the jigsaw pieces suddenly fell into place. Xander looked at Buffy, but she seemed to be stuck on shock. He remembered, belatedly, that she had known and admired Professor Walsh, before Walsh had tried to kill her. "What? What happened?" she asked.

Riley's face was cold. "That's classified."

"Classified?" And in some places she was way ahead of him. "Oh, you mean the Polgara. It got her and escaped. Didn't it?"

Reluctantly Riley nodded.

"I'm gonna find it," Buffy swore. "I'm gonna find it and destroy it.

Riley half raised his gun, but in doing so aimed it further away from them. "No!" he ordered. "Leave it to the
professionals."

Buffy looked at him in amazement. "You just don't get it, do you?" she asked. "I'm the professional here. You and your people are the civilians."

Riley's shoulders tightened and his expression hardened, but he kept his rifle pointed towards the trees. After a moment of impassive staring, he turned and walked away. Buffy watched him go, looking slightly lost. "I kinda liked him," she observed, inconsequentially Xander thought, until the sense penetrated.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The police van drove past them, heading back towards town and from over the rise Xander heard the other vehicles start their engines too. He and Buffy were left alone with the road, the trees and the receding view of Riley's back.

The crime scene told them nothing. It was in a clearing in a hollow, only a few yards from the road, surrounded by trees that were dense enough to block the view of any passing motorist but spaced widely enough to allow easy passage. There was little undergrowth and the bare earth
was scuffed and dry. The body had been taken away and
the forensics team had obviously scoured the area.
They'd left nothing but the flimsy yellow tape that they
always left, like an official tribute to the life that had
been taken. Xander and Buffy cast around, in hope of
finding something, but he was not surprised when they
failed.

They were about to leave when a man stepped out of the
trees at the top of the low ridge. Standing above them
with the morning sun behind him, he was in silhouette.
Big and bulky, he stood with his feet apart like a soldier
at parade rest. He made no hand gestures and he didn't
shrug or fidget when he said, "I've been thinking about
the world." His voice carried across the clearing, the tone
deep and thoughtful, and the incongruity of his words
sent a shiver down Xander's spine. "I wanted to see it.
Learn it. I saw the inside of that boy and it was beautiful."-
Although horrified by what he was saying, Xander wasn't
surprised. He was surprised at how unsurprised he was.
The man was still talking. "But it didn't tell me about the
world. It just made me feel."

He stepped forward, walking down the slope towards
them. Beside Xander, Buffy gave a small gasp as he came
clearly into view and she said one of the strangest things
Xander had ever heard: "I recognise that arm."

A part of Xander admired her for her ability to form any sort of sentence. He was speechless in the face of the monstrosity before them.

He had the form of a man and half his face looked human, as did his fatigue pants and army boots, but the other half of his face was green and his upper body was a badly made patchwork of green, pink and brown flesh and metal. He raised his left arm, twisting it thoughtfully and looked at it as if he had never seen it before. He flexed the fingers and a long spine projected forward from his wrist. About two foot long, it appeared with enough speed to suggest powerful spring loading and a deadly impact. "Yes," he said, his voice still calm, containing a note of innocent wonder. "It comes from a Sub-T:67119, Demon class, Polgara species, captured three nights ago."

"You're 314," Buffy said and Xander was more than willing to second her on the wonder and horror in her voice.

"I am a kinematically redundant, biomechanical demonoid. Designed by Maggie Walsh," the monster
stated. "She called me Adam and I called her Mother."

"She pieced you together from parts of other demons?" Buffy asked.

Adam tilted his head, regarding them both. He raised his left arm again and looked at it, then his right which was mostly brown and scaly. "And man. And machine. Which tells me what I am, but not who I am."

"And you killed her."

It was as if he hadn't heard. "Mother wrote things down. Hard data, but also her feelings. That's how I learned that I have a job here. And that she loved me."

"Why are you telling us this?" Xander asked.

Looking up, Adam focused on Xander for the first time and it was like being studied by a robot. A particularly freaky and evil robot. "Because I wish to know what you are," he said, still in that calm, unemotional tone.

"Get back, Xander," Buffy ordered.

Adam started walking slowly towards them again and
Buffy ran to meet him. She launched a punch at Adam's midriff. Adam didn't even flinch. He backhanded her across the face, so fast that Xander barely registered the movement, sending her flying high across the clearing to crash into the ground. Xander didn't think he'd ever seen anything get past her guard so quickly and with so little apparent effort.

Adam lurched towards her. He walked very clumsily for someone who was so fast and accurate with his arms. Xander ran forwards, unsure what he could do but determined to intercept. Adam's hand came out of nowhere and a moment later Xander was on his back, too, the breath knocked out of him.

Lifting his head off the ground he watched Buffy as she began to move. She rolled down the slope, enough to get her hands and feet under her, then pushing with her arms, sprang upright again. She launched herself towards Adam, landing a powerful looking round kick to the side of his chest. Adam hardly rocked under the impact. He looked at her and smashed his fist into her face. She retaliated with another punch to his midsection and Xander thought she bounced off, for all the effect it had. The hand Adam had used to punch her slammed down and caught her squarely on the shoulder. She buckled
under it and almost fell, but managed to hold her feet.

Ducking around and away to the side, dancing out of his reach, she yelled, "Xander, get up and get back."

Xander did his best to obey. His head was foggy and his ribs hurt, but he managed to roll over onto his front and get to his hands and knees. Using a tree as a climbing frame he got himself onto his feet. Turning towards the clearing again, he saw Buffy land another punch, which achieved nothing.

Holding one arm around his ribs, Xander began to stagger down towards them. "No, get back," Buffy shouted, her momentary distraction rewarded by another punch that sent her reeling.

She stumbled out of reach until she was able to find her balance again and danced around Adam, He simply turned slowly on the spot, following her movements. She was favouring one leg slightly and blood was pouring down her face from her nose. In spite of that, she managed to land another kick straight into the ugly join between two obviously different demon parts, this time making him stumble. In response, he lashed out with the arm that held the concealed spike and she ducked under
the swipe which was clearly aimed at her head.

Recognising that his presence was worse than useless, Xander scrambled up the slope towards the road. It was empty, but a quick glance back at the fight showed him that he needed to do something fast. Adam hit Buffy again, and again she flew through the air to slam into a tree. Xander turned back to the empty road, raised his arms above his head, waving, and shouted, "Over here, quickly, please. Over here!"

Below him, Adam stopped and looked up at him. Buffy pushed herself away from the tree trunk and with a quick glance back at Adam, started to run up the hill towards Xander. Xander resumed his yelling, "Yes, over here. Thank you!"

Buffy reached his side, panting, and he turned back to look down into the hollow. It was empty.

*Note: Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episodes 4.13 and 14, The I in Team and Goodbye Iowa.*

*erm Rozzers is a late 19th century, London slang word for the police.*
Part Thirty-Four

Looking back, it was almost unbelievable to Xander that he had actually drooled over Jonathan's swimwear calendar. Spike said that he'd decided he wasn't going to believe it, because the memory was too painful. Not that he'd been any better - he'd suggested they kidnap Jonathan.

But at the time, it was real. Proof, once again, that spells did the wackiest things to your head. At the time, Jonathan really was a superhero and the Scoobies really did run to him for help and advice with everything from their love lives, to the monster that was menacing the town. A week later, Buffy was still seesawing between rueful amusement and total mortification over her sidekick role in Jonathan's perfect world.

Of everyone, it was Tara and Willow who got off most lightly, although Tara blushed adorably when Spike made a remark about Jonathan, in passing. The remark was aimed at Xander, but he was way beyond blushing by that point.

Most of the town went straight into denial as soon as the spell was broken and Xander wished that he had that
refuge, but some good had also come out of the incident.

One good thing was that the general re-set of reality that was the essence of the spell, included the return of his friends to their own homes and dorm rooms. Xander's apartment was bigger and far less fraught when Buffy, Willow and Giles were not sharing the space with Spike.

Another good thing was the information Jonathan had provided, after he was invited to consult for the Initiative. When he called a meeting at Giles' apartment, he brought blueprints.

Spreading the plans out on the cleared desk, he leafed through them until he found one that looked a bit like the anatomical drawings Xander remembered from Biology class at school. "I present, Adam," he announced. "I pulled some of Professor Walsh's original design schematics."

Adam's skeletal structure was labelled with terms such as 'Peripheral Nervous Electropath', 'GTZ Capacitor' and 'DXR Chip'. "His power source is not biological at all," Jonathan explained, pointing at a spot in the centre of Adam's chest. "There's a power pack here."
Leaning forward to see over Jonathan's shoulder, Xander wasn't trying to cop a feel, really. He looked at the complex of bones, muscles, wires and black-box units in the drawing and a thousand Sci Fi references jostled for position on his tongue. He managed to bite them back. "That does not sound good," he observed, adding, after Spike slipped an arm around his waist and hauling him away, "How long will it last? I mean, does he need to find an electrical outlet to get a recharge every night? If we staged a city-wide power outage, would that help?"

Shaking his head, Jonathan placed both hands on the table and bent forward to study the plans. "No," he said. "The design attempts to hide it, but I believe that inside the power pack is a small reservoir of Uranium 235." He straightened and looked around the room, catching their eyes, one at a time. "That means that his 'charge' will essentially last forever. In addition, his higher nervous system appears to extend into this area," he said, pointing to another part of Adam's chest, "which also means that cutting off his head is useless. To kill Adam we will have to annihilate him completely."

Buffy looked suitably sombre. "First we have to find him," she said.
With his arms around Xander's waist, Spike rested his cheek against Xander's shoulder. "He's in a cave, up above Elm Street," he said.

"How do you know that?" Buffy demanded, turning on him in an accusatory swirl of frowns and flying hair.

Spike remained supremely relaxed. "Went and made a deal with him, didn't I?"

Buffy actually growled and took a step towards them, but halted when Jonathan laid a restraining hand on her arm. "But not to betray us," he said with amazing certainty considering Spike's history.

Xander could feel the power of Spike's smirk, even if he couldn't see it. He shrugged himself free of Spike's hold and turned to face him.

Spike's eyes settled on his face. "No, pet," he said. "I wouldn't do that. I marched in and demanded he took the chip out." He grimaced. "Fat lot of good that did, but he knew about me being here. Said I was mooching off you."

"You are," Xander agreed with a grin.
"Am not. Earned my keep tonight, with this." If it was possible to swagger without moving, Spike did it. "He's cold and clever," he said, "but he doesn't understand vampires. Knows all the facts, but doesn't understand a thing."

Jonathan smiled. "Thank you, Spike. Having a contact Adam trusts could be very useful."

"Not sure trust's the right word," Spike objected.

"Maybe not, but I hope you will be able to gather some useful intel." Turning to look at the rest of the Scoobies, he said, "This could make the difference between success and failure."

"Did you actually find out anything useful on this excursion?" Giles asked. He looked, Xander thought, as if he was trying not to be impressed by Jonathan's obvious approval, but couldn't help being influenced. Although, Xander also admitted to himself, he could be adding wishful thinking into his reading of Giles' expression.

Spike shook his head. "Nah, he's being cagey. Did say he'd be needing heavy casualties on both sides, though."
And he wants you in the thick of it," he added, nodding at Buffy.

"Both sides of what?" Xander asked.

"The war," Spike said.

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The way Jonathan made Xander feel good about himself was real too. And the way he made Xander feel about Spike. It wasn't anything Jonathan said to Xander that really made the difference; it was something he overheard Jonathan say to Spike.

They were in the Bronze and Xander had gone to the bar. The club was crowded, because of a rumour that Jonathan might do a spot, so he had to wait before he got served. As he wound his way back to the table he saw Jonathan, resplendent in a white tux and black tie, standing next to Spike's barstool, leaning with his elbow casually up on the table top.

They were deep in conversation and Xander was within three feet of them before he heard what they were saying. He was so close he could smell the cologne
Jonathan wore, wafted to him on the air-conditioned breeze. "I don't know," Spike said. "He doesn't seem serious. He's cocky and confident and that's not the Xander I remember."

Xander stopped walking and listened.

"He's grown up," Jonathan replied. "He came out of the closet in high school, remember; that's never easy. If it wasn't for Larry, he might not have made it. You should be grateful to Larry, instead of resenting a dead guy."

Xander could imagine the expression on Spike's face because Jonathan took a half step back and held up his hands in mock surrender (because Jonathan would never surrender for real). His eyes flicked up and caught Xander's and he gave a tiny nod of acknowledgement.

Spike moved, as if he was about to turn around and Jonathan looked back up at him. "Puns aside," Jonathan said, recapturing Spike's attention. "Why does that even matter to you?"

"I'm a demon. Demons don't share and demons don't change," Spike growled.
Jonathan laughed in that way that only later Xander would recognise as being irritating. "The only reason you don't change is because you're so flexible, you don't need to. Vampires are unique like that."

He paused thoughtfully, as if he was weighing up what he wanted to say next. "You have to remember that you were both under a spell before," he said, eventually. There was something in his voice that Xander couldn't identify, something wistful. "It wasn't really real, for either of you." Placing a calming hand on Spike's arm, when he jerked as if he was about to stand up, Jonathan shook his head. Spike subsided back onto his stool. "But he's with you now," he said. "And that means something. Something very real. You should relax and accept it for what it is." He paused again, turned to pick up a champagne flute from the table and took a sip. Spike sat still, waiting for what he would say next.

"If he's behaving, sometimes, as if he's taking you for granted," Jonathan asked, "have you considered the possibility that he finds it just as difficult to believe that you care about him?" Again, Spike's head jerked, in an abrupt negative, but Jonathan's free hand was back on his arm so he didn't move. "You're a vampire," Jonathan explained, "and all he knows about vampires is what he's
He's being very brave, being with you in front of all his friends. Braver than Willow is, bringing Tara into the group." Spike gave a snort, but Jonathan ignored it. "He's acting on trust that you are what he believes you to be," Jonathan said. "If he has to test that occasionally, you of all people, should understand his need."

Spike gave a small nod and Jonathan put his glass down and leaned against the table, looking calm and relaxed. He turned his head slightly and caught Xander's eye past Spike's shoulder. "What do you feel for Xander?" he asked, looking back at Spike.

There was a pause, but Jonathan just waited, his eyes fixed on Spike's face. Eventually Spike replied, "As soon as Dru returned my memories, I came straight back here. I had to find him. I'd do anything for him. Anything he asked."

Jonathan caught Xander's eye again and smiled. Xander shut his mouth, which he suddenly realised was hanging open. Looking back at Spike, his head cocked to one side, Jonathan asked, "Do you love him?"

Spike sat back on his stool. "I never said that," he protested. "I never used the L word."
"I'll take that as a 'yes' then," Jonathan agreed with a chuckle. "Have you let him know that?"

Gathering his coat tightly around himself, Spike nodded. Xander had to strain to hear him when he muttered, "I told him I could be what he wanted."

Jonathan regarded him with a slight frown, his body language broadcasting how seriously he was taking his role of relationship counsellor. "You told him you could be what he wanted," he said and Xander knew he was repeating Spike's words for his benefit. "And did he understand what you meant?" he asked.

There was more than a hint of indignation in Spike's reply. "He had to. I told him straight out."

Pushing his glass out of the way, Jonathan turned slightly and put his elbow up on the table top. Xander felt a momentary pang of envy for his cool. "People can't always see what's right in front of them," Jonathan said. "And they don't always understand what they hear." He gave another soft chuckle. "Or, to be more precise, they don't always hear what people say." Pausing, as if he was allowing Spike time to absorb that pronouncement, he
glanced around the club at the crowds who were studiously giving him space to have his conversation with the weird punk guy. He turned back to Spike again. "There's a filter in the human mind that interprets what we hear and that filter is shaped by all the other things we've ever been told," he explained. "Xander wants to believe in you, but he doesn't understand that, although you don't care about abstracts, you can still choose. He thinks that being evil is a permanent state of being, hard wired into you, and that only the chip is holding you in check."

Spike sighed. "So how do I convince him?" he asked, his voice dull and flat.

"I think you already have," Jonathan replied giving Spike's arm a last pat before, leaving his half drunk glass of champagne, he walked past him, towards Xander.

Spike twisted on his stool to watch him go and saw Xander standing two feet behind him. If vampires could blush, Xander thought, he probably would have.

Taking pity on him, Xander nodded to Jonathan and went over to the table. Putting his soda and Spike's beer down, he placed his hands on either side of Spike's face,
cupping his cheeks. "I get it," he said. "I do. I didn't, but I do now." Leaning forward, he dropped a kiss on Spike's lips. Spike's hands came up to hold Xander's head and he pulled Xander into a deeper kiss. It was perfect. The fact that his friends only reluctantly accepted Spike, for his sake, the fact that they thought he was totally crazy, didn't matter. Spike was Spike and Spike would do anything for him. Spike loved him and that was amazing; so wonderful that he knew he'd make them accept him. He slipped his hands around Spike's neck and stepped forward between Spike's knees. Spike's hands slipped down his back to his waist and pulled him closer and his legs snaked around Xander's thighs, his heels locking around the backs of Xander's knees to hold him there. Behind them there was a muted, slightly raucous cheer, but they ignored it, lost in the kiss.

Another cheer, more excited, followed by a first, haunting bar of music caused Xander to pull away and look up. Jonathan was on the stage and had taken the mike from the lead singer. Within moments, the crowd had surged forward and Spike and Xander were left alone together at their table.

As Jonathan launched into the first line of Serenade in Blue, Xander looked back at Spike. "The girls are going to
be so pissed they missed this," he said with a grin.

Spike smirked back at him and allowed Xander to turn around between his legs. Xander leaned back against Spike's chest. With Spike's arms wrapped around his waist and Spike's chin resting on his shoulder, he relaxed and enjoyed the music.

Buffy, Willow and Tara arrived just as the last notes were fading and Buffy pouted for their poor timing. Xander offered to get them a drink as a consolation prize and, with the bar area empty, he got served almost immediately.

It was while he was walking back, carefully carrying three drinks and attempting not to spill them too seriously, that somebody screamed. Crowds near the door began to shift and a moment later there was a mass scramble as teenagers and adults alike rushed to clear the way for something behind them.

The creature that burst into the room was ugly. Many demons were ugly, but this one really was as ugly as sin. It had dark pinkish skin that hung loosely on its powerful frame, a bald head, long matted hair around its face and its mouth was deformed by fangs that jutted past its lips.
Its club-like arms ended in huge hands that were balled into fists and it was swinging them right and left, sending people flying. In spite of its awkward appearance, it bounced and danced with surprising lightness and it was fast. All around, people screamed and scattered or were knocked to the ground.

Xander glanced up at the stage, expecting Jonathan to jump down and defeat it, but he wasn't there. "I'm going backstage, to find Jonathan," he shouted. Putting the drinks down on their table he set off at a run.

He searched the dressing rooms, but they were empty. One of the band was coming out of the mens' room and confirmed that Jonathan wasn't there either. "Don't go back in the club," Xander instructed. "There's something in there. Get out the back way and if you see Jonathan, tell him we need him!"

He spent a few more minutes, fruitlessly opening doors and peering into rooms, from the manager's office to the janitor's closet, although what Jonathan would be doing in there, he didn't want to think. Eventually, worried about the others, he gave up and crept back into the main part of the club.
The creature was working its way across to the bar area and people were still scrambling to get out of its way. Those who weren't fast enough were knocked down by its hammer-like hands. Occasionally it would pause and bend over a victim. Xander feared it might take a bite, but it was either not hungry or not partial to *homo nightclubicus*, because each time it moved on, after a sniff or two.

When it reached the bar, the press of people who had taken refuge at that end of the room had difficulty getting out of its way and the sound of breaking glass was punctuated by more screams.

"Where's Jonathan?" Xander muttered.

Buffy was still standing by their table, scanning the room, probably also hoping for rescue. Spike was sipping his beer and watching the chaos. Xander caught his eye and he lifted his glass in a toast.

Many of the customers seemed to have got out, but there were still a number up on the balcony, either because they had been there to watch Jonathan sing, or because that was where they had taken refuge. The monster didn't seem concerned about them.
Apparently satisfied that whatever it was searching for, because the rampage was looking less random by the minute, was not near the bar, it changed direction and started moving towards the stage on Xander's side of the room.

Spike was on his feet at once. "Come on, Slayer," he yelled, "Wonder Boy's not here. It's you and me," and rushed across the dance floor to collide with the creature. It staggered under the impact and Spike danced back.

He had its attention. It tried to close, but he kept dodging away, towards the door out into the alley, away from Xander. People scattered from his path.

Buffy pushed her way through the crowd and hesitated on the edge of the clear space that was being created by the game of cat and mouse. She bounced on the balls of her feet and seemed to be reciting some kind of mantra, then she ran forward. She landed a punch to the creature's head that sent its spinning away, towards Spike, who was obviously not expecting such a move. He was too close and the creature swung its right arm, caught him in the gut, swept him up and sent him flying
across the room to smash into one of the pillars holding up the balcony. The balcony shifted under the impact and the people hiding up there screamed and grabbed hold of each other and of the railings.

Spike slid to the ground, got his feet under him, yelled, "Thanks a lot, Slayer. Nice one," and dived back into the fray.

He ducked under another sweeping blow and landed a punch with all his momentum behind it, squarely into the creature's midriff. The creature doubled up like a ribbon and Spike's arm seemed to disappear inside it. He pulled back sharply with an expression of disgust. In the meantime Buffy had grabbed a drinks tray and she brought it down on the creature's head.

It turned and lunged towards Buffy. She kicked it in the chest driving it back towards the bar. A follow up kick and a punch to its head sent it reeling.

"Yee ha!" Spike yelled, bouncing up and down on the spot.

The creature paused as if reconsidering its tactics. It was standing under the upper level and lifted its face. It
looked like it was sniffing the air. Spike and Buffy paused too, waiting for it to make its next move. As it swung its arms back and forth in front of its body, it scanned the room.

Spike and Buffy were between it and the exit and they began to move slowly apart, clearing a route for it to the door and the alley beyond. Xander looked behind them and saw a few people creeping back inside, wanting to watch, now that the crashing and banging had ceased. He edged along the wall towards the door, intent on persuading them to clear the way or get back outside.

With an abruptness that took Xander completely by surprise, the creature burst into action. It swung its right arm backwards into a pillar, smashing it. As people under the balcony screamed and cowered against the wall, it sprinted between Spike and Buffy towards the door. Buffy spun to follow its movements. "Get out of the way!" she shouted at the small knot of people there. She was too late, or they were too slow. The creature clubbed them clear of its path as it fled.

Behind Buffy the entire upper level of the Bronze teetered and began to tip in towards the dance floor. "Buffy!" Xander yelled.
A whole section of the balcony structure slowly fell inwards, bringing chairs, tables and people with it. Buffy tried to shield her head from the falling debris with her hands. A few people manage to cling to the remaining sections, dangling in the air, but soon they too fell to the floor below.

When the dust began to clear, Xander saw Buffy, pinned under a large beam. She was struggling to lift it and he ran over to help. Spike arrived a moment later and held it out of the way so she could get up.

As soon as she was on her feet, she looked around, searching them all out and sighing with relief when she spotted Willow and Tara making their way over. "Where is it?" she asked.

Willow shook her head. "Gone."

Spike came over to Xander's side. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Wow, Buffy! I've never seen you fight like that before."

Pausing in her attempts to get dust out of her hair, Buffy
looked up at him. "I, I guess I just didn't have time to think," she said, her voice full of wonder. "I just did it."

"You were brilliant," Xander said. "It was like, like watching Jonathan." Spike made a snorting noise and Xander turned to him, reaching out to stroke his shoulder and adding, in the voice people reserved for praising puppies and babies, "And you were brilliant too."

Batting his hand away, Spike growled, "Bugger off," but Xander could see that he was trying not to grin.

"Er, guys," Willow called.

Xander looked around and saw her and Tara trying to move debris off a couple of injured people. They went to help.

The next half hour was spent clearing fallen timber and broken furniture away from people who had been buried, but eventually the ambulances arrived and began to move the injured out. Looking around, Xander spotted Spike crouching next to a woman. She had blood on her face, and he was telling her not to move. As Xander and Buffy walked towards him, Spike gently lifted her head and slipped a seat cushion under it.
"What are you doing?" Buffy demanded.

Spike shrugged. "Making this woman more comfortable, what's it look like?" He stared up at her and seemed to read something from her expression. "I'm not sampling," he growled. He glanced at Xander. "Just look at all these lovely blood-covered people. I could, but not a taste for Spike, not a lick. Know you wouldn't like it."

Buffy gazed at him in amazement. "You want credit for not feeding on bleeding disaster victims?"

Sparing her an impatient glance, Spike shook his head. "Well, yeah," he said.

Xander smiled and bent down, cupping Spike's face and kissing him, just as he had earlier. "My hero," he breathed.

Spike grinned back while Buffy looked from one to the other with an expression of disbelief, tinged with a shade of disgust, before stalking away.

The monster was long gone and they didn't see it again that night, although they patrolled the whole town.
Jonathan wasn't answering his phone.

When they got home Xander changed into sweats and a t-shirt, and made himself some supper while Spike ran himself a bath and had a long soak.

Leaving his dishes in the sink, Xander heated a mug of blood and took it in to Spike, who smiled. "Thanks, love," he said.

Sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, Xander watched him drink. "I'm sorry it's only pig," he said. "Is there any other sort that tastes better?"

Spike reached down and put the empty mug on the floor. "The tiger wasn't bad," he said. "Not as good as human, of course, but not bad. I reckon anything at the top of its food chain has more quality."

He leaned his head against the rim of the bath and stared at the ceiling. "Nothing's as good as human," he observed.

Frowning thoughtfully, Xander said, "Maybe we can do something about that?"
Spike tilted his head around and stared at him. "You'd help me get the chip out?" he asked.

"Um... Well, I hadn't actually thought of that. I was thinking more like burglary at the Blood Bank."

"Ah! Yeah, might work."

Xander shuffled around on his seat so that he was directly facing Spike. "But, purely hypothetically," he said, "what would you do if you did get it out?"

Spike's face was blank. "Would you try to leave me?" he asked.

Xander considered all the shades of meaning behind that simple sounding question. "I don't know," he admitted. "This. Us. It's all kinda sudden."

Spike made a sound halfway between a grunt, a sigh and a strangled laugh. "Sudden?" he asked. "It's been years, love."

That was true too and Xander smiled back at him. "Yeah, I guess... But it's still sudden. I didn't know, you see? That at the hotel... how you were... that it wasn't the spell."
Cocking an eyebrow, Spike smiled, a mere twist of one side of his mouth. "You didn't change," he said.

"No. But..." Hesitating, Xander tried to find the words to explain. "You're a vampire. I didn't know. So... I guess it would depend, what you decided to do."

Spike's slight smile became a sneer. "I'm a vampire, right? What d'you think I'd do?"

Shrugging helplessly, Xander admitted, "I don't know. You'll have to tell me."

Spike went back to staring at the ceiling. "I don't know, either. Thought I did. Thought it would be easy. But..." He trailed off.

Silence reigned until Xander gathered himself to say, "What you did tonight. Well, what you didn't do. That was pretty amazing."

"Told you: knew you wouldn't like it."

"Yeah."
They lapsed back into their own thoughts.

After a while, long enough for Spike to have felt the need to add more hot water to his tub, Xander stirred. "I do trust you, Spike," he said. "But if you ever did get it out, we'd probably have to keep it a secret." Spike turned his head and stared at Xander. He looked gobsmacked, to use a Spike word that Xander decided he loved because it was so perfect for the moment. "But in the meantime," he suggested. "I reckon the Blood Bank might be worth targeting."

Spike grinned and stood up, stepped out of the tub and walked over to Xander. He took Xander's hands and pulled him to his feet, crowding close and pressing against him. "You are quite beautiful, pet, you know that? I can stay off human for that."

Xander laughed, embarrassed, and Spike took a step back. "And now you're all wet," he said with a smirk. "Best get those clothes off, or you'll catch a chill."

Xander laughed again, more easily, and began to strip.

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In the end it was Spike who discovered where the creature was hiding out. His contacts with the sleazier and more murderous elements in Sunnydale standing him in good stead when he heard of a gang of vampires being kicked out of their den in a cave in the hills.

So Buffy and Jonathan went to face the monster and after they'd left Willow discovered what it was. They all (except for Spike) spent a nerve wracking hour worrying about whether Buffy could succeed, if Jonathan turned out not to be the hero they still believed him to be. When the wave of the breaking spell went through them, it was a moment of disorientation like Xander had never felt before.

Soon after, Buffy phoned to say she was safe and they all went their separate ways. It was as if they couldn't get away from each other fast enough. Xander and Spike went home and with Spike's help, Xander got gloriously drunk and in the early hours of the morning they made love with a passion and desperation that went some way towards exorcising the bad taste that hero worshiping Jonathan Levinson had left in both their mouths.

In the aftermath, Xander managed to marshal his few remaining brain cells to extract a promise from Spike that
he wouldn't go after revenge. Spike opened one eye and peered at him thoughtfully. "Nah, okay," he said "'Sides, seems like he did us a favour. Just don't expect me to thank him."

_Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episodes 4.17, Superstar and 5.11, Triangle_

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**Part Thirty-Five**

Xander stretched luxuriously. Saturday mornings were wonderful. Saturday mornings when it was just a guy and his vampire in a big soft bed, were blissful. Turning onto his side, he pressed up against Spike, his thighs and knees fitting snugly into the backs of Spike's bent legs. He slipped his arm around Spike's chest and ran his palm down over Spike's belly to his cock, closing his hand loosely around it.

Spike stirred. "Wha time 'sit?" he mumbled.

"Late," Xander replied, leaning forward and nipping
playfully at Spike's ear. Spike gave a rumble of approval from deep in his chest. He tightened his grip on Spike's cock and began to stroke, feeling the flesh harden and grow in his hand. "Or early, if you're a vampire."

"I am a bloody vampire," Spike groused, but there was a definite smile in his voice. Rolling over onto his back, he wormed his right arm under Xander's shoulder. Xander raised his head off the pillow, obligingly, and Spike pulled him close.

An hour later, Xander decided that Saturday mornings with wake-up sex, were the best of all, even when your lover turned lazily onto his front and made you do all the work. He grinned and placed a wet kiss on Spike's shoulder blade before climbing out of bed.

Burying his cheek more securely into the pillow, Spike asked, "What time's it now?"

Xander glanced at the clock on the table next to his side of the bed. "Twenty 'til two," he reported.

Spike grabbed the comforter. "Too early," he said, pulling it over his head and adding in a voice muffled by bedding, "Wake me at sunset."
With a chuckle, Xander hunted around on the floor for something cleanish to put on, gathered the bundle into his arms and left the room. He dropped the pile of clothes carelessly on the floor in the hall and padded, naked, into the kitchen to start his coffee brewing, so it would be ready when he'd finished his shower.

He had no plans for the day, nothing he needed to do. There were no (he paused to cross his fingers and touch wood) new monsters making their arrival felt, just the continued threat of the Initiative and Adam, both of whom had been remarkably quiet for the past week, or more.

Xander sat at his kitchen table and enjoyed the sensation of physical contentment, before something came along to disrupt it.

He was halfway through his second cup of coffee and was wondering if Buffy would need them to patrol that night, when there was a knock on the door.

Groaning, he got to his feet and went to open it. In the hallway outside stood Oz, looking slightly sheepish with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jacket. "Hey," he
"Oz!" Xander said, opening the door properly and stepping back. As Oz walked in he asked, "Can werewolves get vamped? Want some coffee?"

Oz shrugged in answer to his first question and said, "Thanks," in reply to his second.

"When did you get home?" Xander asked, leading the way into the kitchen.

"This morning." Oz paused in the living room and gave a loud sniff, before following. Xander ignored the hint and Oz didn't push it. Instead he asked, "Have you seen Willow? I've been to her dorm and to Giles' place, but she's not there." He was obviously a werewolf with a mission.

Sidestepping the question, Xander grabbed a mug, looking over his shoulder at Oz. "Oz, man, it's good to see you too, but you don't call, you don't write."

Oz gave a grimace. "Yeah, sorry."

"So are you back?" Xander poured the last of the coffee
in the pot into the mug and brought it over to the table. They sat down opposite each other and Xander studied Oz's face, looking for clues to what he'd been doing. He looked much the same. Calmer, if anything, assuming that was possible and it wasn't Xander's memory that was at fault.

Oz gave a small smile. Most of Oz's facial expressions were small, but Xander believed that he could still read them and that one looked forced. "I hope so," he said. "It depends on Willow. Do you know where I can find her?"

He was obviously a werewolf who would not be diverted from his mission. "Giles didn't seem to know, but I figured you might. I want to find her, before tonight if I can." He paused, gazing down into his mug, studying the surface of his coffee. "I really want to see her."

Damn Giles, Xander thought. He'd wimped out. "Tonight?" he asked, something occurring to him. "But it's-"

"A full moon, yeah."

Resting his hands on the edge of the table, Xander straightened his arms so that he was sitting back in his chair, narrowed his eyes and said, "You're not the kinda
guy who bites his ex, so what're you playing at?"

Oz looked up sharply and focused on Xander's face. After a moment he relaxed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," he said, sincerely. "No play. I won't change... I, er, I found a cure."

"A cure?"

"Of sorts." He shook his head slightly. "It's not gone. It'll never be gone. But I can control it now."

Feeling the smile stretch his lips, Xander gave a bark of delighted laughter. "Wow! That's amazing. Really amazing!"

Oz dipped his head bashfully. "Yeah. I... I'm a different person than I was four months ago." He looked up again, straight into Xander's eyes. "I can be here now," he said, adding, with an awkward shrug, "That's what I want." He stopped and if it had been anybody other than Oz, Xander would've said he fidgeted. There was a distinct note of nervousness in his voice when he asked, "Has Willow, um... has she got a new guy?"

Hedging, Xander said, "I don't see the girls so much," as
he wondered what he could say, without breaking confidences that had not been explicitly stated. He took a sip of his cooling coffee. "Umm..."

Picking up on his hesitation and jumping to the obvious conclusion, Oz asked, "She has?"

With a sigh, Xander decided on full disclosure. "Not as such. Not a guy," he explained. "But, um, look, this is awkward..." Oz's eyes were fixed on him with painful intensity. "There's a woman. Tara. And Spike says-"

"Spike?"

"Uh, yeah, he's sort of living here. With me."

"Thought I could smell something."

"Yeah, anyway, he said that they..." Xander paused. "Willow brought her to a Scooby meeting last week," he said finally.

"Okay," Oz agreed, his face pinched, "that's pretty much a declaration."

There was nothing Xander could say that would make
things better. Oz had come back hoping to pick up his life where he'd left it and like many people, Xander included, he'd come back to find that home had moved on too. Leaving Oz in peace, he got up to make more coffee. He had a feeling this was a three cup conversation. Or maybe a three cup silence, judging by Oz's reaction. He didn't return to the table, keeping his back to Oz while he watched the coffee maker do its thing. Every now and again he'd glance over his shoulder. Oz was sitting perfectly still, except for his right hand which was fiddling with a string of beads that were wrapped around his left wrist and hand. When the pot was full Xander refilled his own mug and went to top up Oz's. Putting the pot back on the hot plate, he returned to the table and sat down.

Oz looked up at him and there was something harsh and painful in his eyes. He looked like a man who had taken a blow to the gut. He was also shifting in his seat, as if he was about to get up and leave and that didn't seem like a good idea.

"So tell me about this cure," Xander suggested.

For a moment Oz didn't say anything, but then he slumped and Xander realised how tense he'd been before. 'Tense' and 'Oz' were two words that weren't
supposed to go together. With a nod, Oz picked up his mug and took a sip. "I was in Tibet," he said. "My cousin put me in touch with a shaman in New Mexico. He sent me to a warlock in Romania and he sent me to the monks there to learn some meditation techniques."

"And that was it? Meditation?"

A small twitch of the lips suggested that, in Oz's opinion, Xander had just said something funny, or incredibly stupid, but he answered seriously. "It was very intense. All about keeping your inner cool. But I take some herbs and stuff, as well. There's a couple of charms." He lifted his left hand, indicating the string of beads. "And some chanting..." He trailed off.

"You must have seen some amazing places," Xander observed enviously.

That raised another slight smile, less amused and more inclusive this time. "Yeah, Tibet was pretty awesome," Oz agreed. "But some places were just difficult. Different languages, passport and visa problems." He shrugged. "More difficult when you're in a hurry to get somewhere."
Xander smiled and, responding to the encouragement, Oz began to tell stories: sunrises over deserts and mountains, busking for pennies on street corners, bartering his tapes and albums, one by one to maximum effect and working illegally when he could. He didn't ask about Willow again and the afternoon slid gently by. Many of the stories were comic, some were sad, while in a few Xander could hear the awe Oz still felt for what he'd seen. All were told with vivid emotion and Xander was amazed, both by how much he had done in a few short months and by how unembarrassed he was at allowing the emotion to show.

They drank the rest of the pot of coffee while Oz talked, then Xander brought him up-to-date on developments in Sunnydale, including the Initiative, Spike, the chip and the threat of Adam. By the time Xander got up to make pasta for dinner they were swapping stories of the strange and the freaky. Oz had met a lot of strange and freaky on his travels. It was oddly reassuring to Xander, to hear that Sunnydale wasn't the only place on the planet where you could meet the weird and the wonderful, and the just plain scary, while walking down a quiet street. Oz had met things that Sunnydale had never seen (as far as Xander knew) and he seemed to take it all in stride.
They moved on to beer to accompany the meal.

Spike appeared just as Xander was serving the food out onto plates. He came up behind Xander and slipped an arm around his waist, giving him a squeeze, before moving over to the fridge to pull out some blood. "Want some of this?" Xander asked.

"Nah," he replied, pulling a face. "Too soggy. I want something with a bit of crunch."

"Wheat-a-bits in the cupboard," Xander replied, nodding in the direction of the cupboard where he kept dry goods. "I got some more."

"Ta, pet," Spike grabbing the mug that Xander had designated the 'blood mug' and filling it to the brim. He put it in the microwave, switched it on and went to fetch a bowl and the wheat-a-bits.

Xander passed Oz a plate of pasta and sat down again with his own.

"Huh," Oz said. "I guess you are living together."
Spike turned to look at him, his mouth tight. "You got a problem with that?" he asked.

Oz shook his head. "No, no problem. Shouldn't have been surprised."

After a moment, Spike nodded and turned back to making his dinner. "Good," he grunted.

It seemed they understood each other, because there was no tension in the air. Xander tried to remember if Oz had ever expressed an opinion of Spike, when he was stalking Xander in Junior year, but couldn't. He didn't seem to be carrying a grudge for Spike's kidnapping of Willow in Senior year, either. It seemed he'd been speaking the literal truth when he said he was a different person.

Spike came and joined them at the table with his mug, his bowl of blood drenched wheat-a-bits and a beer of his own.

"Oz has been telling me about his travels," Xander explained.

"Yeah, I heard you." He looked over at Oz. "So were you
a wolf when you were with the Red Witch, or is that new?"

"I was. It's the reason I left - to find a cure." Spike snorted, but Oz continued. "And I did."

Spike studied him. "No you didn't," he countered.

Oz grinned, the first Xander had seen from him all day. "No, I didn't," he agreed. "But I learnt to control it." He studied Spike in return. "Does it bother you?" he asked.

"What, that movie crap about vampires and werewolves being mortal enemies?" Spike sneered.

"No. Me being here, with Xander."

Spike gave a careless shrug. "You're not human. I figure I can take you with no trouble, if you try anything." He fixed Oz with a hard stare. "And I'll be keeping a close eye on you after dark," he added.

With a nod of acceptance, Oz returned to his meal. Xander looked from one to the other of them. "Not a damsel, here," he protested. Oz looked up and grinned at him. Spike just snorted. Xander clipped Spike over the
back of the head, which had no effect other than to make Spike grin at him with bloody teeth.

"Oz has control," Xander said. "He was planning to see Willow tonight and he wouldn't do that if he didn't trust himself to be safe."

Spike raised an eyebrow at Oz. "And now you're not?" he asked.

"Thought I'd wait 'til tomorrow. Xander says there's a Scooby meeting in the morning."

Spike gave a grunt of acknowledgement. "There's always a bloody meeting," he agreed. "How often do you let it out?"

Obviously surprised by the question, Oz hesitated. "Er... never?"

"Afraid?"

"Well, yeah," Oz said. "Of course I'm afraid. I might hurt someone."

Cocking his head, Spike considered him. "I'll keep you in
line. If you look like you're about to go for someone's throat, I'll knock you out and tie you up until you change back. How's that?"

Oz stared at Spike for a full half a minute, his face that special sort of Oz-blank that looked like inscrutable. He glanced at Xander, back at Spike and a slow smile twisted the corners of his lips. "Actually, that sounds pretty good, right now."

Xander found Spike a duffel bag to take Oz's clothes and by the time the sun was down they were ready to go, with twenty minutes before the moon would clear the tops of the hills to the east. At the door, he grabbed Spike's lapels and pulled him in for a quick kiss. "Don't let him hurt any humans, please?" he whispered. "He'd never forgive himself and I like him."

Spike gave a terse nod. "Spoil all my fun, why don't you?" he said, but reassuringly added, "Don't worry, pet. I'll make sure the populace stay safe."

Xander spent a quiet evening. Buffy was planning no more than a quick sweep of the town, so he vegged in front of the TV.
He was dozing on the sofa wondering whether to wait up until Spike and Oz got back, or whether to go to bed, when he heard the front door open and looked around, a greeting and questions already on his lips.

One sight of Spike's face caused the words to die unspoken. He leapt to his feet, taking an involuntary few steps back from the door. "What happened?" he asked.

His voice vibrating with controlled rage, Spike gritted out, "They got him. The bastards got him."

"Who got him?" The moment he said it, Xander realised. "Oh my god! No! How?"

Spike paced backwards and forwards in front of the door. His hands were clenched into tight fists at his sides and he moved with a stiffness that told Xander how much effort he was putting into not ripping something apart. "We were right up in the hills. I kept him away from houses. He caught himself a deer. Brought it down and had himself a good meal. Better than that pasta rubbish. Then he took off after a rabbit. Might have been a cat."

He stopped and whirled around to face Xander. Xander realised that he'd taken another step back, only after
he'd done so. He cursed silently when Spike frowned and his whole body seemed to slump in on itself. The contained violence disappeared from his voice, replaced by weariness. "I was right behind him. But he broke straight through a patrol of commandos." Cautiously Xander stepped forward, but Spike held up both hands, warding him off. Seeing the yellow flecks still bursting in his eyes, Xander obeyed. "I couldn't do anything. Had to just stand there and watch them take him away."

Xander went into the kitchen and pulled Spike's whisky bottle and a glass from the cupboard. He poured a large measure and took it back into the living room, holding it out to Spike.

"I said I'd keep him safe," Spike said, taking the glass.

"I know." Spike took a gulp of his drink and some subtle change in his demeanour gave Xander the courage to step close. "We'll get him back," he promised. "We'll call Buffy, right now, and Giles, and we'll get him back." He raised his hand and laid it against the side of Spike's neck.

Spike looked up from his contemplation of his glass. "I trailed them," he said. "Saw them take him through a door in the woods. I judge it's another entrance to the
Initiative." He lifted the glass to his lips and tossed the whisky back in one swallow, then he pulled away from Xander and hurled the glass across the room, into the kitchen where it smashed against the tile floor. "I said I'd keep him fucking safe," he yelled.

Xander backed away behind the sofa and watched helplessly, but that last act seemed to have drained the energy from Spike. He leant against the wall and allowed himself to slide down until he was sitting on the floor with his knees bent in front of him.

Xander crept forward again. "That's good," he said. "That's a start. We know where they are and we know the way in."

Raising his head, Spike looked up at him. "I am going to fucking kill every last one of them," he swore, his voice shaking with anger. "If they do anything to the wolf, I'll tear them limb from bloody limb and feed them their genitals for breakfast."

Xander nodded. He checked the time: a few minutes after midnight. Hopefully Buffy would be home from patrol. Getting to his feet, he went to the phone to call for help.
Part Thirty-Six

Giles was knocking at the door within twenty minutes and the girls were not far behind. Willow marched into Xander's living room with Buffy on her heels. "Oz is here?" she asked. "In Sunnydale?"

Buffy grimaced behind her back and Xander got the message. "Yeah, he is," he said. "He got back this afternoon."

"And he came here?"

"He went looking for you. He couldn't find you. He went to your dorm, first, but you weren't there." Xander could do the guilt trip, as well as anyone.

"I was back by six," Willow said in a small voice.
Xander's eyes fell on Tara, standing hesitantly just inside the door and the guilt trip rebounded on him. "Hey, come in," he said. Turning back to Willow he added, "We'll get him out. Somehow. We have to."

"Bloody right," Spike agreed.

"What I don't understand," Giles said, "is what he was doing out in the woods for the Initiative to catch him. I know he had a safe cage, before he left."

"Had some bad news, didn't he?" Spike said. "Needed to let it out."

Xander saw understanding dawn. "So you took him for a run and allowed him to get captured."

Spike's face tightened and Xander just knew he was going to lash out and say something unforgivable about Willow and Giles and what they should have done for Oz, years ago. He forestalled him. Sometimes he felt like the whole of the United Nations, crammed into one body. "Spike trailed them," he said. "He couldn't take them on without being captured himself, but he found another backdoor in the woods near East Mountain Drive, beyond
Forestville and Pennine. They took Oz in that way. If Spike hadn't been with him, we wouldn't know that."

Giles stared at Xander speculatively. He glanced over at Buffy, standing with her hands clenched on the back of the sofa, Willow, who seemed to have belatedly remembered that she had a girlfriend who also had feelings and had gone to stand next to her, and Spike, leaning with deceptive casualness against the kitchen sink. "Okay," he said.

Willow placed a self-conscious arm around Tara's waist and left it there although Tara didn't reciprocate.

"So that's three entrances we know about," Buffy said. "The one in the Frat House, the one Spike escaped from, and now this. The one in Lowell House works with voice recognition. I don't think they'll leave the other two unlocked."

"They use a key card," Spike said. "But the one I stole doesn't work anymore."

Xander looked up sharply. "You tested it?" he asked.

"Yeah. Tested, failed, and had to clear out when it set off
an alarm."

"So we need a valid card," Buffy said.

Spike came into the living room. "The hybrid, Adam," he said, "he's got eyes into the base. Saw it when I was up there. Rows of monitors showing all angles."

"Interesting," said Giles. Xander threw Spike an approving look. "Do you think he can do more than just watch?" Giles asked.

"Not a computer expert, am I? But there's a lot of knobs and switches for just watching. Thinking he might open the door for us."

"Hmm, but we can't rely on it. However, it would be useful to find out more, for the future, if you could?"

Spike gazed at him blankly for a long moment before turning away. "Right," he said, "I can do that. Meantime, I reckon I'll go ask him to kill the lights and cameras tonight." He leaned his shoulder against the wall of the Kitchen walk through. "Create some chaos, as a gesture of good faith," he added with a derisive snort.
Giles ran his hand through his hair. "That might help," he acknowledged, "but we still need a way in."

"Ambush and mugging?" Xander suggested. Giles looked slightly taken aback, although Buffy nodded thoughtfully, but then Xander remembered something she'd said about their operating protocols. "Except, they travel in teams of four don't they? Can we do it?"

"No they don't," Spike said. "Last few weeks they've been sending their patrols out in pairs."

Buffy turned to him again and her eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?" she asked.

"Same way as I know that they're spread thin and they've been busy," Spike said. "They've specialised. The patrols spot a demon and call for backup. The retrieval team arrives. They take the prey and then go on to the next call. The wolf was just unlucky. He ran straight into a fully armed retrieval team."

Leaning forward over the back of the sofa, Buffy asked, "How come, if you've been tracking them so much, you're still walking around free?"
Spike's grin had a lot in common with a sneer. "Know what I'm doing," he said. "I'm not some mayfly-slayer. I was taught by the best and I've learnt more since. If they can't see me, they can't catch me."


For the first time since he got back an hour earlier, Spike gave him a proper smile. "Love it when you get all commanding, pet," he said.

Xander frowned at him. "Not helping," he replied. Looking around the room at his friends, who were all staring at him with varying degrees of shock, he clapped his hands again. "Come on, people," he said, channelling his inner Willow. "Sit!"

Hesitantly they did as they were told. Xander himself stayed on his feet. "Right," he said, once they were all settled. "Now, we are going to talk about this calmly, with no baiting, no insults and no diversions. We are
going to go in there and we are going to get Oz out. Who knows what they'll do to him if we don't." He looked around. "Anyone got anything positive to offer?"

Half an hour later they had a plan, but it was almost two o'clock. They had four hours before sunrise, a little longer before it cleared the hills, since they were heading east, towards the campus and the National Forest beyond it, but it was still a tight schedule and Xander worried. It would be a relief to get moving.

Giles had brought weapons and they were in his car, so there was nothing to delay them. They were almost at the door when Willow rebelled against staying behind. "I'm going with you," she said.

As soon as the plan was formulated, Buffy had stepped back into her natural position as leader. "No," she said. "It's too dangerous, Will. Besides, if Spike can't convince Adam to cooperate, and I don't know why I'm trusting him, we need you to hack into the city's electrical grid. You're going to have to power down the Initiative."

"Giles can do that," Willow objected. "It's practically on my shortcuts. All he has to do is push delete and the whole town's in darkness. I can show him exactly what to
"Willow," Xander said, placing a careful hand on her shoulder. "We've covered all this. We need Giles and we need his car."

Spinning around and shrugging him off in the process, Willow turned to Tara. Looking at her beseechingly, she took her hands. "Please?" she said. "I-I can't just sit here. I need to go with them."

Tara gave an unhappy nod, but she also pulled her hands free of Willow's hold.

Willow's face crumpled slightly. "Thank you," she whispered.

Looking across at Buffy, Xander saw that she was going to cave. "Okay," she said. "You can back us up."

They waited while Willow drew Tara across to her open laptop and showed her what she would need to do to kill the power to the eastern sector of the town.

Xander tried to still his fidgeting when he noticed that Spike had started to bounce on the balls of his feet.
Finally Willow straightened up and came back to join them at the door. With a sigh, Buffy visibly straightened her shoulders and to Xander's huge relief said, "Let's go."

For once the plan worked perfectly. After Spike split away from them, it took them an hour to locate an Initiative patrol on the edge of the campus, but once they did, it was the work of moments for Xander to step out onto the path immediately in front of them. "Hi, guys," he said cheerfully giving them a wave. Buffy came up behind them and cracked their heads together while they were still assessing his humanity status.

Together they stripped the two soldiers of their radio, keycards and guns, tied them up securely, gagged them and bundled them into the trunk of Giles' car, before he drove them all up to the top of Pennine, to the junction with Forestville.

When they got there, they tumbled out and gathered their weapons, then Giles drove away to lock the soldiers in Oz's old cage. Xander stood in the road and watched his taillights fade until they disappeared around a bend.

"Come on, Xander," Buffy hissed. Xander started and
turned to follow her into the trees.

They reached the door and found Spike already waiting for them. "How did it go?" Xander asked.

"Took some fast talking, but he thinks I'm winning your trust." Spike replied, nodding at Buffy. "He's happy enough for you to get an idea of the layout. I reckon his plan's due to come together in the next few days. If he was capable of it, I'd say he was excited by the idea of you getting in tonight."

"Good," Buffy said. "So he'll leave us alone in there?"

"That's the idea, once he's turned off the lights and killed the surveillance. Here, pass us the card. I also know where to find the guy who can take us straight to Oz.

While Spike took the card from her hand and approached the door, Xander made a quick call to Tara, back at his place, telling her she could probably stand down.

Spike swiped the card through the reader. "Here's where we find out if he bought the story," he said. He pulled the door open and turned to grin at them. Xander felt a shiver of dread at breaking into a sophisticated military
base with someone who was so obviously having fun. Edging inside, they walked cautiously forward.

They had hardly taken a step before the lights went out. A moment later, blue emergency lights flickered on in their place.

"He bought it," Buffy said.

Spike led them down the hallway until they reached a junction with a smaller corridor. "According to Adam, the barracks are this way," he said, turning to face them and jerking his chin to the right. They took the turn and pushed through a set of double doors.

It was immediately apparent that they were no longer in an operational area. A notice board on the wall advertised a softball tournament and a barbeque. The walls themselves were painted in pastel colours and the doors had no viewing windows. One open doorway offered them a glimpse of a kitchen and lounge area, with soft seating and a large screen TV, as they passed. It was quiet. So far from the holding cells, there didn't seem to be any regular patrols and the dayshift were obviously asleep in bed, while the nightshift were on duty. They only had to duck back around a corner once,
when a sleepy-eyed tech in a lab coat crossed the hallway twenty yards in front of them, eating Ben & Jerry's straight from the tub as he walked.

The commander's bedroom was on the far side of the barracks, conveniently labelled with his name on a small brass plaque. They gathered around and Buffy kicked in the door.

Colonel McNamara was asleep, until the door crashed against the wall with enough force to wake the dead. Buffy and Xander burst into the room and crossed to the bed. They pointed their stolen guns at him while, from the doorway, Spike called, "Wakey, wakey!"

The Colonel jerked up on one elbow, automatically reaching for the handgun on his night stand.

"Hey!" Buffy said, waving her own gun in his face.

He looked up at her and pulled his arm back. Xander picked up the gun and stuffed it in his waistband. Noticing a keycard next it, he took that too and clipped it to his shirt pocket.

"You know who I am?" Buffy asked.
The Colonel looked from her to Xander and then to Spike and Willow in the doorway. "Yeah," he said.

Buffy smiled. "Then you know not to mess with me. Take us to Oz."

"Take you to where?"

"Don't play dumb. Take us to our friend."

The Colonel hesitated, looking at each of them again. "The wolf?" he guessed.

With a tense nod that indicated how close to losing her cool Buffy was, she snapped, "Get dressed," and waved the gun again.

The Colonel could obviously read body language too, because he sat up and swung his legs out of the bed. Xander picked up a pair of pants from a nearby chair, checked the pockets and threw them over to him. The Colonel caught them and stood up to put them on.

Xander and Buffy took a couple of steps back to give him space and to stay out of reach if he tried anything.
Xander was pleased to see that Buffy didn't relax. He agreed with her. The Colonel was playing along, but he'd jump at any chance to challenge them and take their weapons. He really didn't know what a slayer was.

Having done up his belt, the Colonel was looking around the floor. Buffy brandished her gun again. "You don't need shoes," she said. "We're not going outside." He frowned but shrugged and, following the implicit order from the waving gun barrel, preceded her to the door.

Back in the corridor, Buffy swapped her gun for the crossbow Willow had been hugging to her chest. "I don't like guns," she said and she certainly handled the crossbow with a confidence that she had not shown when she had a firearm in her hand. Xander saw the Colonel notice the change in her demeanour and smiled.

They resumed their journey with the Colonel in the lead, Buffy holding the crossbow to his neck. Xander and Willow brought up the rear, while Spike walked next to the Colonel. It was a nerve-wracking walk, especially when the Colonel tried to lead them around a corner and Spike stopped them.

"Ah, ah," Spike said, shaking his head, his voice light and
chiding. "You're lying. That's not the way to the cells."

The Colonel's face showed no expression while he considered Spike and after a moment he nodded and continued in the direction they'd been going. "You won't get away with this," he said.

"Can't tell you how many times I've heard that one," Spike retorted. He grinned and Xander knew with absolute certainty that he was about to let his face shift.

"Spike!" he hissed. "Behave!"

Spike turned to look at him and gave a theatrical pout, but he didn't go into gameface, so Xander called it a win.

They'd walked the length of three more corridors, past numerous offices and labs, when they reached a pair of double doors and the Colonel stopped.

Spike took a couple of fast paces, ahead of Buffy and the Colonel. He peered through the round window in one of the doors. "In there?" he asked, looking at the Colonel. "I'll know if you're lying."

"Yes," the Colonel said.
Spike stepped back. Xander laid a hand on the small of his back and he shot Xander a look that said, 'Bugger off, I'm fine', which Xander didn't believe for a moment. But Buffy was already pushing the Colonel through the doors, so they had to follow.

The long white hallway beyond the doors was lined on both sides by rows of cells, all as brightly lit as the corridor, all full of one, two, or even three demons. Many sat listlessly on the floor, as far back in their cages as they could get. A few paced back and forth, like caged tigers. Some roared with rage at the sight of the humans walking past and jumped forward to crash into the clear wall separating them from the corridor, only to ignite a flash of electricity and fall back.

The Scoobies moved forward slowly, searching each cell. Seeing how crowded they were, a new dread rose in Xander's gut. The chances that Oz would have a cell to himself seemed unlikely. He speeded up and, in his fear and eagerness, pulled a step ahead of Buffy and her hostage.

They were about one third of the way along the rows when the doors at the opposite end of the corridor
crashed open and a squad of fully armed Initiative soldiers burst through. In less than ten seconds they were staring down the barrels of half a dozen professionally held assault rifles.

"Hold it!" one of the soldiers yelled.

The Scoobies froze. "Stay back... or I'll kill him," Buffy shouted in return and to the Colonel, added, "Tell them to pull back!"

With the point of a crossbow bolt pressing firmly against his neck, at the base of his skull, the Colonel caught the eye of the soldier in front and gave a small nod. Slowly the soldier lowered his rifle, signalling his men to do the same, but they didn't leave. It looked like they were going to have company for the rest of their visit. Buffy started forwards again and Willow, Spike and Xander followed.

Xander hadn't recognised a single one of the occupants of the cells, so far. "Are any of these demons peaceful?" he whispered to Spike.

"Nah." Spike looked around. "It's like they've been out and dragged in every violent species with a grudge that
ever hung around the Hellmouth. Oh bloody hell," he said, looking at the cage on their left. "Those two in one place is a fucking time bomb." He took a deep breath of air. "And judging by the tempers of the biggest ones, the sedative's not reaching them at full dosage anymore." He shot Xander a grin. "Maybe I should have mentioned that, eh?" Shrugging, he added, "Don't matter. When this place blows it's gonna be fun. Can we get ringside seats?"

From behind them, Willow hissed, "Will you two be quiet? We need to find Oz."

Xander didn't have to think up a reply, because at that moment he spotted Oz curled up against the wall of the next cell. There was another guy sitting next to him, who looked up as they stopped at the door. What was Riley Finn doing in a cell with Oz?

Riley took one look at them and gave Oz a nudge. "Oz," he said. "Your friends are here. Come on."

Oz raised his head. His eyes were blank and his lips were moving silently. Riley scrambled to his feet, bent over and gripped his hand. Oz focused on his face. "Right," he said, allowing Riley to pull him upright.
He was dressed in loose sweats, with a UC Sunnydale logo on the breast and hip. The legs were obviously too long for him and the way the roll-ups exposed his bony ankles and bare feet made him look small and vulnerable. The neck of the shirt sagged and his breastbones stood out starkly in the harsh light. Willow gasped, like she hadn't really believed he would be there, or maybe she'd merely hoped.

"Open it," Buffy ordered and turning briefly to the cage before resuming her watch on their guards, asked Riley, "What are you doing there?"

In Xander's limited experience, Riley had never been the laid back type, but even for him his expression was grim. "I tried to do the right thing. It seems like a court martial was too much trouble," he said.

For the first time since Spike had called him on his attempt to lead them the wrong way, the Colonel spoke. "You tried to release a potentially dangerous HST," he said.

Riley glared at him and snarled back, "And you were just looking for an excuse."
While this exchange was going on, Xander took the key card from Spike's hand and ran it through the reader on the wall. Nothing happened. He tried again.

"Come on, Xander," Buffy muttered.

"I'm trying," Xander replied. "It's not working." He looked at the card. Private Clyde Torres obviously didn't have sufficient clearance to open cell doors. Tearing the Colonel's card off his pocket, he swiped that instead. The door to the cell sprang open and Riley helped Oz out.

"He's been chanting, but he really needs to get out of here," Riley said.

The sound of multiple booted feet behind them caused them all to look around. More soldiers had arrived. Buffy gave the Colonel another prod with the point of the bolt in her crossbow. "Tell them to get back," she ordered, swinging him around to face the new contingent.

The Colonel lifted his chin. "Pull back," he ordered. The soldiers did so, but only as far as the doors. "How did you get in?" He asked Buffy, finally. Personally, Xander would have expected that to be one of his first questions, but
the Colonel had probably been concerned with other things, like staying alive.

"Once we're out of here and safely away, we'll tell you where to find two more of your command," Buffy said. "If you try anything, you don't find them."

Xander held up Private Torres' stolen keycard for the Colonel to see, to prove her point. The Colonel nodded tightly.

Willow slipped past Xander. "Oz...." she cried.

Oz stepped forward and they clung to each other, but when Oz pulled away and staggered, it was Riley who grabbed him, bending over to get one of Oz's hands up around his neck, where he could hold it and so support Oz's weight.

"Let's go," Buffy said, starting to walk back the way they'd come in and forcing the Colonel ahead of her. Xander took up the rear, walking backwards with his gun aimed at the patrol who followed them, step for step.

Slowly, they made their way through the complex, one group of soldiers retreating in front of them, the other
shadowing them behind.

Xander judged they were about halfway back to the entrance when Riley said, "Turn here. The elevator up to the house is just around that corner. It's only been two hours; I doubt they've got around to revoking my access."

Buffy threw him a swift, appraising glance before she nodded and turned her attention back to her hostage. "Okay," she said. "Lead the way."

He did so and a minute later they were crowding into the elevator, leaving the gathered soldiers helpless in the corridor outside.

Riley bent down and spoke into a grill in the wall and the elevator started to move.

Everyone stood silently looking at each other as they ascended, until it stopped and the doors opened. Xander took point and got out first, checking that the coast was clear. It was.

He turned back when he heard a grating sound behind him and saw that Riley had opened the control panel and
was ripping it off the wall, leaving a mess of wires.

The Colonel glared at him, but didn't move when Buffy released him and got out of the elevator herself, still covering him with her crossbow. Riley, still helping Oz, was the last to exit, edging out sideways to avoid spoiling her aim.

"You're a dead man, Finn," the Colonel snarled.

Riley's smile was more of a grimace. He let go of Oz for a moment, stepped back into the elevator and punched the Colonel in the face, causing him to stagger back against the wall. "You were planning to kill me anyway, Sir," he said, placing far too much emphasis on the title of command for it to hold any respect. Returning to Oz's side, he put his arm back around his waist and together they walked out of Lowell House.

Once they were all outside, into the relative safety of the blacked out campus, Xander breathed a sigh of relief. Near them, on the green, what looked like an impromptu party was in full swing. Shaking his head at the nocturnal habits of students and once again feeling decades older than any of them, he pulled out his cell phone and called Tara. After reassuring her that they were all safe he
asked her to tell Giles, next time he checked in, that the planned rendezvous was a wash and they were on campus. They'd see him back at the apartment.

Switching his phone off and shoving it back in his pocket, he looked at his gathered friends - Riley was still holding Oz, who looked like he was on the edge of collapse, Willow was hovering nervously nearby. Xander could see that she wanted to go to him, but for whatever reason, was afraid to do so. Buffy looked impatient to be gone and Spike was standing in the middle of the path, as if he didn't have a care in the world and the sun wasn't threatening to rise on them very soon. "We need to get out of here," Xander said. "The elevator won't stop them for long."

"The blackout will slow them down," Riley said. "They'll have to check on the Colonel first." He gave a mirthless chuckle. "I think it's mostly me they'll be looking for now. But I agree with you, we do need to get out of here."

"Why were you locked up?" Buffy asked. "You're an officer."

"Politics," Riley replied, "Colonel McNamara came in last month..." the split second hesitation was almost
imperceptible, but it was there, "when Maggie..." He seemed to have trouble continuing that line and this time his hesitation was obvious. Taking a breath he squared his shoulders. "I think he had history with her. He moved in and his faction's in charge now. I was on Professor Walsh's team. She picked me out of class, trained me, got me my commission. That puts me out of favour, now she's gone."

"So they locked you up with a werewolf? What happened to the brig? Are things totally out of control down there?" Xander asked.

"No, Colonel McNamara's keeping a lid on it, although the cells are full. Well, you saw. We've been busy and Dr Angleman's disappeared. I don't think he expected Oz to resist and it would have been too late for anyone to object by morning."

"Bastard!" Spike muttered softly, but Xander doubted it was the Colonel he was referring to.

Riley apparently heard him because he turned, seeming to see him for the first time. "You're, uh, you're Hostile 17," he said. Turning back to Buffy he asked, "What are you doing in league with a hostile?"
Xander stepped forward. "Listen pal," he said. "It's because of that hostile that you're not still locked up and getting turned as soon as Oz lost control. If you want to pick a fight, wait until we're clear and then you'll have to come through me."

He felt rather than saw Buffy step up to his back. "I can't believe I'm saying this. Again," she said, "But you'll have to come through me too."

Spike grinned. "Slayer-" he started, but Buffy cut him off. "Don't push it, Spike," she said. She sounded tired. Xander could sympathise. He was feeling the effects of the end of an adrenaline high, himself. "We're not friends," she said. "And I'll take you out in a heartbeat if you put one toe over the line, but for now you're on parole." She looked around. "Let's get back. We need to check Giles and Tara are okay."

It was judged too dangerous for either Riley or Oz to stay at either Giles' or Xander's places. Everyone met back at Xander's apartment, for the Scooby equivalent of a debrief. Giles made an anonymous call to the police, telling them where the two soldiers were locked up, once he had inspected Oz's injuries, and Xander set about
gathering supplies.

Oz was suffering from tazer burns, already fading, and was exhausted, but it was the setting of the moon that relieved him of most of his distress.

Once the medical check up was complete Xander took a peacefully silent Oz and a broodingly silent Riley to the high school, where they set up camp in one of the less wrecked classrooms.

Standing among the scorched and broken remnants of his formative years, Xander asked Riley, "What are you going to do?"

Riley was unrolling a sleeping bag on the floor but he knelt back and considered carefully before answering. "If Adam really is planning a war..." he said, "They don't know what's about to hit them. I've trained with Buffy. I know what she can do and if she says she couldn't touch him..." He paused again and Oz and Xander waited while he occupied himself with setting up the kerosene camping stove Giles had dug out of a cupboard and donated to them. Eventually he looked up at Xander. "They're my men," he said. "Colonel McNamara's leading them into hell, but he's the commanding officer."
"He tried to turn you into a lab rat," Xander said.

Riley continued as if Xander hadn't spoken. "They'll follow him. Adam has to be stopped and he's unfit for command. What he did to me... he'll do it to others and I can't let that happen." He unpacked a few tins and packets of dried food donated from Xander's and Giles' kitchens, from a grocery bag and set them out in neat rows next to the camping stove. When he was apparently satisfied that they were correctly regimented, he looked up at Xander. "Can you leave me the radio?" he asked.

Recognising that that was all Riley was going to say on the subject, Xander nodded and handed it over. He turned to Oz. "Are you going to be okay?" he asked.

Oz had always got along with just about everyone, but he and Riley were about as different as two people could be. It didn't feel right to Xander, to leave him in Riley's morose company, although Oz seemed placid enough. "Yeah," he said. "I'll get some hair dye tomorrow and disguise myself as a student, or something." He was sitting back against the wall on his own bed roll, looking immeasurably better in his own clothes, than he had in Riley's sweats. "I had unfinished business," he said. "I've
got even more now."

"So you're staying?"

"Yeah, I'm staying." He tugged his shoes off. "I'm going to
sleep most of the day, but we'll see you later?" he asked.

It was a polite dismissal and Xander accepted it as such.
"Sure, I'll come by. You should be okay here. Everyone in
town avoids this place. Well, you know that."

Oz gave a weary nod and pulled open his sleeping bag.
"Home, sweet home," he muttered, climbing inside.

Riley was heating water on the stove. "We'll be okay," he
said sparing Xander a very brief glance.

Nodding in reply, Xander took one last look at the lump
of quilted bedding that was Oz and left, heading back out
into the bright morning sunshine.

He paused on the steps outside what used to be the
main doors and gazed out at his town. It looked like an
ordinary Sunday morning. An occasional car drove past;
people heading to church, he supposed. A man walked
by with his dog, obviously following some regular
routine. It all looked so peaceful. With the sun shining down, it was almost impossible to believe in the threat that hung over them.

With a tired sigh, he turned for home. If they didn't come up with a plan soon, he didn't give much for the chances of Sunnydale surviving the culmination of Adam's plans, but that was a problem for later. For now, he pushed the thought aside and concentrated on the idea of his own bed and Spike, who would be awake and waiting for him.

Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episode 4.19. New Moon Rising

Part Thirty-Seven

They had been researching for almost three hours when Spike stomped in through Giles' front door. "Ugh!" he said, loudly and dramatically. "That bastard gives me the creeps."

Xander looked up from the sofa. "He gives you the creeps?" he asked in exaggerated disbelief.

With a grin, Spike crossed the room and bounced down next to him. "You say the sweetest things," he said.
Carefully putting the book he'd been reading before Spike's entrance down on top of a pile of others that they had already gone through, Giles asked, "Did you find out anything useful?" his repressive tone calling an abrupt pause to their teasing.

Digging in his coat pocket, Spike pulled out a computer disc. "Here," he said, flicking it at Giles' head. Giles managed to catch it. "Mission statements, design schematics and I don't know what else. All Maggie Walsh's dirty laundry. He's spicing the dish, so there should be something useful on there."

Turning the disc over in his hands, Giles asked, "He just gave it to you?"

"Yeah. Come on, mate, we're in. That tells us everything Adam wants us to know: full plans of the layout, including the location of all the cells, details of the original grand plan and info on what he's doing instead. He's even marked which door he'll open for us. Oh yeah," he added, turning to Buffy in the chair opposite, "and your soldier's thrown in his chips with the big guy."

"What?"
"Sitting there, large as life, chatting to Adam, he was." He sounded supremely not bothered and leaned back with his hands behind his head, stretched his legs out and put his feet up on the coffee table. In spite of his studied air of relaxation, Xander saw that he was watching Buffy carefully. "Sorry to break it to you and all," he said, "but facts are facts."

Buffy's expression shifted towards the end of Spike's little speech and Xander felt him stiffened, readying himself to react. Xander made a note to mention that later, if Spike got on his case about any aspect of their eventual plan and his own part in it. Leaning over, close to Spike's ear, he whispered, "You're not sorry."

Spike replied out of the side of his mouth, "I know," he muttered, "but polite fictions were more important than truths, when I was young."

Xander gave a snort of amusement that he tried, unsuccessfully, to disguise as a cough.

Meanwhile, Giles had wandered casually across the room, to stand behind Buffy's chair. He laid his hand gently on her shoulder. Buffy broke eye contact with Spike to glance up at him and he gave her a sympathetic
smile. "It may not be as it appears," he suggested. Looking across at Spike, he asked, "Did he say anything to you, while you were there?"

Buffy relaxed and Xander felt Spike do the same. "Now you mention it," he said, "he was looking a bit more wooden than usual. One word answers, glassy eyed, that kind of thing. I didn't ask."

From across the coffee table, Buffy audibly gritted her teeth. "Anything else?" she demanded.

"Er, no. Oh wait, yeah - Adam's reanimated the Witch and some other bloke." Buffy looked puzzled. "Your professor," he clarified. "Plus, one of the soldiers is more than half demon now - don't match any better than Adam, but with the human bits being dark, it doesn't show so much."

Buffy gave a horrified gasp. "Oh my God, Forrest," she said. "I saw Adam kill him. That must be why Riley went..."

Spike shook his head sadly. "Loyalty's a noble thing. Guess your soldier really loved his men, eh?"
"We don't know why he's there," Buffy said. "If he is there and you're not lying." She looked up at Giles "I don't believe he's joined forces with Adam, no matter what Spike says."

Giles didn't appear to know how to respond to that. "Buffy..." he began, only to trail off indecisively.

Xander raised his hand. "Er, guys," he said. "Computer disc?"

Casting a last scowl in Spike's direction, Buffy said, "I'll swing by the school later and check on him."

"Yes, of course," Giles agreed, leaving Buffy, to hand the disc to Tara who slotted it into Willow's laptop.

There was a moment's silence, while Willow clicked and typed and paused and clicked again, before she looked up over the top of the open lid. "There's a file called Info" she said. "Most of it looks like a whole bunch of stuff we already know about 314. But the last paragraph is all about a final phase where Adam manufactures a bunch of creepy cyber-demonoids like him. There's a special lab." She paused and her eyes widened. "It's date stamped for tomorrow," she said.
"Tomorrow?" Buffy exclaimed. "Well, I work best under pressure. If Adam fed Spike this disc, he wants me to know about his evil-guy assembly line. This lab, it's in the Initiative?"

"It doesn't say, but I'm guessing it has to be. I mean, the containment cells..."

Giles pulled his glasses off. "A Trojan horse," he said. "Very clever."

Nodding, Buffy got up and went over to look at the screen. "Yeah, and if Adam's gonna make sure the demons attack the Initiative from the inside..."

"Demons versus soldiers. Massacre, massacre," Xander said, finishing her thought.

Hooking his glasses back over his ears, Giles joined the girls, leaning forward to peer over Willow's shoulder, even though Xander knew he hated reading from a screen. "If we can trust this information," he said, looking up to fix Spike with an appraising stare. "We only have your word it's good."
"It's good," Spike said. "Or as good as we're going to get. It's not my veracity you should be questioning, mate. You're mad if you think I'd encourage Xander to walk into a trap, even if I'd not stop the rest of you."

Giles eyes widened and he froze halfway through the act of straightening up, an arrested expression of understanding on his face. "If he's handed all this over," he said eventually, finishing the move and running his hand back over his head, "he must be ready to start on his final phase. We could try and warn the base, but I doubt they'd listen."

"And he wants me there," Buffy said. "Probably figures I'll even the kill ratio."

Willow was frowning at her laptop, clicking her mouse furiously, but she looked up at this. "He's not worried you might kill him?" she asked.

Buffy shook her head. "No, he's really not."

Glancing back down at her screen, Willow said, "This is gonna take a couple of hours, guys." She shrugged helplessly. "There's a ton of technical specs and I don't know what's important. But at least I've seen the original
blue prints of Adam's design, so I kinda know what I'm looking for."

"Very true," Giles agreed. "And there were some loose pages of notes that might make more sense in tandem with this new information. I'll fetch them." He began to root around on top of the bookcase by the wall and had just pulled a sheaf of papers free when there was a knock on the door, which was immediately followed by Oz's entrance.

"Hey," Oz said, sketching a small wave. "Ummm... There's no good way to say this, but Riley's gone and he's taken the radio."

In the general commotion that followed this announcement, Xander jabbed Spike hard with his elbow, to keep him quiet, but he couldn't do anything about the smug smile on his face. Luckily, Buffy was too busy questioning Oz to notice.

They spent the rest of the night and most of the next day on more research, Willow mostly on the computer, the rest of them going through Giles' books again. Even Spike knuckled down and joined in. They were not looking for anything in particular. It was more a case of hoping for a
lucky break. Searching for serendipity, Giles called it and from the way Spike snorted and Willow gave a wan smile, Xander figured that was Giles' attempt at lightening the depression that slowly settled and deepened as the hours passed with nothing useful to show.

At one point, Buffy left to patrol the streets and check the school, in case Riley had returned. Xander ordered takeaway, which they ate as they read. They slept in snatches.

Eventually, sometime around late morning, it seemed that Buffy had had enough. She closed her book with a snap and stood up. "This is hopeless," she said. "Let's start again with what we know." She paced as she spoke, obviously thinking aloud. "According to the plans Jonathan had," she said, making Xander proud of her with the calm way she said Jonathan's name, "Adam's power source is a uranium core embedded somewhere inside his chest. Probably near the spine."

"So, what about magic?" Willow asked. "Some kind of, I don't know...uranium extracting spell?"

That caused Giles to give a snort of reluctant laughter,
but in the end the final plan was even crazier. Nobody was more surprised than Xander when in reply to his, "Yeah, don't tell me: dumb idea," after he made his flippant summary of their needs, Giles replied, "Actually, anything but..."

It turned out that flippant and crazy were good, in this case. With something to work with, they got down to planning the details. It all came together remarkably fast.

Xander pointed at the map spread out on one end of Giles' desk. "This is Lowell House. The backdoor we used, is here." His fingers skimmed across the surface of the map and stabbed at a spot in the woods north east of the campus, "Spike's escape door is here," and another south east of that. "Where are these caves?" Buffy pointed at a spot just north of Elm Street. Spike reached over and placed his finger east of hers and Buffy pulled her hand away. The four points made a flat diamond shape. "Looks like he's got his own backdoor into the initiative," Xander observed.

Giles nodded. Turning to Willow and Tara he asked, "Can you pull up the floor plans Spike said Adam supplied?"

Willow clicked her mouse, scrolling through the menu of
files on the disc. "Yes, I saw those. It's difficult to tell from the filenames, and there are so many of them. Hang on. Sort by file type. Okay. I just open this and... oh yeah!"

They gathered behind her and studied the plans over her shoulder. "On the principle that up is north..." Giles said. "The lift, I mean elevator, from Lowell House would be this entrance here?"

"Yeah, and the entrance in the hills must be this one at the end of this corridor," Xander added. "Which puts..." He paused to look over at the map. "Based on the distance from Lowell house to the entrance in the woods... Adam's cave... about, here," he finished, pointing at a spot at the bottom of the screen below the floor plan.

"Oh," Willows said. She sounded disappointed.

"We don't know how long the tunnel is from Adam's cave," Giles said. "And this certainly tells us which part of the Initiative to concentrate upon."

"That's 314," Buffy said, pointing at a suite of rooms near the bottom of the screen. "And this is the part I've been
in, officially. The armoury's here. That's the com station. Riley told me the main Control Centre and the Commander's Office are..." She hesitated, her finger hovering over the screen. "Here. West of the barracks. Right under Lowell House."

Meanwhile, Willow had opened another window in the top left corner of the screen and she and Tara were reading another file. "He wants us to use Door C." She paused, studying the screen. "This one," she said, moving her cursor over one of the exits on the floor plans. "And, umm, once we're in, all the outer doors will lock," she read, following Tara's pointing finger.

"That's the one we used last time," Xander said.

"But not the one we're going in by," Buffy announced. She stood back so she could address them all equally. "We're going down the lift shaft," she said.

"We are?" Xander asked. "But..."

Buffy's smile was confident, even cocky. "We want to get to the control room, don't we?" she asked. Xander nodded. "So what better way than to trip the alarm and make them take us there?"
It sounded good, but Xander immediately spotted a problem. "What about Spike and Oz?" he asked. "If we do that, they can't be part of our group, but we'll need them there."

"True, we'll be very vulnerable during the spell," Giles agreed. "But the doors won't lock until Adam knows we're in."

Spike edged up close on Xander's other side. "I choose Door C," he said. "What d'you reckon, mate?" he asked, turning to Oz. "Looks like we're going in first."

Oz nodded thoughtfully. "Only way," he agreed.

Xander was surprised and a little alarmed by the suppressed glee in Spike's voice. "As long as you make sure the soldiers don't see you," he said. He turned so he was standing facing Spike and lifted his hands to cup Spike's face. "If we do this," he whispered. "The chip. You've given away any chance of getting it out."

Spike raised his own hands to cover Xander's. "Don't worry about me, love," he said. "We'll work it out."
Giles cleared his throat and Xander looked around guiltily. Tara was smiling at him while Buffy had an expression of vague distaste on her face. Willow was studying the computer screen with extra intensity. It was left to Giles to observe thoughtfully, "That's true. And if you do this, I might even begin to believe that you do have Xander's best interests at heart."

Spike snorted. "Your generosity overwhelms me, mate."

Giles smiled. "Good," he said. "So it should."

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Getting into the Initiative was easy, and strangely exciting - lowering themselves down the elevator shaft on a rope, praying no one decided to use it in the traditional manner while they were doing so. Getting caught at the bottom required no effort at all. They were immediately rounded up and, according to plan, escorted by three guards to Colonel McNamara's office in the central command station.

As they were herded through the main control room, full of banks of monitors manned by a couple of very young looking soldiers, Xander slowed his pace to give Willow
more time to study the hardware. It was a tactic that earned him a shove in the back with the flat of a rifle that sent him tripping over the threshold into the Colonel's office.

In contrast to the control room, the office was free of high tech equipment, although three telephones - red, white and green - sat on the huge dark wood desk.

The Colonel looked up when they were ushered in. "I didn't expect to see you again," he said, sitting back in his big leather chair and regarding them with satisfaction. "But I can't say it's not a pleasure." His eyes fixed on Giles. "And who are you?" he asked. "Are you encouraging this delinquent behaviour?" Xander managed not to laugh, remembering a younger and very much delinquent Giles. Not that the Colonel would necessarily recognise any difference.

Buffy stepped forward. "Colonel-

She never got a chance to even begin her speech. As if their arrival was the signal Adam had been waiting for, which it was, even if not how he'd planned it, at that moment the lights went out.
No sooner had the emergency lights flickered on than one of the young soldiers from the control room stuck his head around the door. "Sir, the power grid's down. Backup's not responding." He paused before adding, "And we're locked in."

The Colonel got up. He signalled the guards to herd Buffy, Willow, Giles and Xander over to the far side of the room and headed for the door but before he reached it the second technician arrived. "Sir, the containment area's been breached. Hostiles are loose."

The Colonel glared at Buffy, as if he thought she was responsible for the glitches in his systems. "How many?" he snapped.

The soldier blanched. "All of them, Sir."

Buffy folded her arms across her chest. "It's Adam," she said. The Colonel looked at her but didn't say anything. Taking advantage of the moment, she continued, "Look, I'm the only one who can stop him now. Just let me handle this. Get your people out of here."

For a moment Xander thought he was going to see sense. "All right," he said, signalling the guards over to his side
of the room. It made the realisation that he was ignoring her completely, more disappointing. "You men follow me," he ordered. "We've got to secure the armoury, now!"

The guards took up position behind him and Buffy went to follow.

"Not you!" he barked. "You stay here." Turning to the two soldiers from the control room, he said, "These people are under arrest, understand? Keep them here!" Barely waiting for their acknowledgement, he swept out of the room.

The young soldiers were obviously more geeks in uniform, than trained fighters. It took Buffy no more than a moment to knock them out.

"Adam's expecting me to head for the cells," Buffy said as they crowded back into the control room, "to keep the demons contained. He's going to be waiting somewhere that's not there. Willow, find me the way through to where he is."

Willow was already in front of the console pushing buttons and typing commands. Xander went and stood
behind her. The image on the monitor next to Willow's position was split into four, each cycling through a sequence of views of the Initiative. "It's started," he said. Pulling out his cell phone he called Tara in Buffy and Willow's dorm room. "Go," he said, giving her the command that would send her into every building east of Lowell House to sound the fire alarms.

Willow gave the screen a quick glance, pulled a face and turned back to her own monitor. The others gathered behind Xander and they all watched with sick fascination as the carnage escalated before their eyes. One camera was knocked out when a soldier was thrown bodily into it. A shot of a stairwell showed a demon slash twelve inch claws across another soldier's stomach and the soldier seemed to be looking straight into Xander's eyes as he gave his last silent scream before disappearing from their line of sight. Elsewhere a fire was raging and Xander thought he could see men writhing in the flames. He was glad when the picture changed, to show a soldier firing a machine gun and the demon that was charging him fall to the ground.

The pictures kept flipping past, each showing more and more chaos. Sometimes the soldiers seemed to be winning, mostly they were just dying.
Xander was about to turn away when he spotted Spike racing along a corridor with a large, hairy dog on his heels. "Wait!" he cried, grabbing Willow's shoulder as the picture switched to another view. "Can we get that back?"

Buffy pulled him away and shoved him bodily behind her. "How we doing, Will?" she asked.

Ignoring both of them, Willow kept typing. Xander pushed around Buffy and fixed his eyes on the screen, scanning each image for another sight of Spike and Oz.

Eventually his frantic searching was interrupted by Willow exclaiming, "Eureka! Look! According to this, there's air ducts and electrical conduits all running into there. Right behind 314."

Xander looked at the technical floor plan on the screen, memorising the positions of the walls and doors.

"Okay," Buffy said. "Now we just have to get there."

They opened the door into the main hanger-like area with care and paused a moment to assess the situation.
Then Buffy set off at a run and they followed, dodging and diving as they went. Buffy punched a demon out of her way, clearing a path and Xander could see the door she was heading for across the expanse of the floor. Halfway there, they paused for breath behind a burning console of some sort but there was no time to waste. Staying still would leave them sitting ducks. As soon as she had checked that they were all still together, Buffy was off again. Xander grabbed a semi-automatic from the hands of a dead soldier and followed, firing past Giles, Willow and Buffy at anything that looked like it might turn their way.

There was no time to take in the big picture of the fight, all Xander could do was focus on the area immediately ahead of them. He spotted another fallen soldier with a laser rifle lying next to him. "Giles!" he shouted and threw his gun to him when he turned in response. Giles caught it and immediately fired at a large hairy creature that was charging down on them from their right. Xander dived to the left and grabbed the laser gun. Buffy was trading blows with something green and scaly and they didn't have time for that. Xander trained his gun on it, praying that the sight hadn't been damaged. Buffy kicked out and the demon staggered back a couple of paces. Xander pulled the trigger and hit it with a blast in its
midsection. It fell to the floor and Buffy started to run again.

A sound behind him sent Xander spinning on the spot, gun raised. Spike skidded to a halt, hands held up in surrender. "Easy, Sheriff. Watch where you point that thing."

Xander lowered the gun and offered him a sick smile. He jerked his head towards Willow's retreating back. "Come on," he said only then noticing the wolf limping at Spike's side.

They ran.

*****

314 was relatively undisturbed and it didn't take long to locate the hidden entrance to the uncharted back rooms of the Initiative. Finding something to barricade the door they had come in by was more difficult, but between them, Spike and Buffy managed to push a storage unit across it. Then it was a matter of setting up the spell and watching Buffy disappear through the new gap in the opposite wall. "How long before the ritual kicks in?" she asked, pausing and looking back with her hand on the
edge of the opening.

Giles shrugged. "Five minutes, give or take."

She nodded and was gone. Spike closed the panel behind her and pushed a file cabinet against it.

It was difficult to sit down and breathe calmly after the mad dash across the main hanger, but when Giles lit the candle and Willow started to chant, Xander felt his heart rate slow in response. He took his card and laid it down, as instructed and wondered at the milky glow that was beginning to suffuse the room.

The moment of union was both shockingly sudden and as gentle as a ripple on a sunlit lake. They stood up. The thing facing them glowed with black light, jagged and scarred, a dissonance in the unity of the all. "You can't last much longer," it said.

They raised their hand. "We can. We are forever."

They knew the words, but they were unimportant, merely a means to focus the power of the whole. The unity gathered in them, repelling the energy directed at them and absorbing it, redirecting it into life.
The darkness rushed at them and they waited. When it drew near they reached into it and pulled free the spark. The darkness vanished and they looked at the spark until it faded.

Xander opened his eyes to see Spike leaning over him and to the feeling of Spike's hand stroking his hair back from his forehead. "You okay, pet?" Spike asked.

Xander managed a nod and rolled his head to look around. Next to him Willow was pushing herself into a sitting position "Wow," she said. "That was..." before trailing off, because what that was, was beyond any words and Xander knew that too.

A crashing sound behind him caused Spike to disappear, but when Xander turned his head the other way, Spike was looking down at a dead demon at his feet. Oz had his fangs buried in its neck, but he released it quickly and backed away. Xander felt a hysterical urge to giggle at the sight of a large wolf trying to spit. If he'd been in human form, his distaste could not have been clearer.

"Nasty sort of fellow," Spike observed, brushing his hands together as if he was wiping them clean. He
reached down and gave Oz's ear an affectionate tug. "Well done, mate," he said.

Xander began to struggle into a sitting position and looked around the room. Giles was leaning against the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him. He was looking up at Spike, his brow wrinkled in puzzlement. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Keeping the wolf in check," Spike said, nodding down at a now peacefully panting Oz. He looked around the group and raised his eyebrows questioningly. "So, the unkillable nuclear demon?" he asked. "Dead, yes?"

Giles' face cleared. "Yes, yes he is."

Spike grinned, reaching a hand down to help Xander to his feet.

A moment later, the filing cabinet in the corner began to rock. Xander and Spike went over to push it aside and let Buffy through.

"Buffy," Giles said, his pride clear in his voice. Her appearance seemed to be the thing he needed to start him moving. He rolled over onto his hands and knees and
began to clamber awkwardly to his feet.

"And Riley," Xander added. "We weren't expecting to see you here."

Riley hesitated before entering the room, but took the necessary step and halted just inside. "There's no way out back there," he said. "Adam blocked the cave entrance." He stood up straight and stiff, almost at attention. "And I've still got men out there," he added, jerking his head towards the door into the Initiative.

"And we need to get out," Xander observed.

Riley looked around and Xander saw the moment he noticed Spike. "No time, Riley," he said. "Stand down!"

Finally upright, Giles intervened, surprisingly. "Yes," he said. "You were on different sides, but the war is over. Now all we can hope for is to save a few of the survivors."

Spike was bouncing. "Well, let's go save 'em, by gum," he said.

Outside in the main hanger, the carnage was appalling,
but the space was virtually empty of life. The fight had obviously moved on. They went back to the control room and Riley put out a call on the PA system for a general retreat into Section C and then Buffy led a sweep through the corridors. Riley's presence was sufficient to ensure the few stragglers they saw followed, and slowly they made their way to the door above Elm Street, fighting every inch of the way but also gathering more walking wounded as they went.

Every new arrival was questioned and all told similar stories of running from their erstwhile prisoners. At one junction Riley signed off a group of three able bodied with instructions to "Check the brig." They left, returning a few minutes later to report it unlocked, like the rest of the base, and empty.

There were about thirty of them by that point, almost half being helped to walk or being carried. The remaining soldiers took point and they continued on their way to the accompaniment of gun fire and pained moans.

Xander concentrated on keeping between the soldiers and Spike and Spike, for once, appeared willing to be sensible and not attract attention to himself. Oz paced on his other side, still in wolf form. The soldiers were all
too willing to stay clear of him.

There were bodies scattered everywhere and in every case they paused to check for signs of life. Xander also collected weapons and ammunition from the fallen, which he handed out to anyone who needed more.

He was leaning over a tangle of three bodies, extracting a clip and three hand grenades from the belt of a dead soldier when he became aware of Giles at his side, mostly because Giles gave a soft cry and fell to his knees next to him.

Xander reached out to him. "Giles, are you hurt?"

Giles tugged at the shoulder of one of the bodies, a man in civilian clothes who was lying on his front. Xander helped and together they turned him over. His face was unmarked, his eyes staring blindly up at the ceiling but his chest was a mass of torn and bloody fabric. "Oh god!" Giles cried. "Oh no, no, no."

Buffy was there in an instant, pulling him away and onto his feet. "Giles," she urged. "We have to keep moving." She looked down and Xander saw her blanch. She slipped an arm around Giles' waist and her voice was gentler
when she said, "Come on."

Giles allowed himself to be guided away. Xander grabbed the last ammunition clip from the soldier's belt and followed.

When they finally reached the doors to the outside, they had to blast the lock to open them. Meanwhile, Riley and his men brought down the ceiling behind them, to slow any demon pursuit. As they staggered out into the clean night air, it seemed unbelievable to Xander that they had survived.

**Epilogue**

Heavy construction vehicles began to arrive the next day. Xander never found out what was done, but he knew enough about construction work by then to make a guess, based on the number of concrete mixers that trundled through town and up to the campus.
A whole section of the school, east of Lowell House, was shut off to traffic, the authorities using the fire alarms that had led to a general evacuation of the campus as their excuse. Oz moved in with Xander and Spike for a few days and Riley was hauled away by the military to make his report. He reappeared three days later, looking tired. "Honourable discharge," was all he'd say on the matter. Oz went out and bought large quantities of alcohol with Xander's money and somehow Riley ended up staying the night. He wouldn't look at Spike, unless he had to, and he certainly never spoke directly to him, but for some reason that Xander couldn't understand, he hung around, sleeping on the floor in Spike's old room, while Oz slept on the mattress.

Two days later they left together. Oz smiled in reply to Xander's question as to where they were heading. "I don't know," he said. "It just seems like the best thing to do. I'll go up to the campus first, see Willow. Then..." he shrugged. "Maybe Iowa?"

Later that evening, Xander met up with Buffy, Willow and Tara at the Bronze.

"He's gone then?" Xander asked, when Tara went to the bar.
Willow nodded. "Yeah."

Reaching towards her, Buffy said, "I'm sorry Will."

Willow relaxed into her hug. When she pulled back, she looked sort of sad, sort of at peace. "When I'm sixty I'm going to Istanbul," she said. Studying her face, Xander decided not to ask.

That night, once his breathing had returned to normal, Xander turned his head on his pillow and looked across at Spike. "Are you staying?" he asked.

Spike rolled onto his side, facing him. "Was planning to," he said, reaching over and pinching Xander's ear, making him squeal and pull away.

"Good." Xander reached out and stroked a finger down Spike's cheek. "I'm sorry about the chip," he said. "But I'm glad too, because you'd have left if you..." He stopped and stared at Spike. "When?" he asked.

Grinning, Spike pinched his nose, gently this time. "Told you Adam didn't understand vampires, pet. Seems like you don't either. I'm not going anywhere." He paused
and his cocky expression faltered. "Unless you-

"No!" Xander interrupted him before he could finish the question. "I trust you." Spike's smile returned. "But I want you to promise not to turn me. And I want to know the truth about vampires. All of it."

"Could take a while, pet."

"We've got time. And Willow's got a spell."

Spike leaned forward and dropped a kiss on the tip of Xander's nose. "Yeah, we've got time," he agreed. "All the time in the world." Xander stretched and curled his body into Spike's side and Spike ran his hand down Xander's back, to come to rest lightly on his butt. "Want to come to LA, pet?" he asked.

Xander tilted his head up to look at Spikes face. "Why?" he asked in return.

"Oh, no reason," Spike replied airily. "Was just thinking of going to see Angel about my ring."

Note: Some bits of dialogue borrowed and adapted from episode 4.21, Primeval, Pt2.
Note 2: If you've enjoyed this story, please pause a moment and let me know. It is always lovely to hear that people have enjoyed what I've written. I won't write any less if you don't; it's just really nice for me. *g*

The End