Pairing: Spike/Xander
Rating: NC-17
Disclaimer: I'm not Josh
Warnings: m/m, some violence and angst, and, well, biting
Author's Note: This is for xmas_n_july. The fic is
complete and I’ll post daily. Thank you to @lil_coyote and @faketoysoldier for the perfect banners. And thank you to @whyskeyeyes for the awesome prompt which was: It's post Buffy, Post Angel. Xander stops at the entrance to a sewer tunnel and sees Spike huddled against a wall. (He's been searching for him) He approaches him. As Xander touches Spike, Spike slams him to the ground and bites him ..... you take it from there... why is he there and what happens next. As always, I adore feedback!

Hard-Bitten

by

Whichclothes

Part One

There was nothing like Chicago sewers in the summertime.
Thank the gods.

Because he’d visited a sewer or two in his time, but this was horrific. The stench was beyond awful, and if he’d had anything to eat for dinner he would have lost it long ago. They were going to love him when he returned to the hotel with this reek permeating his skin. He was just going to have to burn his clothing. And then there were the local residents. The junkies who’d been too wasted to do more than follow him with their hollow eyes. The crazy homeless guy with the aluminum foil hat who’d taken one look at Xander and his patch, and started screeching about Cyclops aliens invading the planet. The animal that scurried by and was either an enormous rat or a hideous dog. Or maybe some kind of demon. An alligator or two might be comforting right now.

He hadn’t started out down here. He’d begun with more obvious places for Spike to hang out—demon bars and whorehouses and suckhouses—but found no sign of him. But Spike had a way of drawing
attention to himself wherever he went, and Xander eventually found a couple of Yarbnies who admitted they’d seen him a few weeks back. That led him to a specific bar, a seedy dive that somehow reminded him of the cantina scene in *Star Wars*. He’d scowled around and dropped Slayers’ names ominously until a group of purplish things with wings said they’d seen him down in the sewers. An ugly furry guy who looked like a mutant monkey backed up their story, as did a vamp with a bad overbite and a Russian accent.

So he’d gone to the sewers with a stake in his back pocket and a flashlight in his hand. It turned out that there were a whole lot of tunnels in the Windy City. The purple guys had given him a general area, though, and he’d come down in mid-afternoon, figuring Spike at least wouldn’t be anywhere out in the open then. He wandered for hours, getting pretty much hopelessly lost, seeing way more of the guts of this city than he’d ever wanted to.

And then, as he hesitated at the intersection of two major lines, he thought he saw something hunched
in the gloom. “Spike?” he said. There was no reply other than the echo of his own voice. Still, there was something about the way this figure was bent into itself, something about the angle at which it sat.

Cautiously, he stepped closer. “Spike?” he said again, and still there was no answer. But now he could tell it was definitely a person, a person dressed in black and huddled against the wall, head against knees and arms protectively over head.

A few more feet, and he could make out details. Long leather duster, caked in grime. Scuffed heavy boots. Pale, almost delicate hands, the nails speckled with the vestiges of black polish.

At first he’d thought the person might be asleep, but now he saw that the entire body was trembling, as if the person were terrified. Even if this wasn’t Spike, he had to find out what was wrong, didn’t he?

Moving very slowly, he closed the gap between
them, until his own filthy Nikes were nearly against the man. He bent down, gently touched one hand to a shaking shoulder, and, in a voice barely over a whisper, repeated the vampire’s name.

The person burst upwards, and Xander stumbled back, nearly falling. His flashlight went flying out of his hand. He had just enough time to see the face before him, almost if it were frozen in a flash photograph, and sure enough, that was Spike. But oh, shit, that was Spike in game-face, and the vampire was roaring and launching himself at Xander. Then Xander was flat on his back in the fetid muck, the air knocked out of his lungs, Spike pinning him in place with the weight of his body. Before Xander could even gather the breath to scream, sharp teeth were descending towards his neck, were tearing into him.

Back when he was in school, his father would glance at his report card, curl his lip in disgust, and call him an empty-headed little shit. Xander learned to duck the blow that always followed. The truth was, he
wasn’t empty-headed at all. In fact, he was full-headed, too full-headed.

He would sit in the classroom and think about, say, Cordelia, and how far she was likely to let him go during their next session in the closet or behind the stacks of books, and how he could persuade her to go a little farther, and whether his desire for her to go farther was actually outweighed by his being scared half to death at the thought of it, and, speaking of death, weren’t they supposed to patrol tonight, and he hoped there were no more Mnunga demons, not like last time, because then he’d ended up with all that disgusting green stuff all over him, and what was that stuff anyway, he probably didn’t want to know, and how come it was always him who ended up covered in toxic demon goo, not too unlike the goo his chemistry teacher was currently swirling around in a beaker, and wow, the chem teacher was kind of hot, but, oh, hot science teacher, don’t go there, Miss Cortez might be another giant bug thing who wanted to mate with him and then eat him and that was not of the good, well, not the eating part anyway, but maybe the
mating part, except not with a bug, no, with a nice, warm, soft girl, or maybe a hard sexy boy oh fuck he did not think that, girl, yes GIRL, like Cordelia or Buffy or Willow, no, not going there either, definitely not Willow, but like Cordelia or Buffy except with Buffy there was the whole Angel thing, and Angel was kind of hot—gah! No! Vampire! Male vampire! Not hot!—but yeah, Cordelia, and why was Devoto over there giving him the evil eye, that prick wasn’t going to try to bully him again after class was he, but if he did the Xan-man would just smoothly walk by because that kind of stuff was beneath him, couldn’t touch him at all, no way, because he killed demons dammit and Cordelia Chase was his girlfriend and—Shit. Did Miss Cortez just say something about a test tomorrow?

See? Full-headed.

Was it any wonder he tended to have troubles managing to conjugate French verbs?

So now, as the life was being drained from him, one
swallow at a time, he thought about how this was exactly how he’d expected to die, except for the Spike part. He hadn’t expected to die at Spike’s fangs for nearly a decade now. And he really didn’t want to die. Not now. Well, not ever, if he could help it. But, Christ, this felt really good. Why hadn’t anyone told him how good this felt? He took back everything evil he ever thought about Riley Finn paying to get bitten. He’d pay for this. If he actually had any of his own money, that is, and not just a stingy expense account from the Council, because the Council probably wouldn’t be very pleased to shell out dough for vamps to feed off him. But, hey! They didn’t have to, because right now Spike was doing it for free.

Xander was pretty sure he was actually straining his hips upward against the body astride him, and he was about to come in his pants. That was going to be really embarrassing when they found his dried-out husk of a corpse, and then they did the autopsy or whatever and discovered semen in his briefs, so maybe he should try to think about baseball right now, but he wasn’t sure if that worked with vamp
bites anyway, and, oh fuck, oh fuck, oh—

With a terrible howling cry, Spike pulled himself away.

He got up, stumbled, got up again, and ran, deeper into the sewer. Xander staggered to his feet, too, he wasn’t sure whether to chase after the retreating vampire or run away, but either was pretty much out of the question anyway. Lightheaded and dizzy, he slumped heavily against the wall.

“Spike!” he called weakly.

But Spike never even looked back.

When he went looking next time, he’d carry his stake in his hand.

The Irony Fairy had been very generous lately.

Dead Boy called Buffy for help. Help for Spike, of all
people! He’d sent Spike off on some sort of errand, and then didn’t hear from him again. He insisted that something had gone wrong, that this wasn’t just Captain Peroxide’s normal not-overly-reliable ways. Couldn’t go after him himself because, as usual, some sort of apocalypse was looming over LA. But Buffy couldn’t go either, not with the baby due in less than a month, and boy wouldn’t Xander have loved to see the look on Angel’s face when he got *that* bit of news.

Willow would have gone if Buffy had asked her to. And if she hadn’t got her magics all screwed up the previous week fighting the latest apocalypse in *their* neck of the woods. Wouldn’t have that fixed up for a couple of months yet, she said.

And Giles. Wouldn’t have wanted to go, but might have if Buffy made that doe-eyed pouting face at him. But he had some big important Watcher something to work on, so he was out, too.

So that left Expendable Guy himself flying around the globe to a city he didn’t like in search of a
vampire he couldn’t stand. And when he’d finally found him, the fucker had bit him.

Xander wished the Irony Fairy would lay off for a while.

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It took two days for Xander to recover. He didn’t think Spike had actually taken that much blood. Maybe a little more than one of those nice Red Cross ladies with the cookies and juice. But he’d been jetlagged to begin with, and his back was bruised pretty well from the fall, and he just wasn’t all that keen to go stalking around in shit tunnels looking for psychovamp. In fact, he probably would have just got on the next plane back to England, except he kept picturing the look on Spike’s face as he tore himself away from Xander’s neck. He’d still been vamped out, his fangs dripping with blood—Xander’s blood!—but his yellow eyes had held horror and fear. And that sound he made! Xander thought that was going to haunt him for the rest of
So Xander spent two days soaking in the hotel room tub, cursing the tiny little cakes of soap and the itty-bitty bottles of shampoo. He watched pay-for-view porn on the tv. He revived his iron levels by ordering steaks from room service and washing them down with lots of beer—which, strictly speaking, did nothing for his red cell count, but sure tasted good. And somebody else was paying, the Watchers Council or Angel, he didn’t know and didn’t care.

Around lunchtime on the second day, he called London. Buffy and Willow were sympathetic and worried about Spike, but neither had any clue what was going on. So he called Giles, who “good lorded” satisfyingly over his tale of the attack, and promised to do some research, but with so little to go on wasn’t very optimistic. So then Xander took a deep, resigned breath and dialed LA, at least slightly satisfied that he’d almost certainly be waking the big vamp up.
The phone rang nearly a half dozen times, and then there was a crashing sound, like when someone drops the receiver. “Huh? Wha?” said the voice on the other end, and Xander smiled to himself.

“Angel?”

“Yeah. Whozzit?”

“Xander Harris.”

“Xander!” Angel suddenly sounded a lot more alert. “Where are you?”

“Hog butcher for the world.”

“Have you found Spike?”

“You could say that. What the hell’s wrong with him?”

“What’s—What do you mean? What’s happened?”

Xander sighed. Looked like he was getting more
questions than answers here. He told Angel about looking for the wayward vampire, and about the sewers, and about what happened there. Angel was silent, except for one loud exclamation when Xander told him about the bite—“Fuck!”—and another—“Shit!”—when Xander described the expression on Spike’s face, just before he’d run off.

“So you want to tell me what’s going on, Angel? Seeing as how I still have vampire spit imbedded in my skin?”

There was a brief pause. “Look, Xander, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. If I’d had any idea he was going to come after you like that—“

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure you’re all broken up over it. C’mon. What do you know?”

“Not much.” There was a loud puff of air. “He drove there to pick up this talisman we needed. The Eye of Raflos. He was supposed to come right back with it.”
“You couldn’t have just had someone Fed-Ex it to you?”

“No. Someone had to negotiate for it in person.”

“You sent Spike to negotiate? Kind of like sending an elephant to tapdance, isn’t it?”

Angel kind of groaned. “I didn’t have any choice. Besides, he’s not that bad. He can be…fuck. Never mind. So he went, and that was it. He was supposed to call when he got the thing, but he never did. I can’t get any answer on his cell. After a couple of days I contacted the guy who was supposed to sell us the Eye, but he said Spike never showed up. That’s all I know.”

Well, that was helpful. “How did you know he didn’t just take off somewhere?”

“He’s not—he hasn’t been that flaky for a while, Xander. Besides, if he did, he didn’t drive. His car was impounded in Chicago about a week after he left here. It sat on the street without being moved
for too long.”

“Do you know where they found it?”

“Yeah. Hang on.”

There were some rustling noises, and the smack of something hitting the floor, then more rustling. Then Angel was back on the phone, reading off an address. Xander dutifully wrote it down.

“Xander? The situation here in LA’s not pretty. There’s this clan of Efrehok demons, and they’re planning—“

“Save it. I got it. I’m not gonna get any relief from vamp retrieval, am I?”

“No. Sorry. Look, I’ll...I’ll owe you a big one, okay?”

Great. Xander rubbed his eye tiredly. “Fine. But if you find out anything else in the meantime, let me know.”
“I will.”

“Okay. B—“

“Wait!”

“What?”

“One more thing. I still need the Eye. Think you can get it and send it to me? Whatever that guy wants, I can get him. I really need this thing.”

“Anything else I can do for you, Angel? Wash your car? Do your taxes?”

“Be careful, Xander.”

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Xander decided to deal with the talisman first. The irony of him trying to wheel and deal over an eye was not lost on him. Damn Fairy.
The guy who had it was named Danny Vega. He was a wizard of some sort, and he owned an occult bookshop off of Wabash. It was within walking distance of the hotel, actually, so Xander slapped a bandage on his neck—never travel without a first aid kit, that was his motto—and tromped over there through air hot and humid as a sauna. He was damp and crabby by the time he got there. The store was small and slightly cramped, but it was air-conditioned, and it smelled nice. Like flowers.

Vega was younger than Xander had expected, and not at all Dumbledoresque. Actually, he was short and muscular, with thick black hair. He looked like more like a soccer player than a magician.

“Can I help you?” he asked, smiling.

“I think so. I’m here for the, uh, Eye of Raflos? Angel sent me.”

Vega’s smile grew warmer. “Ah! But you’re not Spike.” He gestured outside, at the sun-drenched street from which Xander had just entered.
Xander snorted. “No. Name’s Xander Harris.” He came closer to the counter and they shook hands.

“Angel called a while back asking about Spike. Is everything all right?”

“I don’t know,” Xander replied. He didn’t really want to get into the whole thing. “You still haven’t seen him, huh?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. The, um, Eye?”

“Of course. Just a minute.” Vega disappeared for a moment through a doorway behind the counter. He came back holding a red drawstring bag. Untying the top carefully, he upended the bag over the counter, and a small object fell out. It looked like—ugh—a human eye, fine veins and all. Kind of greenish iris. But there was a sparkly red stone of some kind set where the pupil would be, and a small silver hoop was inserted in the top. A fine
chain ran through the hoop.

“Do you know what this does?” Vega asked.

“No. Don’t particularly want to know, actually. Just doing a guy a favor.”

“I understand. Now, the terms of the purchase?”

“Yeah, um, whatta ya want for it?” Xander hated to haggle. He’d had to do it a lot when he was in Africa, and it always made him feel uncomfortable, and he always came away feeling as if he’d probably been cheated. In this case, he had absolutely no clue what this little trinket was worth.

Vega looked at him consideringly. “I was going to ask forty grand.” Xander had to stop his jaw from dropping. “But I’ll tell you what. I can let you have it for thirty...if you’ll go out to dinner with me tomorrow.”

Xander felt himself turning bright red. “I...uh...didn’t realize a date with me was worth ten k,” he
stammered.

Vega raised one eyebrow and grinned. “I’m willing to take that chance.”

Xander blushed even more, if that were possible. “I’m flattered. Really. But I’m not gay. Sorry.”

Vega’s smile didn’t falter. “Doesn’t matter to me. I can be pretty persuasive, you know.”

Deep in his heart, Xander had an inkling that not all that much persuasion would be required. “I’ll bet you can,” he replied. “But right now...I really need to deal with the whole missing Spike thing.”

The wizard looked disappointed, but he nodded. “I understand. I’ll compromise. How about thirty-five thousand and a kiss?”

Xander blinked at him. For all he knew, the stupid thing was only worth twenty bucks. But Angel said whatever Vega wanted. And the man did have a full bottom lip, and—“Okay. But I’ve never smooched a
guy before, so no guarantees about the quality, right?”

Vega laughed and caught at Xander’s hand, which was on the counter. “It’s not all that different from kissing a girl—as long as your partner has shaved recently.”

“What’s the deal? Why are you so interested in me anyway? I’m not exactly irresistible.”

“I don’t know. There’s something about you, Xander Harris. Something really intriguing. Besides,” he shrugged, “I like a little challenge.”

The term “demon magnet” popped into Xander’s head, and it occurred to him that Vega might not be quite as human as he looked. Before Xander could do anything about it, though, the other man had come around the counter and wrapped Xander in his arms. This close, he smelled of aftershave and herbs. It wasn’t unpleasant. He tipped his head upward—Xander was several inches taller—and pressed in close, touching his soft lips against
Xander’s.

It felt...nice.

When Vega applied just a bit more pressure, Xander allowed his own lips to part a little, and then he was tasting another man for the first time, the flavor of salt and mint and it wasn’t bad at all. In fact it was pretty damn good.

Five thousand dollar kiss, Xander thought, and he rubbed his hands against the strong, broad back and clenched the other man’s body closer to his until they were touching from chest to toe. Vega dug his fingers slightly into Xander’s hips and moaned quietly.

When they pulled apart, they were both a little breathless.

“Worth every penny,” Vega said, his eyes sparkling.

“Guh,” said Xander, with as much eloquence as he could muster.
Vega walked back around the counter and scooped the Eye back into the bag. He held it out toward Xander.

“Um...the, uh, thirty-five grand?” Xander said.

“Have Angel call me with the credit card number, or wire me the payment. I’m sure you’re good for it.”

Xander took the bag. “Um, thanks.”

The wizard beamed at him. “Anytime. I’m sorry Spike is missing, but I’m not at all sorry Angel sent you in place of a vampire. When you get this Spike thing settled, if you want to take me up on that dinner after all, you know where to find me.”

Xander smiled back. “Okay.”

He headed for the door, but before he pulled it open, Vega said, “Xander? If I can help find him, let me know.”
Xander turned and nodded. “Thanks.”

And he walked back out into the oppressive sun still tasting the man on his lips.

**Part Two**

Spike’s car was impounded not far from where Xander found him, so Xander had some hope that the vampire wasn’t wandering far, and that he might find him nearby. But four days later he’d seen even more miles of sewer tunnels, and there was still no sign of Spike. He figured he’d done enough. He felt like he’d have to bathe in acid to get the smell out of his skin and hair; he’d seen some seriously creepy creatures that should always stay far, far below ground; and eventually he was going to have to deal with the fact that he been turned on both by being bitten and by being kissed by a man.

He called Angel and told him he was going to throw in the towel. And then he wasn’t sure whether it was Angel’s quiet, pleading words, or the note of true desperation he could sense even from
seventeen hundred miles away, but he agreed to give it just a couple more days.

On the second of those days, nearly two weeks after he’d first arrived in Chicago, he saw a motionless dark lump hunched against a wall, far from the tunnel entry. He couldn’t even tell if it was a person or simply discarded trash of some kind. He took a deep breath, clutched the stake tightly, and walked closer. Aside from his footsteps, the only sound was the quiet drip drip of water falling from the ceiling and hitting the brown puddles on the floor.

He approached even more cautiously than last time, ready to plunge that stake home at any second. When he was very near, he shined his flashlight directly on the mystery object. “Spike?” he said, feeling a definite sense of déjà vu. The man—because it was a man, and not a pile of garbage—shifted slightly, allowing Xander a glimpse of his face.

Xander gasped.
It was Spike. But skeletally thin, his skin stretched so tightly over his frame that it was a wonder his cheekbones weren’t poking right through. His blue eyes were dull, and his hair and face were caked with grime and blood. At least some of the blood was probably his own, because there was a huge open gash above his forehead, and another down the right side of his face. He lifted one arm slowly toward Xander—it was shaking violently—and croaked out a word that might have been *please*.

And then his arm fell and he slumped farther, as if that small effort had been too much for him and he’d lost consciousness.

Now that Xander had found him, and Spike didn’t seem about to eat him, what the hell was Xander supposed to do? He could try and get help. But there weren’t any vamp ambulance services, and all his friends were on another continent, and in any case, he wasn’t so certain that if he left, he wouldn’t come back to find just a small pile of dust. He couldn’t just leave Spike here. But if he tried to
carry Spike out of here, he was going to have to let go of the stake, and that would be bad if Spike got the munchies again.

Xander stood, looking uncertainly at the small figure at his feet. Then he sighed and stuffed the sharp wood in one back pocket and the flashlight in the other. Just enough weak light filtered through the storm drains for him to see what he was doing.

He spoke softly. “Spike, this is Xander. Xander Harris. Remember me? You crashed at my place a couple times, tried to kill me once or twice, we fought a few apocalypses together?”

He wasn’t particularly surprised when Spike didn’t respond. He bent down and tried to haul the vampire to his feet, but he was dead weight. No pun intended. So instead Xander scooped him up and heaved him over his shoulder. He began the long walk back to his rental car, thankful for all the hours he’d spent working out since he returned from Africa, hoping like hell that Spike didn’t wake up with his fangs within biting distance of Xander’s
Spike was light. Much lighter than a grown vamp ought to be. But still, Xander had to stop several times and plunk him down on the ground and rest. Spike never so much as twitched on his own, and maybe the slow progress was a good thing, because it was just about dusk when they reached the exit. Xander eyed the half-block or so between them and the rental car, and considered the chances that Spike could make it without combusting. Maybe if he waited just a few more minutes. As carefully as he could, he set Spike down right near the broken grate at the entrance, and then squatted against the curved wall. He was completely drenched with sweat and other liquids, and salty tracks were running down his forehead and under his patch, stinging and itching in the socket. He didn’t want to wipe his face, though, not with the filth that covered his hands.

A young couple walked by, hand in hand, giggling together. They didn’t see him skulking in the tunnel. Which was good—he’d probably have scared the
crap out of them if they did.

The couple was gone and the sun was no longer visible. A swarm of fireflies appeared near a clump of weeds nearby, and Xander smiled. He’d never seen one when he was a kid—they didn’t have them in California—and he still found them a nice surprise as an adult.

He glanced at Spike, who was on his back, his head twisted slightly toward Xander. His eyes were closed and he looked, well, dead.

With a groan, Xander hoisted himself to his feet and once again picked Spike up, this time cradling him in his arms. Spike flopped bonelessly and, as Xander stepped out of the tunnel and into the slightly brighter light outside, he saw that the vampire’s clothes were shredded, and so was the flesh underneath. Xander shook his head in disbelief. He’d seen Spike take on some mighty big demons and come out of the scrap virtually unscathed. What the hell did this to him?
Xander had to put Spike down again when he got to the car. He unlocked the back door and carefully slid Spike across the back seat. Avis was not going to be happy with the state of its car, but it wouldn’t be the first time he’d returned a rental in questionable condition. He always paid for the damage waiver.

Xander had been keeping Magic Wipes and a spare set of clothes in the car so he didn’t have to walk into the hotel smelling quite so much like roadkill. Now, he cleansed his hands and face and quickly shucked his t-shirt, shoes, and jeans, leaving only a pair of boxers on. It felt really good to be bare-skinned right now, but he didn’t need a public indecency charge at the moment, so he slipped on the clean clothes from the passenger seat. Angel was so going to have to pay for a new wardrobe for him when this was over.

He thought he heard a moan from the back as he drove, and glanced in the rear view mirror. For a split second, he startled when he saw nobody there. Duh.
The hotel had an underground parking garage. He was very thankful there was no one else around when he pulled Spike from the car, and even more thankful that the elevator car was empty. Anybody who saw what he was carrying in his arms would assume he was a murderer and run screaming away, probably.

His room was on the tenth floor. He juggled Spike awkwardly as he unlocked it, and then heaved a huge sigh of relief when he was finally able to drop the vampire onto the bed. Then he just stood there, uncertain what to do next. He was a little worried—okay, a lot worried—that Spike would wake up and come after him again, but there wasn’t much he could do about that. Even if he could get some ropes or chains or something, there was nothing really strong enough to secure them to. Obviously, he should have stayed at a hotel with a Bondage Suite. Maybe he should just call Angel and tell him to come pick up his grandkid.

Then Spike definitely did moan, and he stirred just a little, his mouth falling open. Suddenly he looked
very small and vulnerable. Xander swore under his breath. Clearly, he was going to have to play nurse.

Okay. He’d patched up wounded friends and Slayers plenty of times before, and he’d been patched up himself more times than he could count. He knew what to do.

He walked slowly to the side of the bed. Speaking soothingly, he touched Spike’s shoulder. Spike just lay motionless. As gently as he could, Xander pulled the duster off of him. He gave it a quick look. It was indescribably filthy, but mostly undamaged. He hoped there was a spectacularly talented leather cleaner somewhere in Chicagoland. He certainly couldn’t bring himself to just toss the thing—it seemed almost like an extension of Spike’s body. So he folded it and set it on the floor in the corner.

The rest of Spike’s clothes were trashed and had to go. He began by unlacing and removing the boots. Spike’s bare feet were bloody and bruised, as if he hadn’t taken the boots off in a long time. Next came the t-shirt—black, of course—and Xander winced
when bits of the cotton stuck to Spike’s wounds and then pulled away. He tried not to look too closely at the state of Spike’s body. He’d have to face that soon enough anyway.

Finally, he unbuckled Spike’s belt, unfastened the button and zipper, and slowly peeled away the remains of his jeans. And now he had a naked, unconscious, battered, dirty vampire on his bed. Just what he always wanted.

It occurred to him that if Spike did wake up, he was going to need to eat, and Xander was the only thing edible in sight. Fuck. Where was he going to find blood that wasn’t his own?

Time for grandpa to help.

“Angel? Xander.”

“Can you give it just one more day, please? I’ll—”

“I’ve got him.”
Angel let out a long, slow breath. “Put him on the phone. Please.”

“Can’t. He’s out cold. He’s...in pretty rough shape.”

“What’d you do to him?”

“Me? Nothing! I found him like this. You think I’m going to drag myself through shit for a week just so I can beat him up?”

“Right. I’m sorry.”

“Look, I’m gonna do what I can for him. But he needs to feed, preferably not on me. Any ideas?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Give me your hotel and room number. I’ll have some delivered tonight.”

“Monaco, 1026. Any tips on demon doctoring?”

“Not really. If we don’t dust, we usually heal okay. I’m gonna see if I can find human blood. It works better. Do you have a microwave so you can heat
“Is it?”

“No.”

“All right. Cold is okay.”

“There’s a coffee maker. Maybe I can soak the bags in hot water.”

“Good. That’ll work.”

“Angel, if he wakes up and drains me, I’m gonna haunt your ass for all eternity.”

“Fair enough. Call me if there are any developments, okay?”

“Fine.”

As Xander hung up, he wondered again at the concern in Angel’s voice. He obviously really cared what happened to Spike. That was weird. He’d never heard either of them say anything nice about the other. But, then, according to Buffy, the two of
them had been fighting bad guys together for some time now. And ever since Angel had lost his crew in some sort of complicated fuck-up involving evil lawyers, Spike was really all he had. Huh. Xander almost felt sorry for the guy. Maybe the end of the world really was near.

Xander was pretty sure that infection wasn’t an issue to worry about with vamps, but the grime certainly wasn’t going to help Spike any, and he stank. So Xander filled the tub with very warm water, and then carried Spike into the bathroom. Spike’s head lolled against Xander’s chest. Xander gently lowered him into the tub.

It took a long time and several changes of bathwater to get Spike remotely clean. Xander couldn’t help wincing as the vampire’s true condition was revealed under the bright bathroom lights. Every bone stood out in stark relief, and his belly was as concave as a bowl. His entire body was liberally covered in purple-black bruises and deep slashes and gouges. Xander tasted bile in the back of his throat when he dabbed at a particularly nasty
wound with the washcloth, and he actually caught a glimpse of white bone and pinkish innards. He’d seen worse before, both in Sunnydale and, especially, in Africa, but never on someone who was still breathing, still capable of feeling pain.

Every so often, he glanced up at Spike’s face, and once or twice he thought he saw a flash of blue, but apart from that, there were no signs of, well, life.

His back and knees were stiff and sore, and his arms and shoulders, tired from carrying Spike, were starting to join in on the ache chorus as well, when there was a knock at the door. He started slightly, glanced quickly at Spike, and went to answer it.

When he looked through the peephole, he saw a young guy in a baseball cap. A guy who looked suspiciously blue-tinged. “Who is it?” Xander called.

“Delivery,” came the squeaky-voiced reply. The kid held up a large plastic sack. It looked heavy.

Xander unlocked the door and the delivery boy
handed the bag over. “It’s paid for,” he said. “Our card’s in the bag. Boss said call when you need more.”

“Great. Uh, hang on.” He set the bag down and pulled out his wallet. How much did one tip for blood delivery? He pulled out a ten and the kid looked happy enough with that.

“Thanks, mister,” he said, and took off.

Xander had already filled the coffee maker with water. Now he turned it on, and, while the water heated, went back to check on his patient.

Spike was awake.

He was still in the tub, his body tense, and when he caught sight of Xander his eyes went wide and round. “H-H-Harris?” he stammered.

“Hi, Spike.”

“What—where--?”
“We’re in my room at the Monaco. Angel sent me for you. You’re hurt. You know that, right?”

Spike looked down at himself, his gaze uncomprehending. “I...how....”

“It’s okay. You’ll be okay now,” Xander said with more confidence than he actually felt.

Spike just gaped at him.

“Look, I’m just gonna go—“

Faster than he could see, Spike flew out of the tub, splashing water everywhere. Xander was trapped back against the counter, and Spike was right there, and he was—

He was throwing himself to his knees at Xander’s feet. He wrapped his matchstick arms tightly around Xander’s legs and pressed his head into Xander’s stomach and started to sob like his heart was breaking.
“Don’t go. God, please, please don’t leave me. Please!”

Xander stood there stiffly for a minute, his hands up in the air, the water from Spike’s body soaking through his clothes. But Spike just continued to cry and plead incoherently, and something shifted in Xander’s chest.

He clutched the back of Spike’s head, burying his fingers in the wet curls, and held the disconsolate creature close. “It’s okay,” he murmured. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to help you, all right? I’m not going.”

Eventually, Spike’s weeping died away, but still he clung to Xander, shivering miserably. Xander stroked his scalp. “Hey. Let’s get you dried off. You’re gonna catch your death. I’ve got some nummy A-neg waiting for you, too.”

Spike finally looked up at him, his eyes swollen and red-rimmed. “Blood?”
“Yeah. Lots of it.”

Spike closed his eyes for a moment as if in relief. But then he opened them again. “You’ll stay, yeah?”

“Right at your side.”

Xander helped Spike to his feet, but Spike leaned heavily against him and almost certainly would have fallen without the support. Trying not to slip on the puddled floor, Xander helped him sit on the closed toilet. He wrapped one of the big white towels around Spike’s shoulders and used another to pat his legs and torso dry. Spike just sat there weakly, looking like he was going to collapse any second.

Xander slowly led Spike into the main room—half carried him, really. The bed was still covered in grime that had transferred from Spike’s body, so Xander instead took him to the big armchair in the corner. He sat Spike on it, grabbing a pillow from the bed to help support his head, and arranging the towel across his lap like blanket.
Spike went rigid as Xander stepped away, but he didn’t go far, only enough to pour the hot water into the ice bucket, and then plunk a couple of packets of blood inside to warm. He brought a third packet back to Spike. “This one’s cold, but the next ones’ll be toastier, okay?”

Spike nodded.

Xander used his pocketknife to cut the blood bag open. He poured it into one of the hotel glasses. Spike reached for it, but his hands were so palsied that Xander had to hold it for him while he drank. It was oddly endearing to watch him swallow, like helping a small child. Spike’s eyes rolled back in his head at the taste of the stuff, and he eagerly drained the glass.

By the time Spike finished off all three bags of blood, he was holding the cup himself, and was looking a little stronger and healthier. “You want more?” Xander asked.
Spike shook his head. “Not...not yet. In a bit, yeah?” They were the first words he’d said since begging Xander to stay.

“Okay. But you’ll remember there’s plenty more, right? And you don’t have to snack from me?” Xander’s hand went to his neck, where, truthfully, only a tiny little mark remained from Spike’s attack.

Spike’s eyes went big again. “Did I...I...I bite you?”

“Yeah. About a week ago.”

“Oh, fuck, Harris. I’m...fuck.” Spike hung his head, his pinched face a mask of desolation.

Xander knelt beside the chair and put his hand on the armrest. “Spike? What’s wrong?”

But when Spike looked up again, his eyes were wild. He tried to push himself out of the chair, and Xander caught him as he immediately collapsed. “Whoa! Whoa! You’re not up to being up yet.”
Spike hung in his arms, still cold and naked, his face drawn in pain.

“Let’s get you to the bed, okay?”

While Spike was eating, Xander had stripped the comforter off the bed, and was relieved to find the bedding underneath still clean. Now, he carried Spike over, ignoring the groans of protest from his own body, and tucked him beneath the white sheets. Spike looked lost.

“Harris,” he rasped. “You have to tie me up. Or just sodding stake me. I might...might hurt you again.”

“I didn’t spend all this time just to dust you, and you can’t even stand up right now. I think I’m pretty safe. What the fuck’s going on, Spike?”

Spike shut his eyes and was silent for so long, Xander almost thought he’d fallen asleep. But then, without opening his lids again, he whispered, “Was the bloody wizard, wasn’t it?”
“What wizard?”

“The one I was off to see. Follow the yellow brick road and all that rot.” Spike barked out a painful-sounding laugh, and Xander wondered how much sanity the vampire retained.

“Spike? What are you—“

“Peaches sent me here to see a wizard, to bargain for a trinket. Eye of Raflos. So I drove halfway across the bloody continent, and I went to the tosser’s shop. Started to dicker with him, and then—“

“But he said you never showed up!”

Spike finally pried his eyes open. “You talked to him?”

“Um, yeah. They sent me here to find you, but Angel still needed the Eye, so I went to Vega’s.”

Spike struggled to sit up but failed, falling back against the pillows. “What happened there?”
“No, wait! You tell me first what happened to you.”

“We were negotiating. He wanted forty thousand for the thing. Peaches would have paid it, too, but I tried to talk the price down a bit.” Spike paused for a moment, and Xander realized he must be exhausted. His voice was weak when he continued. “He grabbed something from under the counter and clapped it onto my arm. Hurt, like something stinging me. Then I was on my knees, being sick. And then…I don’t know what happened. I might have blacked out. Woke up in the sewers.”

Xander was feeling kind of dizzy and weak himself about now. He sat heavily on the edge of the mattress next to Spike. “What’d he do to you?”

“Dunno. But…but since then, I’m having trouble keeping control of myself. Of my emotions, yeah?”

“You seem okay now.”

“I do all right for a bit. And then…. ” He clenched his
jaw and looked away.

“Why didn’t you call Angel and tell him what was up?”

“Tried. But my mobile phone is gone, and when I came out of the tunnels to find a phone.... You aren’t the only one I bit.”

“Fuck.”

“Didn’t want to. Couldn’t stop....” His voice was so quiet now Xander had to strain to hear it.

“Spike, when you got me, you did stop. You ran away before you took too much. Did you do that with the other person?”

Spike looked at him, stricken. “Dunno. It’s...fuzzy.”

“Fuck,” Xander repeated. “So then you were afraid to come out again.” Spike nodded slightly. “How’d you get so banged up?”
“Things live down here. Demons. I expect I started some fight I shouldn’t have. Don’t remember.”

“What have you been eating?”

“You.”

“Nothing else?”

“Tried a rat or two.” He chuckled bitterly. “Taking after my grandsire, there. Couldn’t stomach it.”

Xander’s head was spinning. This entire conversation was raising a lot more questions than answers. It had been a long day, it was late, he was sore, and he still reeked from the day’s adventures. And he’d just realized that the only place to sleep was next to the deranged vampire. And the deranged vampire himself looked like he was about to fade away to nothing.

He rubbed his face and stood. “I’m gonna shower for about three hours, and then I’m gonna get some sleep, and there will be no gnawing on me, right?”
Spike nodded.

“’Kay. And in the morning there’s lots more blood for you in the fridge and we’re going to call grandpa and get this all straightened out.”

He started for the bathroom.

“Harris?”

He stopped and looked back at Spike, who had an odd expression on his face.

“Thank you,” Spike said. “For finding me, even after I....”

Xander suddenly understood that Spike hadn’t really expected anyone to come looking for him, and he felt an unexpected rush of sympathy for the formerly evil undead. When Xander had run into trouble a couple times in Africa, Buffy and Willow had hightailed it over to help him, and he knew they’d do it again. All Spike had was Angel. And
now, he guessed, he had Xander too.

Xander thought about telling this to Spike, but the vampire had already fallen asleep.

Part Three

It was nearly noon when Xander awoke. A vampire was six inches away, staring at him, and Xander was ravenous. He hadn’t had anything since lunch the day before. He ordered about half of the room service menu and, while he waited impatiently for it to arrive, warmed some blood for Spike and watched him drink it.

Spike was definitely looking better. His face looked less like an animated skull, and the injuries that Xander could see—the gashes on his face and arms and chest—were beginning to close and heal over. The deeper wounds on his abdomen were covered by the sheet, but Xander didn’t really feel like inspecting them now.
His food arrived and he dug in. When he noticed Spike eyeing his fries he brought the plate over to the bed and sat down. He gestured at the food and Spike grinned a little as he snagged some potatoes. Xander watched him lick the salt off.

When all the food was gone and Xander felt pleasantly full, he lay back next to Spike and told him of his adventures in Chicago. He skipped the part about the kiss, though, simply explaining that Vega had sold him the Eye and Xander had shipped the creepy little thing off to Angel. Neither of them had any idea exactly what the wizard had done to Spike or why. If he didn’t want Angel to have the Eye, why offer to sell it at all? And why did he allow Xander to purchase it without causing Xander any harm?

Spike seemed surprised when Xander told him Angel had seemed genuinely concerned about him. “Wanker didn’t come get me himself, though, did he? Got you to do it for him.”

“I guess he has another end of the world to stop.”
Spike snorted. “Hasn’t he always? But why did you agree to it? You obviously don’t live here.” He gestured around the hotel room.

“No. I live in London, more or less. Least, I have a room there.”

Spike blinked at him. “You came here from London. Why?”

Xander shrugged. “Buffy asked me to. As usual, I wasn’t especially needed for anything else, so....”

Spike just looked at him, so Xander got up and fetched his phone. It was the crack of dawn by vampire standards—Xander smiled wickedly—and it rang a long time before Angel finally answered with a mumbled, “Wha?”

“Wanna talk to Spike?”

“He’s awake?”
“Wouldn’t be much of a conversation otherwise. Hang on.”

Xander handed the phone over, and sat in the armchair as Spike told him the same story he’d told Xander. Xander could tell just from this end of the exchange that Angel didn’t have any more explanations than they did. After a while, Spike scowled and handed the phone back to Xander. “Pouf wants to talk to you now. Twat.” The last word was muttered and Xander was pretty sure it was meant for the vamp at the other end of the phone and not him.

“Yeah?”

“Xander, you’re not safe near him. You need to get away.”

“You’re going to come get him?”

“Still can’t.”

“I can bring him to you.”
“No. Not with everything that’s happening here. That wouldn’t be good for anyone.”

“So I’m supposed to what, just abandon him?” Spike was staring angrily at the wall.

“He’s admitted he can’t control himself. Once he’s strong, he’ll bite you again, and maybe next time he won’t stop.”

“I’ve been defending myself against vampires for a long time, Angel. I can manage one more.”

“Xan—“

“No! Look, you dragged me here, I’m not about to just give up. See if you can find out what’s going on, okay?”

Angel was silent a moment. “Fine. Just be careful.”

“Careful is my middle name. Actually Lavelle is my middle name, but I like Careful better. Hey, did the
Eye thing actually do what it was supposed to, or was that another trick?”

“It worked fine. If it hadn’t, I’d be dust now.”

“Huh.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Me too.”

He hung up and placed the phone on the desk. Spike wasn’t making eye contact, but was still glowering at a framed abstract painting that looked a little like pinkish cat vomit. “Twat’s right,” he growled. “Go away.”

“No.”

Now the death glare was turned on him. “Don’t be thick! You did your sodding duty, now you can scoot back to the other Scoobies. ‘M not an infant. Don’t need a minder.”
“If I leave now, where will you go?”

Spike opened his mouth, and then closed it. The answer was obvious. He had nowhere but the sewers, not if he didn’t want to risk killing again.

“I’m gonna stay. I think as long as we keep you well-fed, I’ll be fine. And we’ll find a way to fix this.”

“No. I can’t… God….” Spike buried his face in his hands and began to sob again.

Xander’s heart broke.

This wasn’t the Spike he’d known for so long, the cocky little bastard who’d tried to kill him when he didn’t have a soul, and annoyed the crap out of him when he did. This was a man, naked and battered and alone, crying his heart out. Xander knew that whatever the goddamn wizard did was at fault, but still, Spike was really feeling these feelings, magic or not.

Xander sat down on the bed and gathered Spike in
his arms. Spike wrapped his arms around him as if he were drowning and Xander was a lifebuoy, and he shook and wept until Xander’s t-shirt was soaked through with tears and Spike sagged brokenly in his embrace.

With a snuffle, Spike released his grip and sat up. Xander let him go. Spike wiped his eyes with his arm. His face was a mixture of embarrassment, sorrow, and anger, but he didn’t say anything. He just looked down at the blanket.

“You know,” Xander said conversationally, as if he hadn’t just virtually had a lap full of bawling vampire, “once I was in Angola. You ever been to Angola?”

Spike shook his head slightly.

“Big country. I was smack dab in the middle of it. They’d just had a civil war, like, a year or two earlier, and everyone was dying, and there were scary guys with guns and knives everywhere. There was supposed to be a baby Slayer somewhere
nearby, but nobody understood English and I couldn’t find her. And then I did, but she was sick. Cholera. She died about an hour after I got there. Her name was Makiese.

“I was supposed to go to Gabon next, where I could not speak French instead of not speaking Portuguese, but I was so tired. I think I had dengue fever, and my leg hurt because some guy had shot me a couple months before and it still hadn’t healed right, and my goddamn eye socket wouldn’t stop itching, and I realized I didn’t have a single friend on the whole fucking continent. I sort of fell apart.”

Spike was looking at him, his head slightly tilted, his eyes sharp.

“You know what happened? Makiese’s mother came up to me. She had no idea who the hell this crazy white guy was or why he was crying like a baby. She’d just lost her daughter, and I think a couple of her other kids were sick, too. She’s living in this tiny little hut, you know. And she puts her arms around me and sings me some kind of lullaby,
I think, and *comforts* me, Spike. Better than my own mother ever did. She patted my back and when I was all cried out she fed me and gave me a place to sleep that night. When I went to leave the next morning, she wouldn’t take any of my money.

“Even when you’ve got nothing, nothing at all, you can help someone else out. And then you have something.”

He got up and went to take a shower.

~*~*~*~*~

“Xander, do you know what time it is here?”

“I don’t even know what time it is *here*, Will.”

She sighed. “*What’s up*?”

“I found Spike.” The vampire in question was currently propped up on the bed, glass of blood in hand, eyes focused on the television.
“You did? That’s great, Xan! Is everything okay? ‘Cause you don’t sound so happy.”

“He’s…. We’ve got some problems.” And he told her the whole story, again skipping the part where he kissed the bad guy.

As soon as he finished she asked, “Where are you now?”

“My hotel.”

“Is he tied up? So he doesn’t bite you again, I mean, not in a kinky sort of way.”

He ignored the pleasant but unwelcome little tingle that that image sent through his body. “No. He’s not tied up, and he’s not gonna be. And I’m not going to leave him here, and he’s not going to eat me for dinner, okay? Can you guys just see if you can figure out a way to help?”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. When she
did speak, her voice was subdued. “Okay. *Maybe the coven knows something, since it sounds like a magic-type problem. And, uh, I’ll see if I can find something about this wizard guy, okay?*”

“Thanks, Will.”

When he hung up, he saw that Spike was staring at him. “Problems at home?”

“Nothing big.”

“What’s Red up to these days?”

“The usual. She has a girlfriend. Another witch named Vanessa. Nice.”

“And the others?”

Spike really seemed to want to know. “Um, Dawnie’s in France, getting her doctorate, if you can believe it. And Giles is in London, with the Watchers Council.”
“The Slayer?” He was trying to be nonchalant, Xander could tell, but wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

“She’s, um, good.”

Spike lifted an eyebrow.

“Pregnant. She’s pregnant, and the baby’s due any day now. Last I saw her she was mainlining chocolate ice cream.”

“Is it...human?”

Xander laughed, really laughed for the first time in quite a while. “Yeah. The father’s this totally normal guy—well, he’s English, so he’s still a little weird—who she met on the DLR. He’s an architect. They’ve been living together, like, three years now. They’ll probably get married eventually.”

“Does he treat her well?”

“Yeah. He does. He took the whole Slayer thing
pretty well and everything. He’s a nice guy.”

Spike nodded gravely. “All right, then,” he said. “What about your demon girl?”

He didn’t know about Anya. Shit. “She died, Spike. Never made it out of the high school.” He could almost say it now without his voice catching.

“Sorry,” Spike said, and seemed to mean it. “So you round up new Slayers?”

“Yep. And, on occasion, missing vampires.” He smiled at Spike and, to his surprise, Spike smiled back.

“No little missus for you?”

“No. I was kinda seeing this girl for a while, but...no.”

Xander spent most of the rest of the day watching tv and fetching blood for Spike. Spike drank a lot, but it was working. By the time Xander ate some
more room service and then was ready to call it a night, Spike could sit up unassisted and even take a few wobbly steps to the mini fridge to get his own refills. It occurred to Xander then that Spike didn’t have any clothes except his filthy duster. He made a mental note to deal with that the next day. Then he stripped off his own jeans and shirt, leaving just his boxers on. He and Spike fell asleep in front of some movie on HBO.

~*~*~*~*~

Housekeeping woke him the next morning with a knock at the door. “Just a minute!” he called, and pulled on his pants.

“Would you like your room cleaned?” the maid asked.

He thought for a second. The sheets were kind of dirty and they were out of clean towels. “Yeah. Can you wait just a sec?”
“Sure.”

He grabbed a pair of his own sweatpants and a red t-shirt, and helped Spike put them on. Spike only had to lean on him a little as he led the vampire to the armchair. Xander took a quick look around to make sure there were no unri
ing blood glasses lying around, and then he let the woman in.

“My...uh...friend’s sick. Can you sort of clean around us?”

“No problem,” she replied. “Do you need a doctor? I can have the front desk give you a referral.”

“No thanks. He’s...convalescing.”

She gave Spike a warm smile, which he returned. She didn’t seem to think it was strange that they had the curtains stretched tightly across the window. She did frown a little at the comforter in the corner, though.

“It got, um, dirty. Sorry.”
“Do you want another now?”

“No, not really.”

“Okay. I’ll bring a clean one tomorrow.”

It didn’t take her very long to put down fresh bedding and towels, and to wipe down the bathroom. Xander told her she could skip vacuuming.

After she left, Spike decided to stay in the chair for a while. Xander announced that he was going to go get some supplies. “Will you be okay?”

“Oh, not a child, Xander. I’ll be fine.”

In the elevator, Xander smiled to himself. He couldn’t remember Spike ever calling him by his first name before.

It was bright and hot out, but Xander could see dark clouds building over the lake. Maybe a
thunderstorm would cool things off a little. He considered having a little stroll down Wabash, maybe stopping in for a visit at a certain occult shop, but that would probably only bring trouble. Better to wait and see whether they could learn more first.

He began by dropping the duster at the cleaners. He promised them a big tip if they could repair the rips and get it stink-free. He could tell the girl wanted to ask what the hell happened to it, but she didn’t. He’d gone through the pockets first, but found only a set of car keys and a beat-up cigarette lighter. He pocketed those to return to Spike.

Next, he found a clothing store that had stuff Spike would wear and Giles wouldn’t have kittens over when he saw the credit card bill. He guessed at Spike’s size and stocked up on black, black, and more black. He got a few things for himself, too, since a good chunk of his wardrobe had fallen victim to the sewers. And he picked up some food at a little market, because room service got old pretty fast. The market had a small display of
paperbacks, too, and, on a whim, he chose one to give to Spike. Maybe it’d cheer him up a little.

Oh gods, here he was, planning pick-me-ups for a vampire.

Heavily laden, he returned to the hotel. He just barely beat the storm—fat raindrops started to fall just as he was almost in the door. They had free wine in the lobby and he stopped for a minute to drink a glass. He was really more of a beer guy, but during his time in Africa he’d learned to take alcohol however he could find it.

Spike was still in the chair, looking like a child in Xander’s too-large clothes. Xander tossed him the bag with his new outfits and stuffed the food in the fridge. They were almost out of blood already. He’d have to call for more.

Spike was pawing through his purchases, not looking too displeased. “Will those work for you?” Xander asked.
“Yeah. Cheers.”

Then Xander plopped the book in his lap.

Spike picked it up, read the title, and scowled. Then he tossed it at Xander, but Xander had been ready for that, and he ducked and laughed.

“What? Don’t want to do some reading?”

“Not that rot!”

“Not a fan?” Xander couldn’t keep from giggling.

“Tried to eat that bog-trotting tosser when the book came out, but Peaches wouldn’t have it. I actually caught the old pouf more than once reading the bloody thing, but I wager he won’t admit it.”

“C’mon. It’s a classic.”

“Did you ever read it?”

“Yeah. After I met him. I mean, guy has you eating
bugs, you want to learn something about him.”

“Well, it’s all a load of bloody rubbish anyway. Sleeping in coffins. Ha.”

“You slept in a crypt.”

“But I had a proper bed, didn’t I? You remember that. I was in it, that time you came looking for the Slayer, not knowing she’d gone all see-through, and—“

“Gah! I remember. And we shall talk no more about it. Here.” He scooped up the book and dropped it in the trash can. “Bye-bye, Bram. Okay?”

Spike smirked, which made Xander happy, because that was Spike.

The storm blew in in earnest shortly after that, and Spike drew the curtain so they could stand at the window and watch. Not much danger of sunlight now. In fact, the sky was nearly as dark as night, sheets of rain were pouring down so hard they
couldn’t even see the ground, and lightning bolts were flashing through the sky almost non-stop. The rumble of the thunder and the crash of the rain were incredibly loud, and they both stood transfixed in wonder. Xander could almost feel the electricity dancing along his skin.

After an hour or so, the light show moved away and the downpour diminished to a hard, steady shower. Spike closed the curtains again, although it was past sunset by then, and they moved to the bed, where they watched tv all night, squabbling good-naturedly over the remote. Periodically, one of them got up to eat something or other, and Spike was moving around pretty well. The injuries on his face had nearly disappeared, and, although he was still much too thin, his body had filled out considerably.

Xander still felt sweaty from his shopping foray earlier in the day, so he eventually took another long shower. The ache in his shoulders and arms was almost gone, but the pounding heat still felt good. He reminded himself that he ought to use the
fitness center the next day. All this sitting around and eating wasn’t going to do him much good.

When he came back out, the tv was off, the lights were out, and Spike was sound asleep. Xander slipped in next to him and soon drifted off himself.

~*~*~*~*~

He woke up to horrible screams. Leaping out of the bed in panic, he windmilled blindly for a light switch. He saw then that the source of the noise was Spike, who was curled up naked in the corner, arms folded protectively over his head, shrieking raggedly. Xander approached very cautiously, knelt a few feet away, and then reached out a hand for Spike’s shoulder. “Spike?” he said.

Spike whipped his head up. His eyes were wide with terror. But he didn’t try to attack.

“Spike? What’s the matter? What’s wrong?”
Spike blinked rapidly several times and the yelling died away until it was just a fearful whimper. Xander risked moving a little closer, his hand still resting on Spike.

“It’s okay. Everything’s all right.”

Spike’s muscles were just starting to loosen a bit when there was a loud pounding on the door. Spike moaned and threw himself against Xander. He was shivering violently, and Xander again wrapped his arms around him.

“Yes?” Xander called.

“Is something the matter, sir?” came the male voice behind the door.

“No. I’m sorry. Just having a nightmare here. I’m really sorry.”

“Are you sure?”

Xander whispered to Spike, “Tell them you’re okay
so they won’t think I’m murdering you or anything.”

“M fine. Sorry. Bad dream.” His voice was shaky but loud enough.

“Well, uh, let us know if you need anything,” was the slightly dubious reply.

“Right.”

“Good night, sirs.”

Spike was still attached to Xander, but his trembling wasn’t as bad.

“Probably thinks we’re a pair of shirt-lifters and you’re beating the shite out of me.”

“I don’t care what he thinks as long as he doesn’t call the cops. Want to move to the bed?”

Spike continued to clutch Xander as they made their way across the room. Xander helped him lie down. As soon as Xander was between the sheets next to
him, Spike scooted over until he was pressed against him, his left arm tight around Xander’s waist. “It’s all right, Xander?” he asked hesitantly.

“It’s fine.” It was. In fact, apart from the fact that Spike had really cold feet, it was more than fine, and Xander silently prayed that his body wouldn’t choose this particular moment to abandon all the dregs of his heterosexuality.

“Sorry,” Spike mumbled into his neck. Xander prayed even harder, because instead of being alarmed at the extremely close vicinity of fangs to arteries, he was remembering how very nice it had felt when those teeth were slipping into his throat, and the tongue was lapping at his skin, and—

He groaned out loud.

“Sorry,” Spike repeated a little desperately. “Please let me.... So sodding scared.... Can’t, can’t—“

“It’s okay. I don’t mind,” Xander said very truthfully, and wormed his own left arm underneath Spike.
“You had a bad dream?”

“Yeah. Was dreaming of this bloke who tried to drag me to hell. Pavayne.”

“Jesus.”

“I’ve dreamt worse. But this time...so bloody scared. Still.”

“It’s that fucking Vega, Spike.”

“I know,” Spike replied, but he burrowed even closer, until his cool breath was blowing across Xander’s skin, and his lips were nearly touching Xander’s neck. Then his lips actually were touching. Xander steeled himself for the bite, but couldn’t force himself to move away, because part of him actually wanted to be bitten, and that part was fully erect and throbbing between his legs and, seemingly, had taken control of his body away from his brain.

But the sharp pain and sharper pleasure never
came. Instead, he felt only softness, Spike’s soft lips on his thin skin, and Spike was gently sucking, stopping periodically to mutter “sorry, sorry,” until Xander shushed him. He was…nursing…almost, the way a small child sucks on its thumb when it’s frightened. It seemed to be soothing Spike because the tension was melting away from him and he was gradually falling asleep.

Xander, though, was wide awake.

**Part Four**

Xander was good and sick of television.

He never thought he’d feel that way. But three more days had passed, with no new information from either LA or England. Spike was physically in pretty good shape, but he was an emotional wreck. He’d be fine for hours, and then suddenly lose himself in sorrow or fear or another emotion. Once he got caught up in the frustration of their situation and had a tantrum, stomping and yelling and kicking at the furniture. Luckily it was daytime and nobody
came running to make sure there wasn’t a murder going on, and he was barefoot so he didn’t do much damage. He did make a small hole in the drywall, but Xander figured Angel could pay for that, too.

While Spike was ranting, Xander stood near the door, ready to bolt if necessary. He considered digging out his stake, which was in one of the dresser drawers, but he wasn’t sure he could dust the person who’d been snuggling with him in bed, even if that person was momentarily homicidal.

But Spike didn’t try to harm Xander at all. His frantic pacing sometimes took him very close, but he just passed on by, directing his anger at Xander’s helpless suitcase instead.

So although Spike was pretty strong, neither of them felt confident enough to allow him outside, or even to have him stay alone for more than a short time. They remained inside together, watching the goddamn tv. Xander bought a deck of cards and they gambled for miniature bottles of hand lotion and the chocolates the maid left them each day. But
not for long, because it turned out Xander was a hell of a lot better at bluffing than Spike—Spike blamed the eye patch—but Spike cheated.

It was getting to the point where they were both nostalgic for a nice little clan of Zabpehely demons to tussle with, or maybe a Ciasteczka monster or two.

The funny thing was that Xander wasn’t good and sick of Spike himself. Xander hadn’t spent this much quality time with anyone since he and Willow were six and both had the chickenpox at the same time, and Willow’s mother had let Xander stay on a cot in Willow’s room while they recuperated because Xander’s mother had never had the disease and didn’t want to risk infection. At least, that was the story. Even then, Xander had suspected that she was unwilling or unable to take care of him for a week. Xan and Will had had a great time, playing board games and staging scenes with action figures and stuffed animals and coloring in countless coloring books.
Now there were no GI Joes or plush unicorns involved, but Xander was actually enjoying Spike’s company. And although Spike snarked plenty, Xander kind of got the impression that the vampire wasn’t hating him, either.

The first morning when they woke up entangled with one another, it was extremely awkward. They quickly pulled apart, avoiding eye contact. The second morning they were both still a little discomfited. By the third morning, waking in each other’s arms was a routine. Now, when they went to sleep, they automatically snuggled together. Spike claimed it was because Xander kept the bloody air conditioner on too high and he was cold, and maybe he really did enjoy Xander’s body heat, but Xander was fairly certain Spike found him reassuring, too. And Xander, well, let’s face it. That beautiful, muscular body pressed up tightly against him was a very good thing, and he so was ready to admit that, while girls were certainly very nice, boys were just as nice, too. Even when they were vampires. If Spike noticed how turned on Xander got by the cuddling and the breathing and the
occasional mouthing at his neck—and really, even without vampire senses, how could he not notice?—he didn’t say anything. And if Xander noticed that Spike woke up every morning with his hard cock pushing into Xander’s hip, Xander chalked it up to morning wood—vamps got it, too, who knew?—and remained silent as well.

So Xander had left Denialville and was now more or less happily residing in Pretenditsnotthereland. But it was pretty damn clear that sooner or later, his and Spike’s patience and Angel’s and Giles’s bank accounts were going to call it quits.

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“It’s a csípés spell.”

“A sheepish spell?”

were enslaved in Wallachia, you see, and they’d use it to get back at their masters. It hugely intensifies the person’s feelings, and the hexed Wallachians would go all out of control and everything.”

“Fucking gypsy curses,” Spike muttered. His head was pressed close to Xander’s so he could hear, too. Xander shot him an annoyed look.

“That’s great, Will. Thanks for the history lesson. How the hell do we get rid of it?”

“I don’t know.”

Xander and Spike let out identical noises of frustration.

“The Roma didn’t usually want to remove the spell, because, well, slaves and all. And usually the bespelled person would end up getting killed somehow or being burned for demonic possession. Which is ironic, because Spike really is possessed by a demon, only nobody’s going to burn him, but these Wallachians—"
“I get it. And the flambé option is really out here, too, Will.”

“Of course.”

“So, can he be unspelled?”

“I need to do more research, Xan.”

“Okay.”

“Xan? You’re still okay? I mean, Spike’s not... with the fangs, and....”

“If he was, would I be talking to you now?”

She sighed. “I guess not.” There was an urgent buzzing noise in the background at her end. “Oops! Gotta go. We’ll talk later, all right?”

“Bye, Will.”

He and Spike looked at each other.
“Well, at least we know what it is, now,” Xander said, trying for optimism and not succeeding.

“Yeah, but not how to stop it. And not why the pillock did it to begin with.”

“Wanna call Angel? See if he’s figured anything out?”

Spike snorted. “Berk can’t suss out his head from his arsehole, but yeah, let’s ring him.”

It was even noisier in LA. Angel seemed distracted, and there was a lot of crashing and banging and something that sounded suspiciously like chanting.

“I haven’t found out anything, Xander. Ugh!” Spike and Xander blinked at each other. “But, uh, I’ll call if I do. Ow, goddammit!”

“Is, uh, everything okay there, Angel?”

“Fuck! Yeah, yeah, just the usual.” There was an
especially loud clatter. “Gotta go. Later.” The line went dead.

“That was a nice natter, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. He’s as helpful as always. So, what now?”

“James Bond festival on the telly.”

Xander tried his best British accent. “Name’s Bond, James Bond. Shaken, not stirred.”

“That’s horrible. Don’t ever do that again.”

“Oh, c’mon. It’s not that bad.

“It’s worse. Haven’t you been living in London for, what now?”

“Four years, off and on.”

“So you should be better at it.”

“Yeah? And how long have you been in the US of A?”
Because I remember your American accent, and that was horrible.”

Spike frowned at him for a moment, and then laughed. “It was, wasn’t it? Bloody awful.”

“Come on. Let’s see if it’s Pierce Brosnan.”

“Pierce Brosnan? Are you mad? Sean Connery is the real Bond.”

“Sean Connery? Who’s that? Must be before my time,” Xander teased. Spike thumped him on the head with the remote.

By the time they went to bed, they both agreed that Daniel Craig made a passable Bond as well.

~*~*~*~*~

When Xander went out the next afternoon to get some food, he also stopped and picked up Spike’s duster. It looked great. No more stinkiness, no signs
of damage. He beamed at the drycleaning lady and paid the fairly exorbitant fee.

Back at the Monaco, Spike was slumped in the armchair watching a slasher flick and barely looked up when Xander came in. Xander dumped the jacket in his lap.

“What’s—Bloody hell!” Spike held it up and smoothed his hand over the leather. “What’d you do?”

“Just got it fixed up a little.”

Spike blinked up at him as if Xander had just handed over the crown jewels. “Why’d you do that?”

Xander shrugged a little. “Thought you might miss it. Could hardly picture you without it. It’d be like...the cat without his hat.”

“Git,” Spike muttered, but he held the coat tightly to himself. Xander turned his back to hide his smile.
A while later, the little bag of groceries was put away. Xander had eaten the burger he’d got on the way back and was sitting on the bed, half-watching the movie and thinking about what he was going to do with himself when this was over. He rarely did much planning for the future—didn’t seem to make sense when he was likely to get snuffed by something at any time. But here, he was, pushing thirty, and still alive, with almost all of his body parts still intact. Maybe he ought to at least consider the possibility that he wasn’t going to end up as demon chow.

“Oi! Wake up!”

“Huh? Sorry. Spacing out.”

“Asked you a question.”

“Yeah?”

“How are you paying for all of this?” Spike waved his hand around to indicate the room in general, as well as the duster that still lay on his legs.
“I have a Council credit card. But I think Angel’s paying them back for at least some of it.”

“Good. Cheap old sod has plenty of dosh.”

“Yeah? Where from? ‘Cause there’s usually not a whole lotta cash in the saving the world business.”

“He has money stashed away all over the place, some from years and years ago. And when he was head of Wolfram and Hart he got away with loads of money.”

“I heard a little about that. He was head of an evil law firm, right? I kinda don’t get it.”

“Me neither. But yeah, he was, for a time.”

“And there was some kind of fight?”

Spike sighed. “Yeah. Lost almost everyone that night. Nearly got dusted myself—got torn all to pieces—and so did Peaches. Nasty business, it was.”
“How’d you two survive?”

“Dunno. Something went boom, took most of the beasties with it. Half the building, too. Took me a whole day to dig myself out from the rubble. Angel never would give me the details, just says it’s something Fred cooked up, back before....” His voice drifted to a stop.

“Fred. Will told me about her. She liked her a lot.”

“Everybody liked Fred.”

Neither of them said anything for a while. Both thinking of friends who’d died, probably. Xander didn’t want Spike to end up in an excess of melancholy. Not that he minded the comforting part, but it was really hurting him now when Spike’s pain became intense. So he decided on a diversionary tactic.

“How come you stuck with Dead Boy? Didn’t think you two got along all that well.”
“He has a big hotel. Plenty of space to avoid each other. Besides, the pouf was all alone, and I didn’t have anyplace to go. I mean, with the soul and all. Hard to fit in.” He said this quietly, as if admitting to a weakness.

“Why didn’t you come to England? To Buffy?”

“And dozens of baby Slayers? No. Had enough of them for several lifetimes. And Buffy—I wasn’t what she needed. I could see that, finally. She needs a regular bloke with a pulse who can give her fat babies and…and treat her like she deserves.”

“Maybe you need someone who treats you like you deserve.” It was out of Xander’s mouth before he could stop it, and he silently cursed himself as Spike gave him a sharp look.

“What do I deserve, Harris?”

“You know what? I have no idea. Not like I’m in any position to make decisions about anybody else.
Can’t even make them about myself.” Xander abruptly stood. “I’m gonna shower,” he said.

The water felt good, and he tried to concentrate on that, instead of Spike’s question. But he couldn’t help it—it kept rolling around in his head. What did Spike deserve? He’d killed thousands. Done other bad things, too. But then he’d sacrificed himself for good more than once. There was a time Xander would have said it didn’t matter, that Spike was still a serial killer and a monster, and his latter-day conversion to souledom didn’t change that. But Xander’s world came in more shades of gray than it used to, and he was a lot less certain about a whole bunch of things.

When Xander came out of the bathroom, cleaner if no more definite, Spike was leaning against the armoire in his duster and the new boots Xander had bought him.

“Going somewhere?” he asked.

“Can’t stand another minute cooped up in here,”
Spike replied.

“I feel you, man.”

“Thought I’d head to a bar, have a few drinks.”

“Oh.”

“Come with?” Spike said it casually, not even looking at Xander, as if the answer didn’t really matter to him. But Xander had just spent a bunch of days in very close proximity to the vampire, carefully trying to read his emotions, and now he could see the slight tightness around Spike’s mouth and eyes. Spike was afraid to go without him.

“Yeah, okay, if you don’t mind me tagging along. I need a break from this room, too.”

Spike shot him a brief glance of gratitude and nodded. “Well, get your kit on, then. Can’t go out like that, can you?”

Xander looked down at himself. He was wearing
only a pair of boxers. He grinned at Spike. “I’d be more comfortable than you. It’s 90-something degrees out. You’re gonna roast in that jacket.”

“Vampire, love. No body heat. It’ll feel good.”

“Okay. Whatever.”

Xander threw on some jeans and a t-shirt, and pulled on his shoes. Spike looked around him curiously as they left the room and rode down to the lobby, and Xander realized that the one time he’d been through the hotel he’d been unconscious.

“Posh place,” he said as they went through the lobby.

“Yeah. I spent a lot of time living really rough, so now I like to stay at nice hotels when I can.”

“I can see that. Never fancied sleeping in the dirt much myself. Dru used to fix places up all pretty, even if they were just old factories or the like. It was one of her better qualities.”
“You miss her?”

They stepped outside and Spike glanced sideways at Xander. “Sometimes. We had a long run together. She left me plenty of times, but she always came back, you know?” He laughed. “Hell, now I’m as barmy as she is.”

“Nah. You’re mostly sane. You were crazier when you were in the school basement that time.”

Spike sighed. “I expect so. Attacked people then, too, didn’t I?”

“That was the First.”

They turned south on Michigan Avenue. Before they’d left, they’d agreed on Minerva’s, a not too divey demon bar that Spike had visited before he encountered Vega, and Xander had stopped in at when he was searching for Spike. It was only a few blocks away.
The place was about half-full with an assortment of humans and demons, and nobody paid them much attention when they entered. A four-piece band was playing something bluesy, and Spike and Xander found a table a way back from the small stage area. A waitress approached almost immediately. She was tall and curvy, with bright violet eyes and a head of slithering green snakes instead of hair. “What can I get you boys?” she asked. “We’ve got some nice AB positive tonight.”

“That’s all right, love. Just some Jack for me.”

She looked at Xander.

“Heineken, please.”

She smiled and walked away.

“Hydra girl fancied you.”

“Really? I didn’t notice.”

“You playing for the other team now, then?”
Xander flushed. This was the closest Spike had come to acknowledging Xander’s reactions to their nightly contact. “Um, haven’t been doing much playing at all, really. But if I was, I guess I’d be, um, a switch hitter.” Which he knew was kind of a mixed metaphor, but there you go. His face felt fiery hot and he was staring down at his hands.

“Knew you had it in you,” Spike laughed, but not in a mean kind of way.

“Yeah. Guess so.”

Xander and Spike sat there a long time, silently drinking and listening to the music, which wasn’t half-bad. It wasn’t a very exciting evening, but it was a break from their room, anyway, and at least it was pleasantly distracting to watch the various species walking, hopping, and crawling by.

As Xander sat, halfway through his fourth bottle, Spike was at the bar, talking to the bartender, a squat guy with two heads. Xander thought Spike
was trying to persuade the guy to just hand over the rest of the bottle of whiskey, which would have saved some wear and tear on their waitress, at least. As Xander was watching the interchange with amusement, something suddenly loomed over him, having come up from his blind side.

He rolled his head up. And up. The thing sneering back down at him was bubblegum pink-colored, with random tufts of whitish fur across its head and bare shoulders. It was built like the side of a barn, all flat, heavy muscle, and a pair of yellowish tusks like a warthog’s extended from its mouth. Xander groaned. Pilnmop. Strong as they looked and twice and nasty.

“You ugly,” the thing growled at him.

Xander smiled sweetly at it. “Yep. Stupid, too.”

It looked taken aback. Clearly, this wasn’t the response it had expected. In Xander’s experience, if someone was bent on picking a fight with you, there wasn’t much you could to about it.
Occasionally, though, if you confused them enough by being agreeable, they’d go away.

The Pilnmop took another stab at it. “All humans ugly and stupid!”

“We sure are.”

It had to think again for a minute. “You especially ugly and stupid human.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more, pal.” It was too bad. If he was going to banter with something, it would be nice if it at least had a decent vocabulary.

It scowled. “You don’t belong here.”

“Nope. Just a tourist, passing through. I’ll be gone soon.”

The demon scrunched up its face. “No. You be gone now!” it said, and dropped a dinner plate-sized hand on Xander’s shoulder.
“Hey, look, I—“

Xander would never know if he could have deflected this confrontation, because a black whirlwind with peroxided hair suddenly flew at the demon. “Get your filthy mitts off my boy!” the whirlwind shouted, slamming his head solidly against the beast’s chest.

The beast roared and everybody nearby, including Xander, backed rapidly away. The Pilnmop grabbed at Spike, probably trying to crush him in its enormous arms, but then it squealed and pushed him away. There was a big, bloody hole in the middle of its body. Spike spat out a mouthful of demon—he was in gameface, Xander could see now—and rushed back in.

Xander wanted to stop this. Spike was still not completely healed, and Pilnmops were powerful and hard to beat. “Spike! Stop it!” he yelled, but of course the vampire ignored him. Instead, he shouted out a string of incoherent British obscenities and leapt up at his opponent’s neck.
The Pilnmop grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him about ten feet across the room. Spike crashed into a table. As far away as Xander was, he heard something in Spike’s body go *pop!* and the back of his head began to bleed heavily. Xander worried about jagged pieces of wood.

But that didn’t stop Spike. He stood and shook his head, roared again, and crashed right back against the Pilnmop.

Xander had seen Spike fight plenty of times. He’d fought him himself once or twice, if completely ineptly. He knew Spike was a determined and experienced combatant, deadly even against foes much larger than him. Still, he’d never seen him fight like this, more like a pack of rabid tigers than a vampire, as if he’d never been anything remotely human. It was scary as hell.

Spike took a few good blows. Still, within less than five minutes, a lot of furniture was in shambles and the Pilnmop was down on the floor, covered in gore, unmoving. Spike took its head in his hands.
and looked about to twist it off when he made the awful mewling sound again—the one he’d made in the tunnel—and threw himself away from the fallen beast. Everyone gasped as he stumbled toward Xander, but when he got there, he only fell to his knees and seized Xander’s waist, pleading “Help me, god, help me,” over and over.

Everyone in the bar stood and stared.

Xander calmly turned his head toward the bar. “Sorry about the damage,” he said. “He gets a little carried away.”

The bartender nodded, his mouths hanging open.

“I, uh, I can pay for it. I’ll give you a call later to settle up, okay? When, um, he’s a little calmer.”

“Fine, fine,” the bartender said. “Just get him the hell out of here, okay?”

“Working on it.”
Xander helped Spike to his feet. He put Spike’s arm around his shoulder and practically dragged him outside. The other customers gave them a wide berth as they passed.

A couple blocks away, Xander stopped and propped Spike against a building. “Hey. You okay? How badly are you hurt?”

Spike’s eyes were glazed, but he was able to answer. “Just banged up. I’ll be fine with a bit of a feed. Just get me back to the room, yeah?”

“Ohkay.”

It was slow going, but they made it to the Monaco without any problems. As they walked through the lobby toward the elevator, Xander kept himself between Spike and the front desk, hoping to block the clerk’s view. Christ knew what the hotel staff thought of them already.

Up in the room, he sat Spike on the toilet, and Spike docilely allowed himself to be stripped and tended
to. He had a dislocated shoulder, which Xander helped snap back into place. He had a cracked rib, too, but there wasn’t much Xander could do about that, and Spike said not to worry about it. His head had stopped bleeding, and Xander dabbed at it with damp towels until it was clean.

When the doctoring was done, Xander helped Spike into bed, and heated up several bags of blood for him, and brought them over. As Spike drank, Xander called Minerva’s.

“Uh, hi. My friend and I were there earlier this evening. The one-eyed human and the vampire?”

“Yeah. I remember you two,” grumbled the bartender.

“Thought you might. I’m really sorry. I can give you my credit card number and—“

“Forget it. The Pilnmop started it. It won’t make that mistake again.”
“Is it, um, dead?”

“Nah. Ain’t gonna be feeling too chipper for a while, though. Look, mister. Let’s make a deal. You and your crazy vamp stay outta my bar, and we’ll call it even, all right?”

“Okay.”

Spike was finishing his fifth glass when Xander hung up. Xander sat on the bed beside him. “Well, that was interesting,” Xander said.

“Sorry,” Spike mumbled softly. “I was angry.”

“Yeah. I kinda got that.” He had half-expected Spike to turn green and burst out of his shirt. “How come?”

“Tosser was bothering you.”

“I’ve been dissed a lot worse than that, believe me. You’ve insulted me twice as bad before breakfast, you know? I mean, not recently, but back when.”
Spike wouldn’t look at him. “That’s different. You’re mi—It’s different.”

“Well, thanks for defending my honor. You’re my knight in shining armor.” Spike looked at him then, angrily, as if he expected Xander to be teasing. But Xander really wasn’t. Spike’s reaction might have been a little extreme, but it made him feel good to know it had been made on his behalf. He smiled at Spike, and the vampire relaxed.

“Wasn’t meant to get so violent,” Spike said.

“I know. The stupid spell again.”

“You need to leave me, Xander. Go.”

“We’re not doing this again. You’re stuck with me until we get you fixed. Period.”

“I might have hurt you!”

“But you didn’t. You wiped the floor with the
Pilnmop, but you didn’t harm a hair on my head. You haven’t, you know. Except that one time when you bit me, but even then you stopped.”

“Might not next time.”

“I’ll take the chance.”

Spike sighed. He needed to sleep off his injuries. So Xander stripped off his clothes and slid into bed, then turned out the lights. When Spike squished against him, Xander tried to hold him gingerly, mindful of the broken rib. But Spike only pressed in more tightly and sucked at his favorite spot on Xander’s neck, which now sported a permanent hickey. Spike fell asleep like that, but Xander remained awake for a long time, remembering the vampire’s words to the demon.

*My boy*. He’d called Xander *my boy*.

Part Five
“It’s a girl! I’m not sure how much she weighed because they told me in kilos and I still can’t keep metric straight, even though I really should by now, but she’s kind of big, and she’s healthy, and she has the cutest little nose, and—”

“Morning, Will.” Xander tried to shake the sleep from his head. A glance at the clock told him it was 9:30 am, much earlier than he was used to waking up. Spike glared at him balefully and didn’t release his grip around Xander’s waist.

“Oh. Good morning, Xan.”

“Everybody’s okay? Buff and the baby?”

“They’re fine. They’re calling her Emily Joyce, isn’t that nice? We’re gonna do a naming ceremony in a few days, sort of a pan-denominational thing, and Giles is the godfather, which is perfect, isn’t it? Dawnie’s gonna fly in tomorrow. I’m an aunt, Xander! I always wanted to be one. And you’re Uncle Xander. Do you think I’ll be the cool kind of aunt, like the kind she comes and talks to when
she’s fifteen and has all sorts of questions she can’t ask her parents, and—”

“I’m sure you’ll be the coolest.”

“Xan? When are you coming home? We miss you.”

“Thanks, Will. But we’re still working on our problems, you know?”

She sighed. “I know. And I haven’t found a cure yet. But I’m looking.”

“Thanks. Hey, give Buff and the new kid kisses for me, okay?”

“Okay. And don’t think you’re going to get out of diaper-changing duty, mister.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” he laughed.

He hung up and set the phone back on the bedside table.
“Slayer and sprog all right?”

“Yep. A girl. Hey, you don’t think she’ll be a Slayer, too, do you?”

Spike chuckled. “It’d serve Buffy right, wouldn’t it?”

Xander had a mental image of Buffy arguing with a teenaged version of, well, herself. He smiled and snuggled back down under the blankets and vampire.

~*~*~*~*~

Several more days passed. Xander lost count, because they were all pretty much the same. Sometimes Xander felt like everybody had forgotten about them in their cozy midwestern hideout. They were all so busy with babies and apocalypses.

Spike healed.

They watched lots of tv and argued about stupid
things and chatted with the maid when she came to clean their room. They took walks together after dark, but didn’t want to risk another fight, or worse, so they stayed away from bars. In fact, they stayed away from everything, just tromping along lonely streets together, or standing and watching the Chicago River flow under their feet.

Xander went out one afternoon and brought some books back for Spike. No Dracula this time, but instead Christopher Moore (this one was a vampire book, too, actually, but it made Spike snort with laughter) and David Sedaris and Neil Gaiman. Xander was so sick of television that he read, too, actually, voluntarily read, and it didn’t even kill him.

So Xander was reclining on the bed, chortling to himself at Sedaris’s attempts to learn French, when he felt like someone was watching him. He looked up from his book. Spike was in the armchair, staring at him, and now Xander knew exactly how a gazelle must feel when it was stalked by a lion.

“Uh, Spike? There’s lots more blood in the fridge,”
he said uneasily. “Want me to heat you some?”

“Not hungry,” Spike rumbled, not in the least reassuringly.

“Um...is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing at all.” Spike slowly put his own book on the floor next to him and stood, and then prowled toward the bed.

“Spike?” Xander squeaked, in a way that couldn’t remotely be construed as manly.

“Xxxxaaaaannnnn,” Spike purred, and, in one graceful motion, pulled his black t-shirt over his head and let it fall on the floor.

Xander abandoned his own book and tried to scoot away, but there was only a narrow space between the bed and the wall, and he was pretty sure that Spike would pounce on him the instant he tried to escape.
Spike took another step closer and, one-handed, popped open the buttons on his jeans. He did a little shimmy move that Xander desperately tried to tell himself wasn’t the sexiest thing he’d ever seen in his life, and, with vampire grace, stepped right out of his pants.

Xander had seen Spike nude before. Recently, even. And he’d been sleeping with that incredible bare body glued to his for two weeks. But now Spike was stalking toward him with that look on his face, and Spike’s pupils were so dilated the blue was almost obscured, and his cock, dear gods, his cock was stiff and glistening a little at the tip.

“This isn’t funny,” Xander choked.

“Not laughing,” replied Spike, who had reached the bed.

“Look, Spike, it’s the spell again, you don’t really want—“

“I need this,” Spike said, and he knelt on the bed,
then crawled on all fours until he was inches from Xander. “Need you, Xan. Now. Please.”

“Spike....”

Spike blinked at him with eyes as big as a cartoon puppy’s, and, in a hoarse whisper, repeated, “Please?”

You know how that shimmy was the sexiest thing Xander had ever seen? Now it was only second sexiest, and the number one spot was taken up by Spike naked on his bed on hands and knees, begging him. Xander thought it very unlikely that anything was going to be able to top that.

Xander was absolutely unable to form an answer at all.

Maybe Spike took his silence at acquiescence, because he reached out one hand and, gentle as could be, set it on Xander’s left upper thigh.

Xander gathered all his reserves and gave it one
more try. “It’s the csípés. It’s making you do this, Spike. You don’t really want to.”

“But I do. I really, really want to.” And he moved his hand. Just a few inches, no big deal, except now it was on top of the prominent bulge at Xander’s groin. “You want to as well.”

It was more of a statement than a question, but Spike didn’t move, and he looked Xander steadily in the eye. Xander understood at once that Spike really would stop if he told him to, that the vampire truly didn’t want to act against Xander’s will, but at the moment, anyway, Spike honestly was frantic for him. Both of them were going to regret this later. But Xander’s will power had its limits.

“Yes,” he said, barely audibly, but Spike heard him and closed his eyes briefly in relief.

Demonically fast, Spike moved so that he was straddling Xander. “Skin,” he hissed. “Want skin.” And he tore Xander’s t-shirt right down the middle. Spike groaned as he stroked his cool palms up and
down Xander’s torso, leaving a tingling path from neck to waist. Then he bent down and took one of Xander’s nipples between those soft, full lips and sucked on it.

“Fuck,” said Xander. That wasn’t what he was thinking. What he was thinking was that he was obviously incredibly easy, and right about now Spike could do pretty much anything he wanted to him, and Xander would only plead for more. Which probably wasn’t a wise thing to say to Spike, who was nibbling lightly on that nipple now while rolling the other between his finger and thumb. So it was a good thing that Xander was mostly incapable of speech at the moment.

After a while, Spike ripped at Xander’s sleeves until the shirt was no longer on him, but only under him. Then Spike explored Xander’s upper half with his mouth. He began at his favorite spot on Xander’s neck, but then he moved down a little to trace Xander’s collar bone, and to lick at his shoulders, and to bite softly at his belly. Then up again, and now their mouths were pressed together and their
tongues were dancing in a kiss that was leaving Xander breathless and a little dizzy.

All this time, Xander’s hands had been flat at his sides, as stupid and useless as the rest of him. But when Spike sucked on his earlobe, Xander couldn’t stand it any longer, and he cupped his palms onto the vampire’s silky, round ass. Apparently Spike approved because he moaned and wiggled in an entirely satisfactory way.

Xander massaged the powerful muscles under his hands as Spike left a trail of tiny kisses across his right cheekbone, then his left. Suddenly, Spike murmured, “Sod this,” and pulled the patch off of Xander’s eye. He tossed it onto the floor.

Xander tensed. He knew the socket wasn’t pretty. Freakish, really. He didn’t even like looking at it himself, and he never took the patch off in front of others, not even on those rare occasions when he slept with someone. But Spike only continued his kisses, tiny, tender butterfly touches around the empty socket and then across the lid.
And then he was moving again, this time down the center of Xander’s chest and stomach, until he reached the top of Xander’s jeans. Xander had a momentary fear that Spike was going to tear them, too, and that would probably hurt. But he didn’t. He unbuttoned and unzipped them, and then pulled them and Xander’s boxers off together. They joined the patch on the floor.

Spike looked down at Xander’s cock, which was achingly hard and mighty happy to have been released from the confines of clothing. “Pretty,” Spike said. He swooped down and took it in his mouth.

Xander’s overly full head—the one on the top of his shoulders, not the one currently bathed in cold, delicious suction—was as busy as always. Reminding him that the mouth that encircled one of his very most favorite parts housed rows of shark-like teeth, and the vampire that controlled those teeth was maybe kind of unstable at his best, and lately full-blown bipolar or multiple personality or
something, and while spell-induced lust was turning out to be a very nice thing indeed, what if it turned into anger or hunger or something considerably less enjoyable on his end? And anyway, wasn’t he just two weeks ago agonizing over the fact that he kinda liked it when a guy smooched him, and that guy turned out to be an evil wizard, and now here he was doing considerably more than smooching with a guy, a guy vampire, but then it wasn’t like any of this really mattered because there’s no way in a thousand hells he was going to try to stop this, because Jesus Christ nothing had ever felt this good, and he lied before, that begging on all fours thing was certainly very sexy but it was only number two, which moved the naked prowling to number three, because number one was definitely, absolutely, the sight of that blond head bobbing at his crotch, and those hungry ice-blue eyes rolled up to gaze at him, and

“Fuck, Spike, I’m gonna—“

Spike pulled off with a loud pop. His lips were swollen and red and Xander absolutely had to taste
them right this second. He pulled Spike up until they were face to face and pressed down gently on the back of Spike’s head, then sucked that lower lip right into his mouth. It was as delicious as he’d thought. Spike was humping against him, their wet cocks slipping and sliding against each other.

Abruptly, Spike sat up. Then, still straddling Xander, he rose to his knees. As Xander watched, mouth agape, he slipped two fingers of his left hand into his mouth, moved them in and out for a moment, and then reached underneath himself and pressed them inside.

“Fuck,” said Xander again. It was the only word he knew.

Spike grinned at him and then rocked his hips against his hand. He allowed his head to fall back a little and his eyes to close, and he was chewing on that delectable lip.

Xander reached up and, slightly hesitantly, touched Spike’s cock. He’d never touched another man
before, not like this. It was so strange to wrap his fist around a penis that wasn’t his, but it also felt really good, and he liked how Spike’s soft skin moved around the rigid core as Spike thrust himself into his palm.

Unlike him, Spike was uncircumcised, and Xander thought he might like to play a little with the foreskin, see what it was like, but not now. Right now he would rather watch Spike, see his fingers disappear and reappear, watch the play of emotions across that beautiful face.

With his other hand, he cradled Spike’s balls. There, too, soft and hard. Xander wondered what they tasted like, what the sticky liquid leaking steadily from his cock tasted like. He took his hand away from Spike’s cock and licked at his fingers. Spike made a strangled noise and, quick as lightning, flipped them both over.

Underneath Xander, Spike bent his knees and pulled them up and wide. Xander lifted up on his arms so he could see Spike spread out beneath him,
writhing and panting, his pink hole stretched and twitching, his belly painted with pre-cum. “Fuck me,” Spike said. “Please, Xan, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, please....”

Xander had maybe one operational brain cell left. “But...lube,” he stuttered.

“Don’t have any. ‘S okay. Vampire. God, please, Xander!”

Xander took his own cock in his hand and guided it against Spike’s opening. Spike’s eyes flew wide open and his panting increased, and he arched his hips upward against Xander. Excruciating slowly, because if he went fast this was all going to be over embarrassingly quickly, Xander sank inside.

“Fuck,” he said, intelligently. And then, for good measure, “Fuck.”

Spike moaned, maybe partly in pain because this had to hurt, but that didn’t stop him from rocking upward again. His eyes were heavy-lidded and
unfocused. “More,” he said. “Please, please, more, fuck me, more, please.”

Okay. We have a new number one.

It was all Xander could stand. He began to piston into Spike hard, hard, and Spike thrashed under him and called out brokenly for more, and harder, and please, and more, and god, yes, like that, and Xander leaned in until Spike was bent almost double, and Spike gripped Xander’s biceps and his fingernails dug into Xander’s skin but Xander didn’t care, and Spike was so tight and so good and so beautiful, and Spike was howling so loud that Xander had to silence him with his own mouth, only the headboard was still slamming rhythmically into the wall, and god, it was so good, and cold liquid spatred across his belly as Spike’s muscles clenched him, and his head was exploding apart in slow motion into a zillion happy little fragments and the explosion ran right down his spine into his balls and his cock, and, fuck, fuck, fuck, and he was floating back to earth like a feather, so slow, so light.
With a final grunt, Xander collapsed on top of Spike. Spike straightened his legs and wound them around Xander’s, and sucked a little on Xander’s neck. Xander was still inside Spike, and it was a nice place to be. Nice enough for just...a little...nap.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, Xander regained enough energy to peel himself up. Spike moaned and clutched at him just a little when he went to withdraw, and then let go. With a groan, Xander collapsed at Spike’s side.

Spike turned and looked at him, his eyes wide, his face solemn. Then he noticed the bloody little crescents on Xander’s upper arms. He leaned over and licked at them with a delicate cat tongue. When the wounds were clean, he settled back on his pillow.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Better now?” Xander asked.

“Much.”
“What brought that on?”

“Was just watching you, reading on the bed. You were...pretty.”

“Huh.”

“I didn’t mean....” Spike sighed.

“Look, I know it was the spell, okay? I don’t think this means we’re engaged or anything.”

Spike reached over and ran a thumb across Xander’s cheek, just under the missing eye. “Wasn’t just the spell. The emotions always start out as my own, don’t they?”

Xander shut his eye for a moment. “I’m sorry, Spike. I could have stopped you. I just...I didn’t want to.”

“Do you wish you had?”

“Not...not for my sake. I mean...wow. And can I just
say, wow.”

Spike’s smile was almost shy. “Yeah?”

“I’ve never...not with a guy, you know.”

Spike blinked at him. “I thought you said—“

“Yeah, well, that’s sort of a recent thing, actually. I mean, the admitting I like men, not the actually liking them, because that’s been going on a long time.”

“How long?”

“At least since I tried to pretend that the vamp tied up in my basement wasn’t incredibly attractive.”

Spike smirked. “Knew you wanted me then. Git.”

“What about you?”

“Oh, I’ve always known I’m incredibly attractive.”
Xander slapped him on the ass. “No. I mean, I didn’t realize until today that you liked men, too.”

“I like to keep my options open. I was a virgin when I died—Victorian and all, yeah?—but then after I tried all sorts of things. I mean, Angelus—“

“Wait! You and Angel?”

“Angelus, yeah.”

“Oh, my god. Buffy would have a cow if she knew.”

“No, Buffy would picture the possibilities if she knew, but now she’s a mum and we don’t want to torment her, do we?”

“Hmm. You and Angel—recently?”

“No. Said Angelus, didn’t I? Long ago. Twat’s been too good for me ever since. Besides, wouldn’t want to make him too happy, would I?”

“And you would. Because I’m feeling very happy
right now.”

Spike kissed his nose, but then he looked serious. “Look, Xan, you know we can’t—“

“I know. Told you. I’m not ready to pick out colors for the wedding, okay? It was just the spell. But I can enjoy for a few minutes, can’t I?”

Spike looked at him for a long moment, his head slightly tilted. Then he reached over and took Xander’s suddenly interested cock in his hand. “Perhaps we can enjoy a bit more than that,” he said.

~*~*~*~*~

“Dammit, why isn’t he answering?” Xander angrily tossed the phone onto the desk.

“Maybe he’s busy fighting.”

“For, what? A week? We haven’t heard from him in
a week, and I’ve left about a thousand messages. Can’t be the apocalypse, because, hello? World’s still here.”

“Pillock probably forgot to charge the thing. Twenty-first century technology is a bit much for him.” Spike stood and stretched, and Xander watched a white line of flesh appear between his t-shirt and jeans and then disappear again. He’d have thought that after yesterday’s adventures he would be pretty sated, but it seemed they’d only made him hungrier for the vampire today. Spike had shot him a leer or two, but hadn’t said anything about yesterday, and certainly hadn’t made any moves. Xander wished he were brave enough to make a move himself, but he was too afraid Spike would laugh it off.

Xander flopped back on the bed in frustration and annoyance. “A few more days stuck here and I’m gonna be crazier than you. There’s got to be something we can do instead of just sitting around.”

Spike grabbed a plastic packet from the fridge and
stuck it in the warm water in the ice bucket. He hummed quietly to himself while he waited, drumming his finger on the desk, and Xander wondered what thoughts were cycling through that bleached head. He wished they were normal people and they could just have a normal date, and talk about stuff like dating-type people do, maybe over a nice dinner, or—

Dinner.

Xander sat up quickly. “I sort of have an idea,” he said.

“Sounds dangerous.”

“Probably is.”

“What do you have in mind, pet?”

“Um....”

As he hesitated, Spike brought his glass of blood over with him and sat next to him on the bed. He
took a noisy, slurpy sip and smacked his lips. “Pouf gets us mostly cow and pig and that shite. Hardly ever have human. Haven’t fed this well since those wankers chipped me. So. What was this brilliant scheme of yours?”

“I, uh, was thinking of going to dinner with Danny Vega.”

Spike gawked at him like he’d sprouted a second head. “Dinner with that tosser? Then perhaps dancing or a film after? Yeah, that’ll sort everything.”

“It’s just…when I got the Eye, he kind of asked me out. Said he’d knock ten grand off the price if I went.”

Spike lifted his eyebrows. “Did he now? And you were swept off your feet?”

“No, I…I said no.”

“All right, then.” Spike drained his glass and set it on
the nightstand.

“But then he, uh, he said what about a kiss.”

“For how much?”

“Five thousand.”

“So?” Spike had folded his arms across his chest.

“So I’d never kissed a guy before, and I was kinda curious, and—“

Spike leapt up and stood in front of Xander. “He kissed you!”

“Um…yeah. Look, I didn’t know then that he’d hexed you or anything, he just seemed like—“

“That motherfucker touched you!”

Xander scratched his head nervously. “Well, generally you have to touch to kiss, unless you’re, like, blowing kisses, but that probably wouldn’t be
worth five thousand dollars.”

Spike began pacing fiercely, like a trapped tiger. “That fucker touched you with his filthy hands and his filthy lips and now he wants to take you out for a bloody dinner and then he’ll likely want to shag.”

Xander was confused and a little scared. Sure, Vega was an asshole, but he didn’t understand why Spike was so worked up over this. It was just one kiss, after all, and—Oh. The goddamn spell. Time for another emotional meltdown. Xander wasn’t too certain which emotion this was, though.

Spike continued to pace and rant. “Of course you’d fancy him. He’s quite a looker, isn’t he? And he has a sodding pulse, and he can go out in the sun. I can only take you dark places like the bloody sewers. Hah! Fine romance that would be. Here. Let me light another candle and wipe the piss off your boots. And while I’m at it, why don’t I try to fucking tear your throat out? Wouldn’t that be lovely?”

Xander just watched him, open-mouthed. Jealousy.
This was jealousy. Spike was jealous of Vega, over him. Over Xander.

“Spike, look—“

Spike ignored him. “Stupid fucker with his stupid spells. Thinks he can take my boy, does he? I’ll show him. I’ll rip his bloody heart out.”

Spike veered toward the door, and Xander frantically scrambled to stop him. Spike snarled and tried to push past him, and Xander grabbed his shoulders. “Spike! Whoa! You need to chill.”

Spike’s eyes were flecked with yellow sparks. “Let me go, Xan! He can’t have you. You’re mine!”

“There’ll be no having, all right? Not with him.”

Spike wavered a moment and then tried again for the door. “No! Need to make sure he doesn’t come near you.”

Xander executed a block that would have made the
Sunnydale High football coach proud. “You can’t go outside now, Spike! It’s the middle of the day. I’m not gonna do you any good if you’re a little pile of ashes on Wacker Drive, now, am I?”

Spike froze. He was breathing hard, like a racehorse who’d just won the Kentucky Derby. “He touched you, Xan,” he whined.

Xander took a step closer and enveloped Spike in a hug. “Not like you touched me, Spike. Nothing like that.” He was praying to whatever gods would listen that this was the right way to react to an overpossessive vampire.

And maybe it was, because Spike melted against him. “Sorry,” he said into Xander’s neck. “I know I have no right. You don’t belong to me. I know that.”

“It’s okay,” Xander said, rubbing the strong back. “Flattering. Nobody’s ever been jealous over me before, with or without a spell.”

Spike tilted his head a little and sucked on Xander’s
neck. He probably just wanted the comfort—Xander was sort of his security blanket nowadays—but it sent a lightning thrill all through Xander’s body, and his legs grew a little wobbly. “Let’s make a deal,” Xander said. “No more apologizing for the goddamn spell, okay? I understand not being in control of yourself. I really do. Hell, I can barely handle myself anyway, and Willow’s managed to zap me with magic more than once. And I was possessed. Twice.”

Spike pulled away. “Possessed?”

“Uh-huh. Once by a soldier spirit or something, on Halloween. Remember that year? Willow was a ghost, and Buff was some sort of princess or something, and you tried—“

“To kill you all. Yeah.”

“Well, actually I think you were mostly after just Buffy that time.”

Spike rolled his eyes.
“But anyway, that night, I was a soldier. I acted like one, thought like one. Didn’t have any choice at all.”

“And the other time?”

“That was before you showed up in Sunny-D, I think. Sophomore year. Hyena.”

Spike’s eyebrows shot up farther than Xander would have thought possible. “Hyena?”

“Yep. I ate a live baby pig, Spike. And I was mean to Willow. I tried to eat some people, too. And I...fuck. I almost raped Buffy.”

Spike stared at him in astonishment. “You...you....”

“Yeah.” Xander walked away and sat heavily on the bed. This wasn’t exactly one of his favorite childhood memories.

Spike came over. “You tried to eat people?”
Xander nodded.

“And you really tried to rape her?”

“Yeah.”

“Why’d you stop, then?”

“Because she was stronger and she clocked me on the head with a brick. If she hadn’t I would have gone through with it. I really would.”

Spike sat at his side. “Oh,” he said.

“Buff and Will think I forgot about the hyena after the possession went away. But I didn’t. I remember it all—how badly I wanted to hurt, to take, to kill.”

“But you hated me so much after I tried—That time with Buffy, when....”

“I did. Partly because you weren’t my favorite person to begin with, and I was pissed that you and Buff had been...together...anyway. Partly because it
reminded me of me.”

“And now, Xander?”

“I’m older. Wiser, maybe. I have a little more perspective. And besides, you went and saved my eye and then saved the world. That’s gotta count for something.”

“You don’t hate me any longer?”

Xander put his hand on Spike’s knee. “No. I… Honestly? I’m feeling a little confused now. But there’s definitely no hate in the mixture.”

“All right, then,” Spike said quietly. “Go have dinner with the wizard.”

“But…but....”

“No worries. I’m not going to have another fit over it.” He turned and looked at Xander earnestly. “I want some answers. I can’t go on like this, and neither can you. See if you can get something out of
him, yeah?”

“You can come with.”

Spike shook his head. “No. Wouldn’t be able to stop myself from tearing his sodding head off.”

“Okay. But I promise, it’s just an interrogation dinner thing. No naughty touching.”

Spike put his cool hands on either side of Xander’s face and leaned his own face in very close. “When we get this thing sorted, pet, you’ll go back to the Scoobies, won’t you?”

“I don’t know. I.... You need to have your head clear before we talk about this, Spike.”

“But I can have a kiss in the meantime? I don’t have five thousand dollars.”
Xander smiled. "You can have several. Won't cost you a cent."

Part Six
It was a pretty nice place, only a few blocks from the Monaco, actually. The booths had high partitions that gave them a little island of privacy, the lighting was flattering, the music was understated and kind of hip.

Vega was already there when Xander arrived. He was wearing an expensive-looking suit and a white, tieless shirt that showed off his dark skin. His black hair was carefully styled. Xander didn’t have a suit with him—didn’t actually own one, in fact, and probably hadn’t worn one since Sunnydale. So he was wearing a pair of khakis and a maroon button-down shirt that Spike told him looked smashing, and that had a collar high enough to hide the mark on his neck.

Spike. He hoped he was okay alone. Xander had left him with a full fridge of blood and the Council’s Mastercard, and he fervently wished that that was going to be enough to keep his temperamental roommate busy for a few hours.

“Xander! I’m so glad you decided to take me up on
my offer,” Vega said, smiling broadly. He had very white teeth.

Xander smiled back as pleasantly as he was able and sat down. He ordered a scotch from the hovering waiter.

They had a few minutes of awkward small-talk, and then they perused the menu. When the waiter came back, Xander resisted the urge to gulp his drink, and he ordered a steak. Nothing fancy. He wasn’t a fancy ordering kind of guy. Vega wanted a pasta dish of some kind.

“So,” Vega said after the waiter left. “Have you found your wayward vampire?”

Xander had planned to wait a little while before broaching the subject, but he wasn’t going to ignore an opening like this. “Why do you care?” he asked, trying to block some of his hostility out of his voice.

Vega frowned and managed to look genuinely concerned. “You seemed worried about him. Angel,
too. I hate the idea of your friend coming to my city and being...harmed.”

“He wasn’t really my friend. And you can stop the act because I know you did something to him.” He’d meant to take a more indirect route, too, maybe lull Vega into fessing up, but he just didn’t have the patience for it.

The wizard blinked at him. “Me? Why would I—I told you, I never even saw him. What makes you think—“

Xander leaned forward and tried to look menacing. It wasn’t all that difficult, actually. “Cut the crap. It’s time for you to be straight with me, Vega.” He had to hold back a hysterical giggle at his own choice of words. “I may not look like much, but I have some close friends of the kind you really don’t want to piss off.”

Vega looked slightly stricken. He leaned closer, too, and whispered, “The mob? You’re friends with the mob?”
Xander snickered. “Worse, pal. I’m friends with the Slayers. And I work for the Watchers Council.” The wizard’s eyes grew very round and his face was pale. “Now, let’s try for the truth, okay? What the fuck did you do to Spike?” Despite the situation, Xander had to admit he was kind of enjoying himself.

Vega hunched in one himself. “I didn’t want to,” he mumbled.

“What’s that?”

“I didn’t want to. Hell, I was supposed to dust him and I didn’t. And I could have, too!”

Just then, the waiter appeared with their food. He lifted one of those giant pepper grinders and was about to ask if they wanted some when he caught the looks on their faces and obviously thought better of it. “Enjoy your meal!” he said very quickly, and scuttled away. The steak smelled really good, but Xander ignored it. He had bigger prey at the
moment.

“What do you mean you were supposed to dust him? Spill, Vega!” He pointed at the man with his steak knife.

Vega sighed heavily and rubbed his face. “Okay. A day or so after Angel called about the Eye, this guy came by my store. He knew Spike was on his way—“

“Wait! Why didn’t you just sell the Eye to Angel over the phone? Weren’t you trying to lure Spike here?”

“No, I really wasn’t. It’s just...I don’t like to sell powerful stuff to people I haven’t met. I want to get a little reading off them—it’s a skill I have, you know—make sure they’re not up to no good with it. I’m not a very strong wizard, but this is the one thing I can do really well.”

Xander put the knife down and crossed his arms. “You want me to believe that, after you fucked up
Spike?”

“Yeah, I... Let me tell the whole story, okay?”

Xander nodded skeptically. Might as well hear what he had to say.

“So Spike was on his way, and I’m not all that fond of vampires, you know?”

“Can’t say I blame you,” Xander muttered.

“Exactly. But I’d heard of Angel and Spike, I know they have souls, so I figured okay, at least I can talk to the guy. But then this other dude comes by first, right? He knows Spike’s coming, and he tries to convince me that Spike’s evil. But like I said, I can read people pretty well, and I knew this guy was bad news. So I told him to take a hike.

“So then he gets all scary. He’s kind of short, but he’s really built, and he has these scary ass eyes. Like he’s not quite human. And I know what I’m talking about, because my mom was half Brachen,
but she was a nice lady, and this dude was spooky.”

Xander sighed and took a bite of his food. He’d been right. Still a demon magnet. It was good steak, though.

“He tells me that he has some beef with Angel, and he needs Spike out of the picture.”

Xander nearly choked. Fuck! Was Angel in trouble now, too? But Vega was still talking.

“He wanted me to dust Spike. And I could have! I’m not much of a fighter, but I’ve got a few charms that can paralyze a vamp long enough to poke a stake between his ribs. I just have to get close enough to touch him first. Anyway, I told the guy I wouldn’t do it. Told him I was gonna call Angel, too. He got all threatening then, said bad shit would happen to me, and I believed him. I could tell he wasn’t lying, anyway.”

Xander gestured at the wizard with his fork. “But you didn’t dust him.”
“No. I’m not...a murderer, I guess. I don’t kill anyone, especially good guys. It’s wrong, and besides, it’ll always come back and bite you in the ass, sooner or later. But this guy made it pretty clear that if I didn’t do it, I’d be toast, and then someone else would anyway. So I quick came up with an idea. I told him I could do something to Spike that was less than lethal but would keep him away from Angel. Dude thought about it and said okay. Said he’d be back for me if I said anything to the vamps about him. And I’m not, am I? I mean, he didn’t mention you.”

Xander swallowed another bite. “Did he say what he wanted from Angel?”

“No. Just didn’t seem to like him much.”

“Yeah, well....” Xander snorted. “Okay, so Spike arrived?”

“Yeah. And I put a spell on him.”
“A spell?”

“It’s an old one. It makes emotions go sort of out of control, sometimes.”

“And you thought it was a good idea for a vampire to have out of control emotions?”

“No! I thought it sucked. But I didn’t have a whole lot of options. I hexed him, which knocked him out for a little while, and then I left him in the sewers. I figured that was the safest place for him.”

For some reason, Xander was inclined to believe Vega. But still, he was furious. “You cursed him, you dumped him in the sewers and didn’t tell anyone where he was. Very caring.”

“If Angel found him right away, I’d be in trouble with the guy from the shop. What else could I do?” The waiter came by, probably to check on them, but when he heard Vega raise his voice a little he steered himself immediately in the opposite direction.
Xander cut another piece of meat and was surprised to see that he’d already eaten most of it. Apparently, this was hungry business.

“What did you think was going to happen to a half-loco souled vamp in the sewers of Chicago, Vega?”

The wizard looked down at his plate. He hadn’t had a single bite. “I don’t know,” he said softly. “Nothing good.”

Xander just glared at him.

Then Vega looked up at him and cocked his head. “Why are you so angry? I thought you said he wasn’t your friend?”

“He wasn’t.”

Vega frowned and then his eyes went wide again. “You found him!” he exclaimed. “You found Spike!”

Xander didn’t answer.
“Was he all right?”

“Of course he wasn’t all right, you jerk! He was starved and cut to shreds.”

“And now?”

“He’s okay. Physically. But his head’s a mess, and you did that to him. What’s the cure, Vega? How do we fix him?”

Vega winced and rubbed the back of his neck. “Um...,” he said.

“C’mon, you prick! How the fuck do we de-hex him?” His voice was loud and a little shrill, but he didn’t care. Another three seconds and he was going to leap over the table and strangle the guy.

But Vega’s voice was tiny and subdued. “You weren’t friends but now...but now you care about him.”
Xander collapsed back on the plush red seat and looked up at the ceiling. “Yeah. I really do.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I never want to hear those words again,” Xander said. “Tell me how to help him.”

“There’s no cure, Xander.”

Panic and murderous rage surged through Xander’s brain and for a moment, his emotions were nearly as out of control as Spike’s. He clenched his jaw and squinted at the ceiling and tried for a response that wouldn’t get him thrown in prison. But before he said anything, the wizard went on.

“There’s no cure, but I think—I’m pretty sure, actually—that it’ll wear off. If you give it enough time.”

The tinge of hope felt good. But—“How much time?”
“I don’t know.”

“Cause we’re talking about the undead, here, Vega. He’s already 150 years old. Is he gonna have to wait another 150 years to get his head clear?”

“No, no, nothing like that. But weeks at least. Maybe several months.”

Xander took a deep, cleansing breath. Several months. Okay. He could handle that. Spike probably could, too. And Xander could continue to babysit. It’s not like he was desperately needed anywhere else anyway. But they couldn’t just stay at the Monaco. Their patience and the credit card had limits. Besides...fuck. Angel. What was up with him?

In a calm, tight voice, Xander said, “Why didn’t you do something more reversible, if you’re such a great guy?”

“I didn’t have a lot of time. And with vampires, there aren’t really that many viable options.”
Xander sighed. What was done, was done. “Tell me everything you know about this guy who sicced you on Spike.”

Vega seemed almost eager to comply now. “It’s not much. He’s not from around here. He was about your age. Like I said, kind of short, muscular, really good looking, actually. Dark hair, blue eyes. A southern accent, and he was dressed sort of like a cowboy, you know? Pointy boots, big shiny belt buckle, like that.”

“Did he tell you his name?”

“McDonald. He said his name’s McDonald.”

The name didn’t mean anything to Xander, but it might be fake, and besides, he supposed Angel had had plenty of opportunity to collect enemies. Maybe Spike knew who he was.

Xander looked across the table at the wizard. He was still furious with the man, but the heat had gone out of it. He believed Vega’s tale, and he even
believed that he was remorseful over what he’d done. It didn’t excuse him, and Xander didn’t forgive him, but there didn’t seem to be much point in taking it out on him either. Let Spike get his revenge if he wanted to.

Xander wiped his mouth with the red cloth napkin and stood. “Thanks for the date. It’s been a blast.”

He was going to walk away, but Vega said “Wait!”

Xander looked at him.

“You’re going to try to help Angel, aren’t you?”

“He’s even less of my friend than Spike was.”

“Yeah, but you’re gonna help him. You’re that type, aren’t you? I can tell.”

Xander snorted but didn’t deny it. He was that type, damnit.

“Let me give you a couple things that might help. I
mean, I don’t know what you’re going up against, but I have a couple good all-purpose tricks in my bag.”

“Yeah, you’re full of tricks.”

“Please. Let me help. Let me do this.”


“Can you stop by the shop tomorrow morning?”

It could be a trap. But Xander didn’t think it was, and if the wizard really did have something that’d assist him...well, he could use all the help he could get. “Okay. Ten?”

“Great. I really am sor--.” He stopped himself and smiled wryly. Then he pushed his untouched plate away and stood. “I’m guessing a good night kiss is out of the question, but maybe a shake?” He held out his hand.

But Xander didn’t take it. “Touching me would be a
bad idea. Ramped up jealousy in a vampire isn’t a pretty thing, pal.”

Vega let his hand drop and he nodded. “Okay. Good night.”

~*~*~*~*~*

The walk back was pleasant. It had actually cooled off a little tonight, and there was a breeze coming in from the lake. Xander had got some useful information, some faith that Spike’s problem would go away eventually, and he hadn’t managed to get himself turned into a toad in the process. Even the food had been decent.

So he was feeling relatively good as he rode the elevator up, but also worried. What if Spike had flipped out while he was gone? There were no dismembered bodies littering the hallway, in any case, and he took that as good sign.

He got to room 1026, slid his key through the
sensor, and opened the door. He stepped inside, through the little foyer near the bathroom, and then he froze in shock.

Nearly every horizontal surface in the room was covered in flowers.

There were bunches of roses on the desk, irises on the armchair, and carnations on the bed. Even the top of the tall armoire held vases full of brightly colored blooms. More—yellow, pink, red, white; Xander didn’t know what kind they were—were scattered around the floor.

Leaning up against the window was a blond vampire. His duster was on, and his arms were wrapped tightly around himself. He was glowering at his boots.

It took several minutes before Xander found his voice again. When he did, it was still sort of a squeak. “Spike? What’s this?”

Spike didn’t look up. “Gratitude,” he growled. “I was
feeling bloody thankful for all you’ve done for me.”

The hardest thing Xander Harris had ever done in his entire life was not laugh right then. But he didn’t. Instead he walked across the room, avoiding several pots of African violets along the way, and stood a few feet from Spike. “Thanks,” he said. “Nobody’s ever bought me flowers before.”

Spike snapped his head up angrily, as if he expected Xander to tease, but all Xander did was crook the corner of his mouth in a smile.

Spike’s scowl began to crack, and then his mouth was twitching, and he was smiling, too, and then chuckling. Within seconds, they were both howling so hard with laughter that they’d collapsed into the floor, into each others’ arms. Tears were streaming from Xander’s eyes and he was damn close to wetting his pants.

They eventually caught their breath again. They were on their backs, Xander’s head pillowed by Spike’s hard stomach. Several upset vases
surrounded them, leaking water and petals onto the carpet.

Then Xander had a thought. “You used the Council credit card for this, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Xander started giggling again. “Giles is gonna have an aneurysm.”

Spike snorted out more laughter that shook Xander’s head. Xander scooted around until he was lying alongside Spike, resting his head on his shoulder instead. He wrapped an arm around Spike’s middle.

“Did you learn something from that git?” Spike rumbled into Xander’s ear.

“Yeah. A lot, actually.”

“Did he...did you let him....”
“Not a single finger, Spike.”

Spike let out a long and noisy sigh. “Good,” he said, and nuzzled into Xander’s hair. “I know I’ve no right, but good.”

“As far as I’m concerned, if anybody’s going to touch me right now, it’s going to be you, okay?”

“Yeah? Like this?” Spike snaked his hand down, past the waistband of Xander’s pants and boxers, and onto the skin just below the small of his back.

“Like that is nice.”

Xander moved closer. It was nice. Until he’d found Spike, he hadn’t done much snuggling since, well, since Anya. He liked having another body to rest against, and, it turned out, the fact that the body was male was a plus.

They were quiet for a while, and Xander wondered why Spike bothered to breathe. Was it reflex? Did it feel strange if he didn’t? Then Xander had another
idea. He turned his head slightly and pressed his lips to Spike’s delicate neck, and nibbled very lightly. He was rewarded with a hissed intake of oxygen and an all-over shudder.

“Bloody hell!” Spike said hoarsely.

“Good touching?” Xander asked with another little bite. Spike only groaned in reply, so Xander slid his arm down, until his palm was resting on the hardening bulge beneath Spike’s fly.

Xander continued to bite and suck and rub, and within minutes Spike was arching and writhing on the floor, little inchoate sounds of pleasure escaping his throat. Xander was enveloped in the vampire’s scent of leather and copper and hair gel and, now, flowers, too.

“Stop!” Spike gasped. “Gonna...make me...come in my trousers.”

Xander didn’t stop, though. He simply continued his administrations by mouth and hand. And then when
he took the tender skin in his blunt teeth and pressed down hard enough that he tasted Spike’s blood, Spike roared and bucked, and Xander felt the coolness of his spend seeping through the denim.

Spike continued to quiver for several seconds and Xander gently licked and sucked at the small wound he’d made. Finally Spike was panting, but still. He turned his head to the side and raised one eyebrow. “Pet?” he said.

Xander grinned wickedly. “That was about the most fun I’ve ever had with my clothes on.”

“Yeah? Let’s see what we can get up to with your kit off, then.”

And, for quite some time, they did.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander swept the last of the crushed flowers onto the floor with his leg and wondered how much he
was going to have to tip housekeeping to make up for this mess. He looked around the room at the sea of color and laughed. It was going to have to be a very big tip.

Then he fell back on his pillow, completely drained. There had been the dinner with the wizard, the emotional roller coaster of his vamp roommate (and, he guessed, lover), a couple rounds of entirely enthusiastic sex (assisted by the fact that gratitude-filled Spike had bought lube as well as posies), and then telling Spike everything he’d learned from Vega.

Spike had taken the news of the lack of cure pretty well. He had a moment of anxiety about how he’d manage, until Xander assured him that Xander would stick by him as long as he wanted. Spike had nursed contentedly at Xander’s neck for several minutes after that.

Then Xander told him of the plot against Angel, and of this McDonald guy, and Spike jumped up from the bed and hurled several bunches of flowers
against the walls. As tantrums went, it was fairly harmless, and then he crawled back under the sheets and up against Xander again.

“I know the wanker,” Spike said. “He was one of those lawyers.”

“I thought they were all dead.”

“They were. But the buggers tend not to stay dead very well.”

“Huh. There’s a lot of that going around.”

Spike lifted up on his elbows and looked sharply at Xander. “Do you wish I’d stayed dead, Xander? You wouldn’t be saddled with me now.”

Xander squeezed Spike’s bare ass. “This kind of saddling is of the good. I prefer you non-dusty.”

Spike smiled and collapsed back onto Xander’s chest. “I expect the cowboy has a bit of a gripe with Angel. He was working on our side at the end, and
Peaches had him shot.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t trust him.”

“So, what? Just, blam, in cold blood?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

They said nothing for a long time, as Spike played with the sticky mixture of lube and drying semen on Xander’s belly, and Xander ran his fingers through Spike’s hair. Then Spike sighed. “I have to go help him.”

“I know. We can leave tomorrow evening if you want.”

Spike stilled his hand. “You don’t have to go, pet.
Know you can’t stand the pillock.”

“No, I really can’t, but I’ll go anyway.”

“Look, when you promised to stay with me until I’m sorted—that wasn’t taking this into account.”

“Yes it was. Because when I promised, I’d already pretty much figured you’d want to run to the rescue. Besides, I’d meant to go anyway. If for no other reason than I’m pretty ticked at this McDonald guy myself, after what he’s done to you.”

Spike regarded him with serious blue eyes. “Still a white hat, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what else to be, Spike.”

Spike put his head back down on Xander’s chest, with his ear directly over Xander’s heart. Xander wondered for a moment what it was going to feel like when he had to lie in bed alone again, without this strong body against his, and then he pushed that thought quickly away. He’d have plenty of time
to agonize over that later.

“There’s a business center downstairs. I’ll go book us a couple of tickets to LA tomorrow night.”

“Won’t work.”

“Sure it will. Council will pony up for it, if they haven’t cancelled the card over the flowers. I’ll just get us a red-eye so we can avoid incineration.”

“I don’t have ID.”

“Crap. Crap! Giles could get you some—he’s done it for me before, more than once—but it’d take, I don’t know, six or seven days, probably, to get here.”

“It’s already been a week since we spoke to Angel. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

“Okay. I guess it’s a road trip then.”

Spike sighed. “I expect so.”
“Angel said your car was impounded.”

“Won’t be able to get it without ID either.”

“Damnit! Okay, then. I’ll return the rental piece of shit I have now and get something better for a long drive.”

“Make sure it has a big boot.”

“Why?”

“So I have somewhere to go if I get caught in the sun.”

“Traveling with vampires is damn inconvenient.”

“Spent a century, on and off, wandering with Dru, didn’t I? At least I won’t try to name the stars at two in the bloody afternoon, or insist on stopping to buy tea things for my dollies.”

Xander snorted out a laugh. “Big boot it is, then.
Anything else?”

“Cooler for blood. Don’t fancy running out in Utah.”

“Cooler. Check.”

“Don’t expect you could dig up some weapons of some sort?”

“Mmm, maybe. Vega said he had some lovely parting gifts for me.”

“Bastard.”

“Yeah. But weapons, check.”

“That’s it.”

“No souvenirs from your visit to Chicago?”

“I’d say I have my souvenirs already, love.”

“I guess so. Me too. I’ve picked up a whole new sexual orientation.”
Spike tickled his armpit.

~*~*~*~*~

Around two am, Xander called Giles.

“Xander! What on earth are you up to?”

Xander suppressed a giggle. The poor man hadn’t even seen the credit card bill yet. “It’s kind of complicated.”

“Please. Enlighten me.”

Xander rolled his eyes. Somehow Giles could always make him feel like he was fifteen again. But Xander told him what had been happening—minus the vampire sexcapades part—and what their plans were.

“Xander, you can’t be thinking of driving across the country with Spike in his...unstable status.”
“I can. I am.”

“Don’t be stupid! It’s dangerous.”

“No more than, say, trying to find Slayer wannabes in war zones.”

Giles didn’t have an answer for that.

“I’m gonna do it, Giles. I’d appreciate your support, but I’ll do it without.”

Giles let out one of his drama queen sighs. “Very well. You can continue to use the card. And I’ll see if there’s anything I can find out to assist you.”

“Thanks. Hey, how’re Buffy and the baby doing?”

“Well. They’re home now. Jack is beaming. Willow is hovering. They’re worried about you, though.”

Xander smiled at the warmth in Giles’s voice that let him know that Giles was worried, too. “I’ll be fine,”
he said. “Two thousand miles with a nutso vampire to save another vampire from a resurrected evil lawyer. What could possibly go wrong?”

Part Seven

The rental car reeked. It had been sitting in the garage, untouched, since Xander fished Spike out of the sewers. The un-air conditioned garage in Chicago in August. Xander was fairly certain there were several new life forms growing inside of it. The Avis people must have felt so, too, because while they were forced to take this car back, and couldn’t charge him extra, they refused to rent him a replacement.

And then maybe he instantly got on some kind of rental car blackball list, because nobody else was willing to loan him a car to drive to LA either. He was discouraged at first, but then had another idea. He called a taxi and had it take him to some nearby car dealerships. A couple hours and some hard bargaining later, he was the proud owner of a used
Dodge Sprinter. Or, technically, the Council was. The van didn’t have a trunk to stuff Spike in, but it had been a delivery vehicle in its former life, and the entire windowless back compartment could be shut off from the front, making it lightproof. Spike would have plenty of room to stretch out there. Xander could crash back there while Spike drove, too, which would get them to California all the faster.

The salesman gave him directions to the nearest Walmart, where he bought a big red cooler and a bunch of blankets and pillows. Might as well be comfortable for the drive. He bought a road atlas, too.

He drove back into the city. It was a Saturday and traffic was light. He even found a place to park outside Vega’s store. He was late—he’d promised ten and it was past noon—and he wondered whether the wizard would be there.

He was. As soon as Xander walked inside, Vega hurried over. “Xander!”
“Sorry I’m late.”

“I was worried! I thought maybe something happened to you. Like...like a vampire attack.” As he finished his sentence, he stared pointedly at the red mark on Xander’s neck, which wasn’t hidden by the collar of his t-shirt.

Xander blushed slightly. “Not all vampire attacks are bad things,” he mumbled.

Vega raised an eyebrow. “I thought you weren’t gay?”

“Yeah, well, apparently I’m not particularly straight either.”

“Xander, I know Spike has a soul, but with the spell-…”

“Christ! You’re not going to try to warn me off him, too, are you? I don’t think you’re in any position to be doing that, hex-man.”
Vega sighed and nodded. “You’re right. Come here. I have a few things for you.”

Xander followed him over to the counter, where there were several objects laid out. Vega picked up the first one. It was a small plastic pillbox of the kind you could buy in any drugstore. He opened it, and inside was a single pill, a big, dull yellow one. “If you swallow this, you’ll be invisible for four hours.”

Xander’s eyes bugged out slightly. “Not inaudible, and people can feel you. They can see anything you wear or carry, too. Even your patch. It just works on your body.”

“So I have to be naked invisible guy?”

“Exactly. And it won’t work for Spike. The body has to be alive.”

“Okay.” Xander took the plastic box and stuck it in his pocket.

Next, the wizard pointed to a knife without
touching it. It looked like a hunting weapon, with a wide, jagged blade and a carved bone handle. “It’s enchanted. It’ll be bound to the next person who touches it. Once it’s bound to you, all you have to do is call it, and it’ll find you, even several miles away.”

“How do you call a knife?”

“I’ll show you. Touch it.”

Gingerly, Xander pressed a single finger to the handle. Vega nodded.

“Okay. Stand over there and say ‘kisu.’”

“Hey. That’s Swahili.”

“You know Swahili?”

“A little.”

Vega looked impressed.
“Kisu,” said Xander. The blade came flying off the counter, straight at him, and he had a split second to conclude that this was some convoluted trick of the wizard’s, but then the knife slowed, and it nestled itself gently into his right hand. He whistled. “Wow!”

“Handy, huh?” Vega grinned. “Okay, one more thing. This one’s for Spike.” He lifted a small brown bottle between his fingers. “There a salve inside. If he rubs it on the skin over his heart, he’ll be able to go out in the sun.”

Xander gasped and Vega lifted up his free hand in warning. “Just for one day! After that, it’s worn off and he’ll burn. But it’ll last from one sun-up to sundown. Just make sure he uses the whole bottle.” He held it out, and Xander shoved that in his pocket, too.

Xander was looking at the knife, trying to decide where to put it—walking around the city with a big blade in his hand was probably unwise—when Vega ducked behind the counter. He came back up again
with a black leather sheath that was attached to a belt. “Here,” he said, sliding it over the glass toward Xander. “This ought to work.”

The knife fit perfectly, and Xander happily buckled it around his waist. It would still look odd, but be a lot less likely to get him arrested.

Vega came back around the counter and walked with Xander to the door. “I know you said you didn’t want to hear it, but I really am sorry. And I wish we’d met under better circumstances.”

“That whole come-on, with the kiss...that wasn’t part of the get rid of Spike plan?”

“The only thing I planned for you, Xander, was to get you into bed with me. I’m truly sorry that plan didn’t succeed. But it was a nice kiss.” He smiled, and a little sparkle returned to his eyes.

Xander stuck out his hand, and the other man shook it. “It was a nice kiss. Thanks for the toys,” Xander said.
“Good luck, Xander.”

Spike was pacing anxiously across their room.

“What took you so long?!“ he yelled as soon as Xander was in the door.

“Transportation arrangements.” Xander set the cooler down on the floor.

“You could have called.”

“Thought you’d still be asleep.”

“Wasn’t.” Spike crossed his arms around himself and stomped to the curtained window, where he stood with his back to Xander.

“Sorry. I’m not used to checking in with someone regularly.”
Spike’s back was stiff.

“C’mon. I got us a cool ride, and Vega gave us some neat stuff.”

Spike swung around to glare at him. “I expect you were having a jolly old time with the wizard.”

“Spike. Power pouting is not a good look on a vampire.” Except it kind of was, because Spike’s lower lip was stuck out a little, and his lashes were lowered, and he looked altogether delicious, actually.

Xander prowled closer until he was almost touching Spike, and then whispered in his ear: “When I got too sulky, my parents used to threaten to spank me.”

Spike glowered a moment longer, then gave in. “Sodding spell. I expect you’d enjoy that.”

“Spanking? Maybe.”
The pout turned into a leer. “Giving or taking, pet?”

Xander leered right back. “It’s negotiable.”

A beat, then, “You’re more bent than I expected.”

“One word, Spike. Anya.”

As Spike looked at him thoughtfully, Xander went to the armoire and began pulling out his clothing. His suitcase was slightly more worse for the wear after a couple of Spike’s fits of temper, but it still held everything. “Want me to put your stuff in here, too?” he asked.

“Yeah. Ta.”

Xander stuffed his luggage full of their clothes and books and toiletries. “Got enough blood for the road, Spike?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. Ordered some yesterday, remember?”
“Okay. We can leave now if you want. The van’s vamp-safe, and it’s down in the garage, so you can get to it okay. I’ll take the first shift driving.”

“All right.” Spike looked relieved to be almost on the road. He emptied the contents of the fridge into the cooler.

They took a last look around the room, lifting vases and flowers to make sure they had all their belongings. Xander had made a cash withdrawal while he was running errands, and now he left a dozen twenties on the desk. Maybe that would soften the blow when the maid saw the state of the room.

They picked up their things and took the elevator down to the lobby. While the desk clerk flirted with Spike, Xander signed the bill, wincing at the total. Back in Sunnydale, he could have lived for half a year off that much money.

Spike sneered when he saw the van.
“Okay, it’s not very stylish,” Xander said, shoving the suitcase in the back. “But it’ll get us there. Look.” He pointed at the interior.

Spike poked his head in and took in the pile of bedding.

“Better than a trunk, isn’t it? And it gets better mileage than that De Soto you used to drive.”

“Used to nick Peaches’s Viper,” Spike said mournfully. “It was necrotinted and everything.”

“Yeah? Well, I used to be happy when I got to drive my Uncle Rory’s piece of shit Ford. This is a Rolls Royce by comparison, and I ain’t complaining. So all aboard.”

Spike hoisted the cooler inside and climbed on into the back. Xander showed him how they could close the partition, which had an opening small enough to keep out the light, but big enough that they could still hear each other.
“Ready?” Xander asked, turning on the engine.

“Ready.”

“Westward ho.”

They made good time through Illinois, and it was dusk by the time they got past Des Moines. Xander pulled over at a gas station with a Burger King next door. While Spike filled the van’s tank, Xander filled his own with a Whopper and fries. Then they swapped spots, and Spike took his turn driving while Xander snuggled into the blankets in the back.

“I didn’t tell you yet about what Vega gave us,” Xander yawned.

“A curse, and trouble for Angel?”

“Besides that.”

“What?”
“A magic knife for me, and a pill that’ll make me invisible for a while.”

Spike snorted.

“You’ll probably only use it to spy on birds undressing.”

“Why would I do that when I can see you undressed instead?”

Xander could tell by the set of Spike’s shoulders that he was pleased with that.

“And he gave me something for you, too.”

“Don’t know if I fancy a pressie from a wizard.”

“Oh, you’ll like this. It’s magic goo. Spread it on, and you can be out in the sun for one whole day.”

“Bloody hell!” Spike whispered.
Xander let his eyes fall shut. He’d always liked the feeling of a moving vehicle under him. Back when he was little, his family took an annual trip to Denver to visit his grandparents. He’d stretch out in the back seat, tune out his parents’ perpetual bickering, and just feel the miles roll away beneath him. Trains were even better than cars. And ships—ships were the best of all. Like napping in a rocking cradle.

“What would you do with it, Spike?” he asked sleepily.

“What with?”

“Your day in the sun.”

“Last time I tried to kill the Slayer.”

“Mmm. Gem.”

“Yeah.”

Another huge yawn. “So now?”
“Walk on the beach. Bloody seaside was always cold and wet when I was alive.”

Xander fell asleep as Spike was speculating aloud about whether vampires could tan.

Xander woke up groggy and disoriented. It was pitch dark, and at first he had no idea where he was. Then he remembered, and he realized that the van wasn’t moving. “Spike?” he called.

There was no answer. He sat up and peeked through the partition, to discover that the front of the van was empty. He opened the barrier and peered outside. It looked like they were in a large, empty parking lot, but there were no lights and he couldn’t see much. The moon was full, but it was cloudy out. He glanced at the dashboard. The keys were still in the ignition. Good.

He opened the driver’s side door and stepped
outside, stretching and groaning when he first hit the blacktop. They were the only car in the lot. A large building loomed just across the street, and there was a much smaller one off to one side, with a small pool of yellow light around its door. An elevated highway curved behind the lot. He could hear an occasional car zooming by. There was no sign of Spike.

“Spike?” he yelled. No response. Where the hell was he? It’s not like a vampire needed pit stops. Xander called again, louder, but the only answer was the echo of his own voice.

He jogged off to the back of the lot, under the highway. There were some railroad tracks there, and beyond that he could see nothing. Where the fuck were they, anyhow?

He ran toward the small building. There was a sign over the door: Champions Club. Okay. But there were two flags as well. One of them was Old Glory, and the other was red, with a big white “N”. He realized then that the big building nearby was a
stadium, and he knew where he was. Nebraska. Lincoln, to be exact. That was helpful, but he doubted Spike had had a sudden yearning for Herbie Husker memorabilia. Where was his vampire?

Uncertain about what to do, Xander returned to the van and leaned against the front. The hood was cool. That meant they’d been parked here a while. He pulled out his phone and glanced at the time. Just past three. Another three hours or so until sunrise. With no better plan of action, and no clue where to begin looking, he sat on the hard tarmac with his back against one tire and waited.

He waited a long time. Maybe even dozed off. But then he heard a noise and he lurched upward, his back stiff and his skin chilled. It was the sound of running footsteps, but with a strange rhythm, and they were coming closer. He squinted into the darkness. “Spike?” he said, slightly hesitantly. The footfalls came faster, and faster yet, and he tensed. And...there! Oh, thank fuck! “Spi—“
Before he could get the name out, the vampire was on him, knocking him bodily to the ground. “Ow!” he said as his head bounced none-to-gently against the pavement.

Spike moved just a bit and Xander’s breath stopped as he got a good look at him. He was vamped out. His face was red with blood, and one whole side of his head was matted with it. An enormous, gaping slash extended from his neck and down his chest. His eyes were yellow and alien.

He snarled at Xander and bared his teeth. Xander felt cool liquid soaking through his clothes, making his stomach and his legs wet, and he realized with a sick twist to his gut that that was blood, Spike’s blood. Spike was badly injured.

“Spike,” he whispered, but the vampire growled at him. There was a whimpering, desperate edge to the sound.

Fuck. He was hurt, and he was hungry, and he needed human blood. Not the animal stuff they’d
filled the cooler with because Spike said it kept better, and because it led to fewer hard-to-answer questions if the car was ever searched.

“All right,” he said softly, and he tilted his head to one side, baring his neck before the demon.

Quick as a flash, Spike bit him.

It was different than last time. Yeah, the fangs still hurt. But the last time—was it only a few weeks ago?—it had been that annoying, aggravating vampire who attacked him. That arrogant, snarky, formerly mass-murdering fiend who’d tried to kill him when he was evil and just irritated the hell out of him when he wasn’t. And yet that first bite had still felt very, very good.

But now, this was Spike. The man whom he’d been sharing a room and a bed with, whom he’d spent more time with than anyone in years, whom he’d comforted and laughed with, and into whose body he had blissfully sunk only twenty-four hours ago.
This felt like every inch of his body, inside and out, had been turned into one giant erogenous zone. He couldn’t have tried to stop this if an apocalypse was happening three feet away. Wouldn’t have wanted to. He clutched Spike tighter to him and howled as an orgasm ripped through his body like a tornado. But Spike kept feeding and Xander’s cock was still hard and he felt another gale-force wind gathering in his core and gods, this was a feeling worth dying for. He came again, bucking and thrusting up against that hard body, and little sparkly lights danced at the edges of his vision. He didn’t know if it was from blood loss or the force of his climax and he didn’t much care, because he was pretty sure he could come again before he was drained.

Spike tore his head away and screamed. Xander tried to hold onto him, but he was weak, and Spike was so strong, and Spike was across the parking lot and gone before Xander could even sit up.

Xander looked up at the sky and swore. It was almost dawn.
Using the van for balance, he heaved himself to his feet. “Spike!” he shouted with all his might, but of course there was no reply.

Xander didn’t know how long he leaned against the car, his legs shaking, tears blinding his one eye. But when he finally straightened up, it was fully light out and he was still alone.

He looked down at himself. His t-shirt and jeans were coated in sticky gore. He could feel more dried blood flaking on his neck. His shirt had rucked up during the attack, and his back itched from bits of dirt and grit. He had a mental image of what he would look like to a passerby: a one-eyed, filthy maniac.

Unsteadily, he let himself back into the van. He stripped off his ruined clothes and used some of the melted ice in the cooler to wash his face and neck and groin and hands. Then he pulled a clean set of clothes out of the suitcase and put them on. Beside the passenger seat were the warm remains of a giant cup of Coke, as well as a half-eaten bag of
Doritos. He ate the chips and drank the soda, grimacing at the taste but hoping to replenish some body fluids and blood sugar.

A short time later, he was startled by a knock at his window. He turned and looked. A police officer was frowning in at him. “What are you doing here, sir?” asked the cop.

“Just resting a little.”

“You’re not a student here?”

“No. We’re traveling through, and—”

“Sir, this is a student parking lot, not a campground.”

Xander looked out at the lot, which was still empty except for his van and the patrol car. “I understand. But, I mean, parking doesn’t seem to be a problem today.”

“Fall semester hasn’t begun yet, sir.”
“Well, I’ll be long gone before it does.”

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Xander sighed. Arguing with this guy wasn’t going to get him anything but trouble. He’d rather the nice officer not see his blood-drenched clothes, or the great big knife tucked under the blankets in back. And in any case, it’s not like Spike was going to come loping across the parking lot in the bright morning sun.

“All right,” Xander said, getting up and moving to the driver’s seat. “I’m leaving.”

The cop watched him as he started the engine and pulled away.

Even if he’d been in the mood for tourism, Lincoln wasn’t exactly a tourist hotspot. Xander drove aimlessly for a while, through campus and the small
downtown, past the phallic capitol building, and then south for a while until he was out of town. Then he circled back.

He parked the van downtown and walked around, and eventually he came to a coffee house and stepped inside. It had exposed brick walls with various pieces of art hanging on them, each labeled neatly. The ceiling was high, and fans lazily moved the air around. A dozen or so people were seated at an eclectic array of tables. Xander went to the counter and ordered a big coffee and an OJ and a bagel and a piece of chocolate cake. He was suddenly ravenous.

He sat in a comfortable chair by the window and ate and drank. He got refills for the coffee, and the cute girl at the counter, who had multicolored hair and a pierced eyebrow, smiled at him each time. He watched people walk by. There weren’t many of them; it was a Sunday, after all. He thought about calling London, but what good would that do? If he told them what happened, he’d only get more lectures about being near Spike, and he so didn’t
need to hear that right now. He did try Angel again, just for the hell of it, but of course got no answer. And he worried. How badly was Spike hurt? What had happened to him? Had he made it somewhere safe before the sunrise? Would Xander be able to find him?

He spent most of the day at the coffee house. Nobody seemed to mind.

It got busier around dinner time, and Xander stopped by the counter and left a twenty in the tip jar, then left. This time he veered toward campus, wandering past the buildings. Again, there were very few people around. A few teenagers on skateboards and a couple of jock types. A pair of middle-aged women in shorts and headbands. A harried professor-looking guy with a battered briefcase under one arm, limping quickly down the sidewalk. Xander sat on a bench for a while, then got up, walked for a while, and sat on another.

When his stomach began to rumble again, maybe an hour before sunset, he went back to the van.
There was a sandwich shop just down the block, so he downed a roast beef sub and some chips. Finally, he got back in the van and drove to the parking lot where Spike had disappeared. He hoped the cops were nowhere around.

He parked exactly where they’d been before. Then he did a quick circuit of the area, trying to find any signs of Spike, to get any idea where a vampire might hide out. As he searched, the sun went down.

Two hours later, he was exhausted and he’d found nothing. Deep in the back of his brain, a nasty voice was telling him there was nothing to find, that all that was left was a pile of dust, mixed now among the dirt alongside the railroad tracks. Xander refused to listen to that voice.

He sank down on a broken piece of curbing, trying not to sink into despair as well. Spike couldn’t be gone. He just couldn’t.

And then a small rustle caught his attention.
It didn’t sound like footsteps. It was more like the swish of something creeping through grass. He stood and looked around him, but the moon was obscured by clouds again tonight, and he saw nothing but blackness.

The rustle came again, closer.

“Who’s there?” he said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Silence.

A few minutes later, another rustle.

And then, suddenly, a rush and a roar. He braced himself for another assault, and he could see that whatever was coming at him was on all fours, and was certainly not a vampire.

And then there was another bellow, and another rush in his direction, and he had just enough time to think, “Oh, fuck. It’s a pack.”
But instead of coming at him, the second creature slammed into the first one, throwing it off balance. There was an earsplitting chorus of growls and howls and screams, and as a stray beam of moonlight broke through, Xander saw a blond vampire in a leather duster grappling with an enormous dog. Not a dog, of course. A wolf. A werewolf.

Blood and fur were flying everywhere, and it was a terrible fight. Xander had witnessed a lot of battles. Taken part in plenty of them, too. And with his one practiced eye, he could tell that Spike was weakened and losing.

Without even thinking about it, Xander shouted, “Kisu!” There was the crash and tinkle of broken glass way across in the parking lot, the whoosh of a flying missile, and then the knife was nestled snugly in his grip.

Xander had, of course, experience with werewolves. He knew it would take a silver blade to kill one, and he was pretty sure his new knife was steel. But even
steel could do some damage, and so he strode
toward the snarling mass and plunged the knife
depthly into a furry flank. The wolf screamed. Xander
withdrew the knife and thrust it in again, and again,
and again, until he realized the beast was still, its
nearly severed head cradled in the vampire’s hands.

Xander and Spike looked at each other. “Spike,”
Xander said, but the vampire was gone, lurching
across the weeds. Xander called the knife to his
hand again and looked down at the corpse at his
feet. It was no longer an animal, but instead a
naked, balding, middle-aged man. With a small
start, Xander recognized him. He wondered where
the professor’s briefcase was now.

And then Xander took off after Spike.

It was easy to track him this time. Spike was moving
slowly. Xander found him huddled in a miserable
ball, half underneath a small shed.

For what seemed like the zillionth time, Xander said
his name, but this time softly, gently. “Spike.”
“Piss off!” Spike yelled.

“No.”

“I’m not one of your sodding Scoobies! I’m a fucking vampire and I bit you and I’ll do it again.”

“Good.”

Spike unfolded himself and looked at him incredulously. “Good? Good!? I fucking ate you, you twat!”

“I wanted you to, moron! It felt really goddamn good. And you were hungry and you needed to feed.”

Spike suddenly stood and pulled Xander up by his shirt. He vamped out, his bloody fangs inches from Xander’s face. “Look what I am! I’m a fucking demon. I’ve bathed in the blood of thousands of humans, tasted their life pouring down my throat, felt their bodies twitching and dying beneath me.
Look at what I AM!!” he roared.

Xander lifted his arms and cupped Spike’s face in his hands. He moved his own face even closer, focusing his eye on one of the furious yellow ones before him. “I see what you are,” he said quietly. And he leaned his forehead against the bumpy one.

With a terrible cry, Spike released his grip on Xander’s shirt and crumpled to the ground. Xander collapsed too, and gathered Spike into his arms, and felt Spike’s tears dampening his shoulder.

They stayed like that a long time, rocking slightly.

At long last, Spike said in a broken voice, “You have to go. You—”

Xander pushed him away and narrowed his eyes. “Listen to me. I’m. Not. Fucking. Leaving. You. You’ve bitten me twice—one at my invitation—and twice you’ve stopped yourself before you drank too much. And tonight you saved me from a fucking werewolf, Spike. It almost tore you apart. You’re
stuck with me, so stop telling me to leave.”

Spike looked at him, and then he nodded.

Xander stood and helped Spike to his feet. Spike had to lean heavily on him as they made their way to the van. Xander shook his head slightly at the window that had broken when he called the knife. Xander helped Spike inside, and when he saw his condition under the bright dome light, he hissed in shock. Spike was a goddamn mess.

With an odd sense of déjà vu, Xander helped Spike peel off his shredded clothing, and he wiped him fairly clean with the cooler water, and Spike guzzled the remaining bags of blood on the principle that animal was better than nothing. Xander pulled out his handy dandy first aid kit and taped up the worst of Spike’s wounds, giving each a little kiss as he went. Then he wrapped Spike in the blankets and shoved some pillows under him and ordered him to get some sleep.

Spike blinked at him, clearly exhausted. “You’re not
going to drive, pet. You look knackered.”

“No. I’ll get us a motel room and crash for a while.”

“Good.”

Xander started to move to the front of the van, but Spike grabbed his shirt. “Wait,” Spike said.

“What? Is something the matter?”

Spike pulled Xander closer and struggled upright, and then pressed his lips against Xander’s. It wasn’t the most passionate of kisses, but it was sweet and tender and it made Xander’s heart melt. Then Spike fell back onto the pillows again and Xander went to look for a room.

Part Eight
“You’ve been working out, yeah?”

“Sure. Been doing lots of vampire carrying reps.” Xander set Spike gently on the bed.

“You were stowing a few too many doughnuts for a bit there.”

“Africa fixed that. Not a whole lot of Krispy Kremes there,” Xander grinned. “I’m gonna go grab the suitcase and cooler. Want me to run you a bath when I get back?”

“Yeah. Ta.”

Xander went back out to the parking lot. It was a Motel 6. Not as nice as the Monaco, but then they weren’t planning to spend weeks here. It had a bed and a tub, and that was the main thing. And the room opened directly into the parking lot, so Xander didn’t have to worry about how to smuggle a mangled demon through the lobby. Xander hoisted the nearly empty cooler on one shoulder and the suitcase in one hand and returned to the
room. He was going to have to find a way to get Spike more blood pronto, but first he could get Spike cleaned and settled in for the day. And a shower sounded good to him too.

He started the tub filling, then got Spike. He’d carried Spike in from the van wearing nothing but his duster and a blanket, so it was simple to strip him and then carry him into the bathroom. The water turned muddy pink as soon as Spike was in it, and Xander knew it was going to take several water changes to get Spike clean.

Spike leaned his head back and closed his eyes as Xander dabbed gently at the slashes and bite marks that covered his body. “Want to tell me how you ended up wolf wrestling, Spike?”

Spike sighed. “Stopped for petrol. You were out cold, snoring away. But when I got out to fill the tank, I could smell wolf and fresh human blood. So I followed the scent. It wasn’t far.”

“Now who’s the white hat?”
Spike snorted. “Was only...curious.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

Spike glared at him but Xander just smirked back.

“I followed the trail to that car park at the university. Then I got out to investigate.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“Weres are nasty beasts, love. Thought you’d be safer in the van.”

Xander was instantly furious. “Look at me!” he yelled. Spike opened his eyes in surprise.

“I’m just the Zeppo, right? Nothing special. Not a single super power. But you know what? I’ve been fighting monsters for half my fucking life, and I’m still here. Only missing one little body part. Haven’t died even once, which is more than a lot of the people I know can say. And I don’t need you or
anybody else deciding what’s safe for me!” Xander slammed the towel onto the side of the tub and stood. He stomped to the corner of the small bathroom and stood with his arms crossed and his back to Spike.

“Finished?”

Xander didn’t answer.

“You’re right. You’re a brave man and a good fighter and I shouldn’t have treated you like that.”

Spike’s voice was soft as he said this, and Xander relented enough to turn and look at him. He saw Spike, naked and beat up and small and vulnerable-looking in the water, and his anger melted away. “Okay. Don’t let it happen again.”

“I won’t.”

Xander knelt again next to the tub. He looked at Spike earnestly. “You told me before to look at what you are. And I did. You’re a vampire, and...I accept
you as a vampire. I...I want you as a vampire.” He’d ducked his head as he said this last sentence, unable to meet Spike’s gaze. But now he looked straight into blue eyes. “You don’t have to want me, but accept me as I am. I’m not the sharpest tool in the box, but I’m not a fool, and I’m not a child, either.”

Spike lifted a hand out of the water and stroked Xander’s cheek with it. “No, you’re not. You’re strong, Xander. Strongest person I know. And I do want you, you know.”

Xander smiled. They were good words to hear, even if he knew they were only temporary. “Okay, then,” he said.

“We’re sorted?”

“I guess we are. Tell me more about the wolf.”

“It was wolves, pet, and that was the problem. At first I saw only one, feeding on a kill. Somebody’s going to have a nasty surprise next time they go
looking through that field. When I saw what the wolf was doing, I lost my temper.” He sighed. “Stupid. Went after it without thinking. Got torn up a bit, but was getting the better of it—nearly had it dead. And then the other one attacked.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Perhaps I could have managed two if I was fresh from the start, but I was already tired and hurt by the time the second one got there. I did kill the first one, and crippled the second, but it nearly tore my head off.”

“I can see that.” The wound there was still open and gaping horribly.

“I got away. I expect I ran toward the van. Don’t much recall. It was too injured to follow.”

“And then you met up with me.”

Spike set his jaw and looked away. “Yeah.”
Xander gently turned Spike’s head back toward him. “I knew you were hungry, Spike. I… I trusted you. You didn’t bite until I told you to, and you stopped before you took too much. Against my objections, may I add, because sweet merciful Zeus!”

Spike squinted at him. “It doesn’t bother you to get off on a vampire bite?”

“Only the good, hot and bothered kind of bother.”

“Oh.”

“Spike, I lost my virginity to a Slayer gone bad. I almost married a former vengeance demon. A little nibble isn’t gonna disturb me.”

Spike blinked at him and then gave a small leer. “Imagine, then, what it feels like to get bitten while you’re shagging.”

Xander’s cock, which had been dozing away peacefully, woke up with a twitch. Xander splashed a handful of water at Spike’s face. “Don’t go putting
ideas like that in my head when you’re in no condition to follow through. Evil undead guy.”

Spike laughed.

“So what did you do all day? How’d you not get crisped?”

“Hid in one of those sheds.”

“What were you going to do?”

“Dunno. Was considering watching the sunrise.”

“Jesus, Spike.”

“I was hurting, love. No way to mend. And...I couldn’t bear to hurt you again.”

“Don’t you think I’d be hurt if you dusted?”

Spike opened his mouth, blinked, and then closed it and swallowed.
“Were you still in the shed when the wolf came at me?”

“Yeah. I heard you calling. Wasn’t going to answer. But then I heard the wolf, too.”

“You saved me.”

“And you were handy with that blade, pet.”

Xander grinned. “That was a useful present.”

Spike’s head fell back again. His face was drawn and his body was clean, but still badly damaged. They needed to get some blood and some sleep and then get the fuck out of Dodge before the assortment of corpses behind the stadium was discovered. And Angel was still... wherever Angel was.

Xander stood. “Ready for bed?”

Spike nodded.

“’Kay.” Xander looked down at himself. His clothes
were still covered in blood and grime. No sense getting Spike dirty again when he carried him. Xander pulled his shirt over his head and let it drop on the floor. He sure was going through a lot of clothing lately.

Suddenly, Spike hissed loudly. “Oh, love,” he groaned.

Xander looked at his shoulder, where Spike’s horrified gaze was pointed. He didn’t understand what the problem was. There were just a few minor scrapes, so small he hadn’t even realized they were there.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“It bit you.”

“It’s no big deal. You’re the one who was the real chew toy.”

“But I’m a vampire. I’ll mend just fine. You’re human, Xan, and you’ve been bitten by a
werewolf.”

“So? What—Oh.” Spike’s point finally sunk in. “Oh.”

“Xander—“

“Wait. Just a minute. Just.... This won’t—it won’t affect me right away, right?”

“Not until the next full moon.”

Xander let out a long breath. “Okay, then. I’ll deal later. We have other fish to fry right now.”

“But—“

“I mean it! I’m good at denial. An expert. And any thoughts about turning furry are going to be struck firmly from my brain until later. Hey, look on the bright side. Maybe I’ll get killed trying to save Angel and then I won’t have to face it ever.”

Spike shook his head mournfully, but Xander reached into the water and pulled the plug. When
the tub was drained, he wrapped a big towel around Spike’s shoulders, scooped him up, and carried him to the bed. “Get some sleep, Spike. You need it. We have a long drive still.”

Spike looked doubtful, but he was clearly still exhausted and in pain. His eyes fell closed, and within minutes he was deeply asleep.

Xander fished his cell phone off the bedside table and took it into the bathroom with him. He closed the door so as not to disturb Spike, and dialed England.

“Rupert Giles here.”

“Hi, G-Man.”

“Xander. Where are you?”

“Lincoln, Nebraska. And I’m really tired and I need to crash, so could you just listen? We can pretend you lectured me already, or you can save it for later, okay?”
Heavy sigh. “All right.”

“Thanks, Giles. Okay. Quick version: Spike’s hurt. Werewolf attack. We need human blood, like, now. Where can we get some?” The whole story, especially the parts where Xander got twice bitten, could wait for later. Much, much later.

Giles paused. He was probably polishing his glasses. But all he said was, “All right, Xander. I know someone who could get human blood, but I’m afraid he’s quite a distance away.”

“Where?”

“Las Vegas.”

“Shit.”

“Yes.”

“That’s, like, a thousand miles from here.”
“Erm...twelve hundred, actually. But it’s closer than LA. Can you make it there?”

“We’ll have to, I guess.” Xander felt dumb from fatigue. “Okay, thanks. I’ll, uh, call you later, okay?”

“Please do. And be—”

“Careful. I know. Bye, Giles.”

“Bye, Xander.”

~**~**~**~

When Xander woke up, it felt like he’d only slept for minutes. But the clock said 5:30pm, and his stomach agreed. He must have woken Spike up, too, because the vampire blinked blearily at him.

“Pet?” Spike croaked.

“Will you be all right if I go get something to eat? Then we can hit the road.” He didn’t need to tell
Spike how long that road would be before they’d get him a decent feeding.

“Fine,” Spike replied. “I’ll have a bit more of a kip, yeah?”

“Good.” Xander leaned over and kissed the pale forehead.

He took a shower before he left, and that helped wake him up. It felt good to be clean again.

He’d noticed a grocery store nearby, one of those big, warehouse-style places. He steered the van over there. The butcher was willing to sell him a gallon or so of cow blood (for sausages, Xander lied, not very convincingly, but he got the blood anyway). He got some more ice for the cooler, too, and a bunch of food for himself. Stuff he could eat while he drove.

It was dusk by the time he returned. He hauled the cooler and suitcase back to the car and filled the cooler up. Then he bundled Spike in his duster and
blanket and carried him to the van. He placed the vampire carefully in the nest of blankets and pillows. Spike moaned a little, but said he could manage. Then Xander checked out of the motel and headed west.

Spike drank a little and then fell back into a fitful sleep. Xander ate with one hand and drove with the other, trying to put the miles behind them as fast as he could.

Nebraska was fucking endless. It was all flat and nearly featureless, and sometimes Xander could almost swear they weren’t making any progress at all, like characters in an old cartoon, with the same background looping endlessly behind them. Finally, though, they were in Colorado and the land started to rise.

It was still dark when they blew past Denver. By Grand Junction, Xander had been driving nearly nine hours and he couldn’t see straight any more. He pulled into a rest stop and climbed in the back. He woke Spike up enough to get him to eat some
more—Spike had been semiconscious or out completely most of the night—and then Xander crawled carefully in beside him and went to sleep.

He woke up about three hours later, and it was fully light outside. He fed Spike some more, used the bathroom, and then climbed back in the driver’s seat.

By the time they arrived in Las Vegas, late in the afternoon, Xander felt like he’d spent his whole life behind the wheel. It didn’t help any that Spike had been moaning fitfully for miles, the constant bump and jostle of the ride having aggravated his injuries.

Xander knew this city fairly well. There was always a lot of demon activity here, so the Council had sent him on errands to Vegas more than once. He hadn’t minded. It beat, say, Detroit. And he could usually get in a little gambling or a show after he’d dealt with the demonic issues. His love of Cirque du Soleil was one of his deepest secrets.

But there’d be no acrobats this time. Xander found
a motel downtown, one that wasn’t too skeezy but that allowed him to park right outside the room’s door. It was still light out, but with the help of a blanket and Spike’s coat, he was able to dash his vampire into the room combustion-free.

Spike was pretty much out of it, just whimpering and twitching slightly. Xander placed him on the bed, which looked entirely too inviting right now. But no rest for Xander yet. Instead, he smoothed at Spike’s hair for a moment and then dialed the number Giles had given him.

“Hello?”

“Uh, hi. My name’s Xander Harris, and—“

“Gotcha. Your Watcher told me the tale, kid.”

Xander didn’t bother explaining that Giles wasn’t strictly his Watcher. “Okay, great. Can you get—“

“Some perky A Pos. No problemo.”
“Oh, thank gods. Can you get lots?”

“Sure thing. Where can I find you?”

“Best Western on Las Vegas Boulevard. Room 103.”

“I’ll be there in two shakes.”

Xander hung up feeling a little better. He sat next to Spike and drank some water, and tried to soothe a little of Spike’s pain away. Spike half-opened hazy eyes and rasped, “Where, love?”

“Vegas. And dinner’s on the way.”

Spike’s eyes fell closed again.

It felt like days, but it was less than half an hour later that there was a knock at the door. Xander got up and opened it, only to be faced with a tall green demon in a purple suit. The demon had red horns and red eyes, and he was carrying a big paper bag. “Delivery!” he sang.
Xander let him in. At this point, he would have let in anything that promised to help make Spike better.

“Hi,” said Xander.

“Hey there, pumpkin. I’m Lorne.”

Lorne walked over to the bed and looked down sadly at the torn and naked vampire. Xander hadn’t wanted to cover Spike’s wounds for fear that the fabric would stick to them, and he had nowhere near enough bandages. “Oh, Spikester,” the demon sighed. “What did you do to yourself this time?”

“You know him?”

“Yeah. We’re buds from way back. Haven’t seen him in years, though. Let’s say we get some of this red stuff in him, huh?”

Xander positioned himself next to Spike on the bed, and then carefully raised Spike’s upper body, supporting his head and back with his arm. Lorne dug in the bag and brought out a packet of blood.
He darted into the bathroom and came back with a plastic cup, and then he tore open the packet and filled the cup half-full. He handed it to Xander.

Xander held the cup near Spike’s mouth. “Spike,” he said softly. “Open up. Down the hatch.”

Spike’s lips parted just a little, and Xander tipped the cup. Some of the blood dripped down Spike’s chin, but at least some got inside, and Xander was very relieved to see the vampire swallow. He tipped the cup some more, and soon the cup was empty, so Lorne refilled it.

By the time they’d emptied a half dozen bags, Spike’s eyes fluttered open. “Green jeans?” he whispered.

“Hey, slim,” Lorne responded, rubbing Spike’s arm.

“What...what...?”

“I’m your source for human blood in the greater Las Vegas area. Not a service I normally provide,
actually, but I’ll make an exception for my little prince.”

“Cheers.”

Xander eased Spike back onto the pillows. “You want more now, Spike? Or in a while?”

“Sleep...a bit...yeah?” Spike’s voice was weak.

“Okay. I’ll wake you up in a while for round two.”

Spike’s eyes shut, but it seemed to Xander that he looked a little more peaceful already. Less like a murder victim and more like his normal, dead but sexy self.

Xander stood, and he and Lorne walked to the door. “Thanks, man,” Xander said. “I don’t know what I’d have done without you.”

“My pleasure, pilgrim. You want to tell me how he got in this state? Mr. Giles just said something about an attack.”
Xander considered this for a moment. He didn’t know this colorful creature. But Spike seemed comfortable with him, and Giles had trusted him enough to call him. “It’s kind of a long story. See, Angel sent Spike to Chicago, and—“

“Hold on there.” Lorne held up one long green hand. “I have a show to get to tonight. Let’s save some time. Sing me a song.”

“Huh?”

“A song, muffin. Just a few lines will do it.”

“Umm...what kind of song?” Was this guy crazy?

“Whatever you like. Just—no Sinatra, okay? I like to leave ol’ blue eyes for the professionals.”

Xander hesitated, but Lorne was smiling expectantly at him. Oookay. Xander had bought a couple of CDs for Spike before they left Chicago, and Spike had been humming along with one of them when
Xander fell asleep in the van. So the first song that came to mind was a Clash tune, and Xander mumbled a verse to the demon:

_I heard the people who lived on the ceiling_
_Scream and fight most scarily_
_Hearing that noise was my first ever feeling_
_That's how it's been all around me_

Lorne put his hand up again. “Enough! Got it. Oh, honey. That’s quite a journey you’re on.” He patted Xander’s shoulder. “Buck up, all right? There’s a silver lining, I promise. It’ll be a little...complicated. But you’ll work it out.”

Xander had no idea what the guy was on about, but he nodded sagely.

“And our little cowboy? His anger is understandable. Believe me. But Angel-cake was right in what he asked me to do.”

“What? I don’t—“

Lorne frowned. “I did it, honey. I pulled the trigger
on Lindsey. It still leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It’s why...why I had to stay away from Angel all these years. And your little sugar pie, too. But it was still the right thing to do.”

Xander was too astonished to respond properly, and besides, his brain was running on fumes. So he simply smiled and thanked Lorne again.

Lorne patted him again. “You two take care of each other, you hear? You need each other.” The demon stepped out into the dusk and was gone.

**Part Nine**

“Can’t this heap go any faster?”

Xander thought sourly that maybe it would be better if Spike hadn’t quite healed enough to backseat drive. But he knew the vampire was anxious, so he only smiled stiffly and said, “Doing the best I can here. Less than an hour, okay?”
Spike nodded sulkily.

Xander had helped Spike pour pint after pint down his throat, and as a result, they’d needed to spend only two days in Vegas before Spike felt up to the rest of the trip. If it weren’t for the knowledge that Angel might be badly in need of help, it wouldn’t have been so terrible at all. No Cirque or Texas Hold ‘Em, but Xander caught up on his sleep, at least. In fact, they both spent almost the entire time in bed, huddled up against each other. Spike was getting to be like a drug to Xander, a drug he desperately craved. It wasn’t even the sex, because that had happened only a few times. It was the contact, the companionship. He was dreading having to go cold turkey.

Spike fidgeted and grumbled and rolled his eyes, but Xander was already pushing ninety and didn’t want to get pulled over. So he tried to distract Spike instead. “So, you have a plan? Or do we just drive around LA looking for vamps to rescue?”

Spike huffed out a breath. “We’ll go home first.”
“Home?”

“Hyperion. Peaches owns it. Big old heap.”

“Okay. And then?”

“Dunno. Have a look about. See if we can learn anything.”

“And if we can’t?”

“We’ll just ask around then, won’t we? Somebody will know something. I have contacts in LA.”

Xander would have felt comfortable with a little more of a strategy. But then plotting had never been his strongpoint, or Spike’s either. Spike was pretty much a rush into things kinda guy, and Xander was mostly get dragged into things and hope he didn’t die.

Spike tapped his fingers on the dashboard and jiggled his knees and chewed at his lower lip. He
fiddled with the radio and rolled his window up and down. He toyed with his seatbelt. He drove Xander nuts.

Again trying for diversion, Xander asked, “Why are you so anxious to rescue Angel anyway? I thought you two hated each other.”

“Not hate. More can’t stand one another.”

“And yet here you are.”

“It’s…it’s family, innit? Even when the buggers drive you mad, you still care about them. I expect you care for those tossers, your mum and dad, yeah?”

“They’re dead.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Xander saw Spike turn to look at him. “Sorry. Didn’t know.”

“How could you? It’s been a long time anyway. They got in a car wreck near Denver, about six months after Sunnyhell imploded. Tony was driving drunk
again.” At the time he’d felt a some sadness, some regret for what could have been. Now he felt nothing.

“Sorry,” Spike repeated. “You deserved better.”

“Thanks. You don’t get to choose your relatives, do you?”

Spike snorted. “Look at mine. Peaches and Dru were the best of that lot.”

“Yeah, I remember the Master.” Xander shuddered. “Still, I’m surprised you and Angel have managed to not stake each other, all these years.” He suddenly remembered what Spike had said about him and Angelus. “I mean, stake as in the pointy wooden thing, not....”

Spike looked at him with amusement. “We’ve had a few brawls, the pouf and I, but nothing fatal. Or naked. It’s a big hotel; we don’t spend that much time together.”
“What do you do, then? When you’re not fighting evil, I mean.”


“You haven’t minded sticking around LA?”

“I’ve wandered a lot. Staying put a while’s not so bad. Those Watchers have you racking up frequent flyer miles, yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t have to go if I don’t want to. But seeing the world is interesting. I’d only been to Colorado, before.”

“And there’s nothing to keep you any one place.”

“No, I guess not. The girls have their own lives, you know?”

They were both silent for a long time after that. Soon, though, they descended into LA, and Spike
directed them to the Hyperion. It was, as Spike had said, a big chunk of real estate, in a decidedly iffy neighborhood. Xander parked right in front and they walked to the door. Spike opened it, but when Xander went to step in, he bounced off an invisible barrier. Spike laughed.

“Now you know how vamps feel. We had the place warded. Can’t get in without an invite.” Xander raised his eyebrows and Spike laughed again. “Xander Harris, please come in,” Spike said with a little bow and sweep of his arm.

The lobby was big and mostly empty. There was a curved reception desk and a few plush seats, including a rounded one in the center of the space. Several overhead chandeliers cast a yellowish glow over the space. As Xander turned slowly, taking it in, Spike inhaled deeply several times.

“He hasn’t been here recently,” he announced.

“How can you tell?”
“The scent is old. Over a week at least.”

“So you’re sort of like a bloodhound?”

Spike shot him an irritated glance.

“Can you smell anyone else?” Xander asked.

“Loads of other people, but none lately. Not McDonald. Let’s have a poke about, yeah?”

Xander followed Spike into a small office behind the desk. It contained a big desk and a few chairs, and three shelves full of books. Five or six books and an empty highball glass were scattered across the polished wood of the desk. There was a half-full bottle of whiskey, too, and Spike grabbed it, undid the top, and took a big swig. Then he held it out to Xander, who shook his head. He wanted to keep his brain clear for now.

Spike moved things around for a while, while Xander stood there uselessly. But apparently Spike found nothing helpful, because he sighed and
walked to the door. “Let’s try upstairs.”

On the third floor, Spike ushered Xander into a suite. Xander knew right away it had to be Angel’s. Everything was in muted colors, and there was an oversized armchair flanked by a two small tables. One table held a small stack of paperbacks, and the other a sketchpad and a few charcoal pencils. More out of curiosity than hope of finding anything useful, Xander wandered into the bedroom and opened the closet. There was nothing there but dark clothes: slacks, shirts, a long coat, even a few suits. And several pairs of shoes beneath. The bathroom wasn’t very enlightening either. It was neat as a pin, with a small shelf full of hair gels. There was no mirror.

Back in the sitting area, Spike was humming with frustration. It looked like Angel had just stepped out for an evening stroll. “Had a look in the fridge as well,” Spike said, pointed at the small appliance in the corner. “Few pints of pigs’ blood in there, but they’ve gone off.”
“Do you need to find some for you? Because the cooler’s empty, isn’t it?”

“I’ll get some tomorrow. Meantime, I have some stashed in the freezer in my room. That’ll tide me over.”

After a little more fruitless searching, they left Angel’s rooms. Xander trailed behind Spike as he went up another flight of stairs and down a long corridor. He opened another room, and the odors of cigarettes and whiskey and leather informed Xander that it must be Spike’s.

Spike had only a single room, with a double bed against one wall, and a brown loveseat alongside. A big flat panel television hung on the wall, and underneath was a cabinet containing a Wii and some games in their cases. There was a tall dresser, fairly beat-up, with a microwave on top, and a stainless-steel fridge that looked strangely out of place. Xander could tell Spike had made efforts to make the space homey: there were rugs on the floor, a soft blanket on the loveseat, and some
drawings of Drusilla and Buffy tacked to the cream-colored walls.

“Hey!” Xander exclaimed, noticing another sketch, this one of the whole Scooby gang, including him. Back when he had binocular vision.

“Peaches did the scribbling,” Spike said, looking slightly uncomfortable.

“It’s nice.”

Heavy draperies covered the window and Xander peeked outside. The view was of a courtyard that looked somewhat overgrown. He let the curtain fall back into place.

He turned back to Spike, intending to ask him what next, but he fell silent when he saw the vampire. Spike’s shoulders were hunched, his hands limp at his sides. His head hung low and his eyes were shut. Xander walked over and drew Spike against him. At first Spike was stiff, but then he yielded, contouring his body against Xander’s and resting his head on
Xander’s shoulder.

“We’ll think of something,” Xander murmured. “You’re beat. Let’s get some rest and then deal with it, okay?”

Spike nodded slowly. Xander helped him off with his duster and t-shirt. Spike stood there, unresisting and defeated-looking. So Xander led him to the bed, where he pushed him down gently. He unlaced Spike’s boots and pulled them off, then unfastened his jeans. Spike raised his hips a little so Xander could take the pants off, too. When Spike was completely bare, Xander helped him into bed, noting as he did that the wounds were healing nicely, most of them just red raised lines now. He tucked Spike into the crisp white sheets.

“I’m gonna go get the suitcase, okay?”

“Fine,” Spike replied without interest.

“Um...where do you want me to sleep?”
Without looking at him, Spike said, “There’s a hundred bloody rooms. Take your pick.”

“Oh. Okay,” replied Xander, his stomach plummeting. He walked toward the door.

His hand was on the knob when Spike said, “Wait!”

Xander turned around.

“Sleep here. Please.”

And Xander’s mood did a complete one-eighty. “Sure,” he said, hiding a grin. “I’ll be right back.”

On the way downstairs he dialed London, Willow this time.

“Xan! Where are you?”

“LA. Angel’s place.”

“And you’re okay? Giles told us about the werewolf, and—it wasn’t Oz, was it?”
“No. Definitely not Oz.”

“Good. Spike’s back in one piece?”

“More or less. But there’s no sign of Angel here. Hey, could you do a locator spell?”

“No, sorry. Won’t work on the undead. And this McDonald guy, he’s sort of undead, too, isn’t he?”

Xander opened the front door and walked into the balmy night air. “I don’t know. I guess so. I mean, he was dead. I don’t know what he is now.”

“What will you do, Xan?”

“No idea. For now I’m gonna crash. Maybe we’ll come up with something tomorrow.” He opened the van and removed the suitcase. He left the cooler inside; they didn’t need it now anyway. “So how’s the new mommy doing?”

Willow giggled. “Honestly? I think she’s scared to
death. But she’s doing fine. You should see Giles holding Em! It’s so sweet.”

Xander smiled at the mental image of that and re-entered the building, belatedly relieved that the ward seemed to know him now.

“I’m gonna go now, Will.”

“Keep in touch, mister.”

“Will do.” He hung up, noting happily that for once, he hadn’t been warned to be careful.

By the time he got back to the room, Spike was asleep. Xander set the luggage down and stripped, then climbed in next to his vampire. Without really waking up, Spike immediately plastered himself to Xander’s side, his hair tickling Xander’s shoulder. Xander wondered how many more nights he’d get to sleep like this.

~*~*~*~*~
“I hate to ask this. But is it possible McDonald just dusted him?”

Spike threw back his shot of Jack and then shook his head. “Nah. That’d be too easy. He’ll want to play, I reckon.”

Xander’s empty glass joined Spike’s on the table, and Xander rubbed at his chin, thinking. “Okay. So he needs a place where he can keep a vamp captive. And a source for blood, too, right?”

“Yeah, if he wants to keep Angel interesting.”

“So that means, what? Butchers, blood banks, hospitals?”

“Demon bars as well. And I know a few other sources.”

The bartender came by and, with a nod from Spike, refilled their glasses. Xander was on his way to getting fairly sloshed. That was the problem with
hanging out in bars, looking for some sign of their quarry. But Spike was driving anyway, so what the hell. This was their third bar tonight, and it was a dive, with creatures of all descriptions skulking in the dark corners, and the floor sticky with substances Xander would prefer not to identify. Fortunately, most of the demonic denizens of LA seemed to recognize Spike, and they gave both of them a wide berth. But nobody had seen any sign of Angel for at least a couple of weeks, and they all claimed ignorance when Xander and Spike described McDonald.

Spike and Xander had begun by checking out Wolfram and Hart’s old headquarters. But it was gone, reduced to rubble after the battle, then the remainder had been razed. Now there was a Starbucks there and a fitness center and a Quiznos and a tanning place. No sign of anything more evil than a venti caramel frappuccino. So now they were hitting demon bars, had been doing so for several days, but with no more luck.

“We could also try.... McDonald’s gonna need
supplies if he wants to torture Angel, right? So where would he get stuff like that?”

Spike shrugged. “Depends on his tastes. Hardware stores. Bondage shops. If you’re creative enough, you can use nearly anything. One time in Berlin, Angelus—“

“Am I really gonna want to hear this story, Spike?”

Spike sighed. “No. Not especially.”

They both downed another shot. Xander tossed some bills on the bar and then stood, only a little wobbly. Spike stood, too, and they walked out of the bar and toward the van. As he slid into the passenger seat, Xander concluded that the only way they were ever going to find Angel was through a huge stroke of good luck. He watched the city go by his window, mostly dark this time of night, with brief flashes of color and light.

Back at the Hyperion, Spike was morose and discouraged. He flipped listlessly through channels
on the television, while Xander sat next to him, watching the vampire’s face instead of the screen.

“What can I do?” Xander asked at last, desperate to wipe that look of distress off of Spike.

“You’re doing enough, love,” Spike said, and leaned his head wearily on Xander’s shoulder.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“You’re here. That’s plenty now. I need you. Couldn’t carry on without you.”

A thrill went through Xander at these words. He was rarely needed. Used, sure, helpful, occasionally, but not necessary. He bent his head and kissed Spike’s scalp, smiling at the feel of Spike’s ungelled hair.

Spike responded by tossing the remote onto the floor and climbing into Xander’s lap. He wrapped one arm around Xander’s shoulders and pressed their foreheads together. “Thank you,” he whispered. “For staying. For...treating me like a
person. For being funny and brave and stubborn.”

“What mood is this, Spike?”

Spike smiled. “Appreciative. And sod the spell, I do appreciate you.” And he kissed Xander, a soft, tender touching of lips that soon became more heated, until Xander’s breath was coming in pants and his face felt flushed with passion.

They pulled slightly apart, and in a flurry of unbuttoning and tugging, managed to get each other completely naked. Xander loved the feel of Spike’s cool, hard muscles against him. Spike dragged Xander to the bed and pushed him back on it, then collapsed on top of him.

They couldn’t stay still. Spike’s mouth was everywhere: on Xander’s cheeks and brow and earlobes and neck and shoulder and sternum and nipples. Meanwhile, Spike’s lower body was wriggling and writhing against Xander’s, and Xander felt the damp hardness of Spike’s cock and the tickling softness of his nest of curls and the solid
weight of his balls, all rubbing against him in an entirely agreeable way. Xander’s hands roamed over Spike’s shoulders and back and ass, stopping now and then to stroke or squeeze or lightly pinch. Spike was making noises. Low moans and hisses and growls that reminded Xander that this was a vampire atop him, and made Xander’s head swim with desire.

Xander knew what he wanted.

He pushed at Spike’s shoulders until they were eye to eyes, and said, “Wanna really show me how much you appreciate me?”

“Yeah,” Spike panted.

“Fuck me. Fuck me and bite me, Spike.”

Spike’s eyes blew wide open and his irises sparkled from blue to yellow. He swallowed. “You’re sure?” he rasped.

“Oh, yeah.”
Spike flew off of Xander and, almost before Xander could blink, flew back again, now clutching a bottle of lube. Then he knelt on the floor between Xander’s legs and, very cautiously, caressed the sensitive skin of Xander’s perineum. Xander had expected he’d be nervous about this. He and Anya had played around with toys—his girl was nothing if not adventurous and she practically wore out her copy of *Bend Over, Boyfriend*—but Spike was about to go where no man had gone before. As Spike slid a single slick finger inside Xander, though, his other hand gently massaging Xander’s balls, what Xander mostly felt was the wish that Spike would hurry along with it, damnit.

Spike didn’t hurry. He took his own sweet, evil time, blowing on Xander’s overheated flesh and thrusting into him with his slender digits and, occasionally, rubbing a fingertip just so, so that Xander was biting his tongue to keep from begging or crying, or maybe both.

A decade or so later, Spike stood. “How d’you want
me, pet?” he purred.

Xander attempted to get a few brain cells operational. He rolled to his knees and elbows, his feet hanging over the edge of the bed, and looked back over his shoulder at Spike. Spike groaned loudly and shut his eyes. “Fangs, please,” Xander said.

“Fuck,” muttered Spike, and his face shifted. He was still beautiful, Xander thought. He had a moment to consider how preposterous his current position would have seemed to his teenaged self, and then Spike was lining his cock up against Xander’s hole and, exquisitely slowly, pressing inside. One of Spike’s hands was on Xander’s lower back, smoothing at it as if to calm a nervous animal.

It hurt, just a little, but Xander so didn’t care. He wiggled his hips impatiently and Spike laughed and pushed deeper until he was fully inside. He draped himself over Xander’s back. “Your heart’s beating about a thousand beats a minute, love,” he said, his voice slightly sibilant over his teeth. He ran his
hands up and down Xander’s sides. “You still want this?”

Xander grabbed one of Spike’s hands and touched it to his own cock, which was slick with precome and pulsing with need. “I’m about ready to bite you myself, Spike. Please!”

Spike chuckled, low and dirty, and it occurred to Xander that he could possibly come just from hearing Spike’s sexy noises. But that line of thought was rendered moot as Spike began to thrust in and out, long, slow strokes that sent shudders of pleasure down Xander’s spine. Spike was still holding Xander’s cock, too, fist ing it in tandem with the movement of his hips. “God,” he gasped. “So tight, so hot, fuck, Xander, so hot for me.”

“Gah,” replied Xander, all power of speech having escaped him.

Spike moved a little faster, snapping his pelvis against Xander, jacking him with his left hand and stroking Xander’s ass with the right. Xander felt his
balls drawing up. “Bite!” he managed to choke out.

Continuing to piston his hips, Spike placed his right hand on Xander’s forehead and applied pressure until Xander’s head was drawn up and back, his neck stretched and bent. Spike sank his fangs deeply into Xander’s throat.

One of them howled. Xander had no idea which. He couldn’t tell where his body ended and Spike’s began, or which way was up. He couldn’t have remembered his name right now if somebody put a gun to his head. It was all about feeling: Spike inside him, on top of him, around him. An electric current ran through every vein and nerve in his body and he thrashed and came and came and came….

It must have been only a couple minutes later that he regained awareness. Spike still covered him, still penetrated him, but now their bodies were unmoving and Spike was licking delicately at the small wounds on Xander’s throat.

“Okay, pet?” Spike asked, sounding a little worried.
“Angh,” Xander replied.

“Gonna have to repeat that in English if you want me to believe you.”

“Good. Dandy.”

Spike kissed his cheek and then pulled away. Only for a moment, though, because then he wrestled Xander around until Xander’s head was on a pillow and his body under the sheets. Spike crawled in beside him, clutching him tightly. “Was...was that okay?” Xander asked, suddenly struck by insecurity.

“It was brilliant, love. Remind me to appreciate you more often.”

Xander was sticky from his fluids and Spike’s, but he was too goddamn drained to do anything about it right now. A shower could wait until morning. For now, he snuggled against his vampire and wallowed in bliss.
Part Ten

Xander thought to himself, for maybe the twentieth time in five minutes, that this was a bad idea. But he couldn’t think of a better one, so he squirmed in the slippery vinyl booth and sipped at his beer, and tried not to be too obvious in the way he watched the vampire at the bar.

They’d spent a few more days unsuccessfully trawling bars, not finding any sign of either Angel or McDonald. And then, at a place called Nicky’s West, kind of a hip bar for a demon joint, the bartender had gestured to them. They’d moved to the end of the bar, perhaps away from prying ears, and the guy, who was about seven feet tall and whip thin, with odd pinkish eyes, leaned down until his face was inches from theirs.

“I think I know this man you’re looking for,” he whispered. Xander felt Spike tense beside him. “I’m only telling you this because you and Angel took
care of that Bzriknank problem I was having last year. The dude comes in every few days, has a Coors or two, and then leaves with a dozen pints of blood. I been wondering what a human wants with the stuff, but I ain’t inclined to ask questions. He hasn’t caused any trouble, but there’s something creepy about him, you know?”

“Thanks, mate. How long since he’s been in last?”

The bartender furrowed his brows. “Hmm. Not sure. Maybe two or three days.”

“So he’s due back soon?”

“Yeah, probably.”

Spike nodded. “You won’t tell him we’re looking for him, yeah?”

“No.”

Spike nodded again, and he and Xander moved outside to confer. They walked around the corner to
the alley, Spike leaning against the brick wall, Xander sitting on a plastic crate.

“Got an idea,” Spike announced.

“Yeah?”

“The cowboy will recognize me, but I reckon he won’t know anything about you.”

“So?”

“So I’m gonna sit inside Nicky’s, alone, and wait for him to show up. He won’t be too pleased to see me.”

“And me?”

“You sit across the room. Pretend we’re not together. Just watch. I’m gonna try and get him to take me to Angel, and you can tag along without him knowing.”

“Why can’t we both just hide, and then follow him
when he leaves?”

“Couple reasons. He might not go straight to Angel, and if he sees us, we’re buggered. Or even if he does go to Angel, if it’s a house, I’m not gonna be able to get in without his invite.”

“Fuck.”

“Downside to being a vamp, pet.”

“But he could hurt you! He already tried to get you dusted. And if he had some way to take Angel down, he could do the same to you.”

“You’ll have to be my back-up. Take your magic pill and he won’t even know you’re there.”

Xander fondled the plastic box in his pocket. He’d been carrying it everywhere, just in case. His knife was there, too. He’d bought a shoulder harness the other day, and wore it over his t-shirt and under a button-down, so that it was more or less inconspicuous. Spike had asked him to carry the
salve as well.

“All right,” he sighed. “But don’t get yourself killed.”

Spike crouched down and gave him a thorough kiss. “Don’t plan to, love,” he said afterwards.

They went back in the bar and Spike sat in one place and Xander in another, but McDonald never showed. Ditto the next night. So here they were again, and Xander was hating McDonald more and more as every minute passed.

Tonight Spike was wearing the knife. Xander could always call it to himself if he needed it, but he wouldn’t be able to carry it if he wanted to be invisible. Spike had the salve in his duster, too.

A silvery, metallic demon of a type Xander didn’t recognize approached his table. It had lidless eyes with horizontal pupils and two thin slits instead of a nose. “Hey,” it said, its voice high-pitched and squeaky. “Want some company?”
Xander suppressed a shudder. “No, thanks.” He looked around nervously, as if he thought someone might be spying on him. “My Master doesn’t like me talking to anyone else. Sorry.” It was a trick he’d used a few times before, and it worked. The demon smiled crookedly and walked away. Xander took another sip of beer.

The door opened, letting in noise from the street. A man entered, alone. Short and muscular, wearing blue jeans and a blue and white striped shirt. Cowboy boots, too. He didn’t see Spike at first; the vampire was sitting too far back in the gloom. But when the man came a few steps farther in, he halted in his tracks.

Spike slowly turned his head to the side and looked at McDonald and smiled, a thin, predatory grin that reminded Xander of a skull. “Lindsey,” he drawled.

“What—what are you doin’ here?” the man replied, looking as if he was trying to decide whether to run or piss himself.
Spike pointed at his glass. “Jus’ havin’ a drink.” Xander knew he was nowhere near drunk, but Spike was deliberately slurring his words, making his movements appear over-careful.

McDonald stood there a moment longer and then slowly approached Spike. He sat on the stool next to him. Xander couldn’t hear their conversation; he was too far away. But he saw them talk awhile, and then McDonald started moving his arms around, gesturing widely as if he was trying to convince Spike of something. Spike shook his head a few times, and McDonald continued. Finally, Spike hunched over the bar, seemingly lost in thought, while the man waited. Then Spike nodded and scooted off the stool, stumbling slightly when his feet touched the floor. McDonald put an arm around him, presumably to help him balance. Xander instantly seethed with jealousy, but remained where he was. McDonald looked around quickly, furtively, as if making sure nobody was paying too much attention. Xander ducked his head, but he could see out of the corner of his eye as Spike was led to the door.
A moment after they left, Xander hurried after them. He peeked outside and, to his relief, it appeared that they were going to proceed on foot. Spike was lurching and staggering, and McDonald had Spike’s elbow clutched in his hand and was steering him down the sidewalk.

Xander ducked into the alley, pulled the plastic box from his pocket, and removed the pill. With a grimace at its size, he dry-swallowed it. It was bitter. Mere seconds later, there was a funny lurching feeling in his gut. When he looked down at his hands, there was nothing there. He sleeves ended on emptiness.

He kicked off his shoes and then tore his clothes off. He was about to come out of the alley when he remembered the patch. With a quiet oath, he ripped that off, too, throwing it on top of the pile of fabric at his feet. Moving as quietly as possible, he followed Spike and McDonald down the street.

It felt very weird to be naked in the middle of Los
Angeles. Kind of...liberating in a way, but weird. He fervently hoped Vega had been truthful when he said the pill would last four hours. He wondered what it would be like to have sex while he was invisible, but then he remembered that time with Spike and Buffy, and that was really not a memory he wanted to dwell on. Ugh.

Xander kept about a block behind the others, not wanting McDonald to hear the patter of his bare feet on the pavement. They were making slow progress, and Spike weaved and lurched erratically. Xander focused on the hand that was touching his vampire, and wished he could chop it right off.

They proceeded for half a dozen blocks. The neighborhood grew pretty dodgy. Lots of boarded up buildings with trash collected around their fronts and graffiti on their walls. A broken shopping cart here and there. An empty lot surrounded by wilted chain-link fencing. Then they turned down a small side street. The street lamps had all burned out or been broken, and it was dark, but Xander was able to follow Spike’s hair as it gleamed in the starlight.
Lindsey took Spike to a two-story house. It was large and square, the windows covered with plywood. Xander could see the cracks and crumbles in the stucco siding from a block away. A battered old pickup truck was parked out front, and there was no other sign of life on the entire street. Again glancing around himself first, McDonald unlocked the front door, and ushered Spike in. Then the door closed behind them.

Xander took a deep breath and approached the house. He waited a few minutes, pacing anxiously. Spike had told him to do so if they got this far, to give McDonald time to lead him to wherever Angel was. When he couldn’t stand it anymore, Xander walked up the broken front steps and tried the knob. Locked, of course.

Wading through waist-high weeds, and wincing when he stepped on debris, Xander made his way around the building. A side door was completely boarded over, and the back door was locked as well. But there was a window beside it, and it had been
left open a little. Xander removed the torn screen as quietly as possible and pushed the window open. Then he clambered inside.

He was in a kitchen. A single light was on, a tiny bulb over the stove. He saw peeling linoleum, scuffed and dented walls, warped cabinets with the varnish worn away. A few dishes were stacked near the sink, which dripped, and an old fridge hummed quietly to itself in one corner. There was a square table and three chairs in the center of the room. A closed door was off to Xander’s right, and to his left was an arched doorway.

Xander couldn’t hear anybody. He tiptoed through the arch and found himself in an empty space that was probably once a dining room. A built-in hutch was missing most of the glass from its doors, and some of the shelves were knocked askew. He walked through that room, under another archway, and was in a large living room. There were a few scattered pieces of furniture here, and he couldn’t make out the details in the dark, but they mostly looked like Goodwill rejects. He opened two narrow
doors. One led to a closet, empty except for a cardboard box, and the second was a bathroom with a toilet and a chipped sink.

Just across from the front door was a stairway. Xander crept up it, freezing when a floorboard creaked, but there didn’t seem to be any response. The second floor held a series of bedrooms, mostly empty except for a few pieces of broken furniture and other debris. One of them looked lived-in, though. A mattress on the floor was covered in a small heap of bedding. A guitar leaned in the corner. There was a small dresser with one missing drawer and a stack of books on top of it. There were two more bathrooms upstairs, but that was it. McDonald and Spike weren’t there.

Xander went back downstairs, this time avoiding the noisy one. He walked into the kitchen and considered the closed door. A calendar hung crookedly on it. It had a picture of a snow-capped mountain, and it was dated 1996. Xander slowly turned the knob, and the door swung open to reveal another stairway, this time to the basement.
Of course. Where else would you keep a vampire?

These stairs did a ninety degree turn, ending in a small space with a bare bulb overhead. A heavy metal door was in front of him. Silently praying that it was unlocked, Xander tried the knob. He nearly collapsed with relief when it turned, too. He opened this door only barely enough to slip inside, and then closed it. He had to smother a gasp at what he saw.

It was a large space, clearly taking up the entire underside of the house. The floors were gray cement, the walls and ceiling lined with something dark and thick. Soundproofing, he’d guess. Two fluorescent lights hung from the ceiling. In the corner was a large, heavy cage, maybe eight feet square. There was a metal table inside, and, bound to the table with thick steel chains, was a bare, bloody body. Xander couldn’t see the face from his angle, but he could see that the person was male, and had probably once been large and powerful, but was now nearly skeletal. His torso and genitals and legs were covered in burns and deep holes. He was struggling feebly against his fetters, making
muffled noises that told Xander he must be gagged.

But Xander didn’t have time to focus on him. Because just outside the cage, Lindsey was standing with a sharpened stake in his hand. And Spike was hanging from a ceiling beam by his wrists. His clothes had been stripped off him and lay in a heap nearby. The knife was there, too, still in its holster. Spike’s legs were spread and shackled to the floor and his chin was on his chest, as if he were unconscious.

Xander stifled the urge to attack McDonald. He had no idea what defenses the guy might have, and he wasn’t going to do any good if he was dead.

“Wake up, little vampire,” McDonald sang, poking the end of the wood into Spike’s belly hard enough to draw a bead of blood. Spike grunted and stirred. “C’mon,” said McDonald. “Wouldn’t want you to miss out on all the fun, now.” He poked again and Spike lifted his head and squinted blearily at him.

“Whadja do?” slurred Spike.
“You like that? Just a little trick I picked up along the way. I say a couple words and demons go out like a light. Worked on Angelpie, too.” He gestured towards the body in the cage.

“Bastard,” snarled Spike.

“Nah. My Daddy was legally married to my Ma when I was born.”

Spike glared at him and pulled at the chains.

“Nope. Those are vamp-proofed. Ask Angel. Well, I guess he can’t answer you right now, can he? Now, here’s the thing. Do I dust you right away, or should I show you my toys first?” He waved his hands around, and Xander saw that the floor was littered with all sorts of paraphernalia perfect for torturing vampires: crosses and whips and heavy metal rods, and something that Xander recognized with a shiver as a blowtorch.

“How’d you slink your way out of hell this time,
Lindsey?”

“Hopin’ for some tips for when it’s your turn? The firm called me back. Had some jobs that needed doin’ in Europe. But I slipped their leash. They probably ain’t even figured out yet that I’m gone.”

“I’d have thought you’d find something better to do with your free time than come back here, then.”

“There ain’t no place I’d rather be, man.” McDonald jabbed the stake viciously into Spike’s groin. Spike yelped and tried to jerk away, and McDonald laughed.

A muffled noise of anger escaped Xander’s mouth, and McDonald whipped around. “What the fuck’s that?” he shouted. Xander was very still.

“Oi! Wanker! Whatever happened to your bird? She was a tasty little bite, wasn’t she?”

McDonald turned back to Spike and socked him hard in the face. Blood burst from Spike’s nose, but
he still managed a sneer. “Still have a soft spot for her, yeah? Did Peaches ever tell you he shagged her? Would have liked a bit of that myself.”

McDonald hit him again, this time connecting with his jaw. “Shut the fuck up, you undead prick!”

Spike spat out a mouthful of blood. “Which of them are you jealous of? ‘Cause I know bloody well how badly you wanted the pouf. Could smell it on you, you know.”

McDonald cocked his hand back, as if to hit again, but then lowered it. “Nice, Spike. Subtle. But not quite enough.”

On the last word he suddenly whirled around and hit Xander in a flying tackle, sending them both falling to the ground. Xander had one advantage, in that McDonald couldn’t see him. But the other man was much stronger than a normal human, and he was armed with that stake, which he stabbed into Xander’s right shoulder. Xander howled in pain and tried to swing at McDonald’s Adam’s apple with his
left hand, but the blow didn’t have enough power to do much harm.

“What the fuck are you?” Lindsay said, yanking the stake back out again. It hurt even more coming out than going in.

“Kisu!” Xander shouted, just as McDonald slammed the stake into his stomach and Spike roared in the background. McDonald jerked the sharpened wood out of him. As Xander screamed and tried not to black out, he felt the knife settle in his hand.

“What the—“ McDonald dropped the stake and grabbed for the blade while Xander tried to stab him with it. But Xander’s arm was weak from the wound, and all he managed was a shallow slice on the man’s chest. McDonald wrapped a hand around Xander’s invisible wrist, pinning his hand to the ground, and tried to pry the knife out of his fingers. Over his opponent’s shoulder, Xander could see that Spike had vamped out and was struggling fiercely with his chains. Xander brought his knee up and McDonald grunted in pain as the hard bone
connected with his balls. But he didn’t loosen his
grip on Xander, and didn’t stop trying to get the
knife away.

“Xander!” Spike shouted, but Xander was too busy
struggling with McDonald to answer. He clawed at
McDonald’s face, leaving long bloody furrows down
his cheeks, but the fucker just swore and held on.
McDonald punched Xander in the shoulder, very
close to where the stake went in. Xander’s vision
grayed for a moment, and in that moment the other
man wrenched the knife away from him.

Xander reached for the knife just as McDonald
brought it down. The blade pierced Xander’s palm
and Xander screeched and yanked his hand back,
pulling the slippery handle out of McDonald’s grip.
Frantically, Xander brought his hands together,
trying to remove the weapon from his flesh so he
could use it, but he was weak and dizzy and
McDonald was banging blindly away at him with his
fists.

This was it. Xander was going to die, and then there
would be nobody to rescue Spike or Angel.

But just then, there was a huge bellow, and a crash. It was hard for Xander to see well—McDonald’s blood and his own sweat were dripping into his eye. But suddenly a vampire appeared over McDonald’s shoulder, its face twisted with fury. It wrapped a chain around McDonald’s neck and jerked, and the man was hauled off of Xander, scrabbling frenziedly at his own neck.

Xander took a deep breath and pulled the knife out of himself, but he couldn’t hold it at all in his injured hand, and was forced to use his left instead. He struggled to his knees in time to see McDonald kick spastically a few times and then pass out.

Spike looked in his direction, his eyes still yellow and wild. “Xan? Xan? How bad are you injured?”

“I’m not sure,” Xander wheezed. “Can’t see myself, either. It hurts. Are you okay?”

“’M fine. Fuck. Just a mo’.” Spike removed the chain
from McDonald’s neck, and then used a long leather flogger to hogtie him. As soon as the man was securely bound, Spike approached Xander, his eyes on the knife, his hands held in front of him. He touched Xander’s head and knelt beside him.

“What’s hurt?”

Xander laughed a little hysterically. “He staked me! Not in the heart, though. The stomach.”

“Bugger, bugger, bugger. Can you undo the spell?”

“Don’t know how.”

“Can’t take you to hospital like this.” Spike was patting at Xander, trying to assess the location and severity of his wounds. Xander felt woozy, and he swayed in Spike’s grip.

“Xan? Don’t pass out on me. Need you awake.”

“Kay.”
Spike found Xander’s shoulders and guided him until he was lying flat on his back. “Hold onto that blade,” he ordered. Then he scurried over to the pile of his clothing, and picked up the duster. He draped it over Xander, which at least allowed him to see where Xander was. He was still trailing chains from his wrists and ankles, Xander saw. He must have managed to pull them right out of their tethers.

“Spike?” Xander said. His voice sounded hollow in his own ears.

Spike’s hand found Xander’s face, and he stroked at his cheek. “Right here, pet. Gonna find the keys and get us the hell out of here. Patch you up properly. You’ll be fine.” His voice lacked conviction.

“Spike, need you to know……” Every word was an effort, but he had to get this out. “I think…I was falling in love with you. Isn’t that funny?”

Spike wasn’t laughing. His face was human now, and tight with fear and anguish. “Xander! Don’t you
dare say something like that to me and then leave me!”

“Don’ wanna go...don’...Spike....”

Part Eleven

He woke up.

That was a surprise. It wasn’t the first time he’d been amazed to wake up and discover he wasn’t dead, but it was still a pretty major shocker. And as surprises went, it was a pretty pleasant one, too, pleasant enough that he didn’t even mind the ache in his belly and shoulder and hand. And, now that he thought about it, the pain wasn’t nearly as bad as he might have expected.

Cautiously, he peeled his eyelid open.

He was in Spike’s room in the Hyperion. Spike was propped next to him in the bed, running his fingers
through Xander’s hair. It felt nice.

Angel was sitting in a chair next to the bed, frowning at him. He looked awful, thin and bruised, but he had clothes on, at least, and he was clutching a glass of red liquid in his hand.

“You back with us, love?” came the familiar, deep voice.

“Yeah.” His throat was dry and scratchy. Maybe Spike knew that, because a moment later he was propping Xander’s shoulders up a little and holding a glass of water to Xander’s lips. Xander drank it gratefully. He looked down at his hands. One of them was wrapped in bandages, but he was no longer the invisible man.

“Where...how....?”

“Sshh. We’re all safe now. Rest and I’ll explain later.”

“McDonald?”
Spike kissed the top of Xander’s head. “Won’t be giving us any trouble, I promise.”

Xander wanted to ask more, he really did. But he was suddenly too tired to speak, too tired to keep his eye open. So he slipped off to sleep. The last thing he was conscious of was Spike’s touch.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander wasn’t sure how good a nurse Spike would have made under ordinary circumstances. Maybe he’d have been okay. He took care of Drusilla, anyway. But now, under the continuing influence of the csípés spell, he took nurturing to new levels. He fluffed pillows and tucked blankets, he changed bandages, he engaged in sponge baths that Xander found more interesting than was good for a man in his condition. He produced endless cups of juice, complete with bendy straws, and he spooned soup and cereal and ice cream into Xander’s mouth, even though Xander had one fully operational hand.
Spike wielded a bedpan without even grimacing. He shooed Angel away when he came in to stare at Xander, and he deflected all of Xander’s questions until later. He answered Xander’s phone, too, barking irritably at whomever was at the other end, telling them that Xander would call back when he was able.

In all the many times he had been sick or injured, nobody had ever fussed over Xander like this. It was wonderful.

Still, he healed amazingly quickly, and he was soon anxious to get on his feet again. He had so many questions that needed answering, too. And then there was that declaration of love he’d made, which neither he nor Spike had mentioned, but which hung in the room like a giant, frilly balloon. Sooner or later it would have to be acknowledged.

“Spike, I’m fine.”

“You’re still mending. Don’t want you hurting yourself.”
“You can’t keep me tied up in this bed forever, you know.” He saw a glint in Spike’s eyes and smiled. “Or, you know, you could admit that I’m better, and then you really can tie me up, if you want.”

“You’re bent.”

“Says the vampire.” Xander made his very best puppy dog face, and hoped it worked with one eye. “C’mon, Spike. Let me up. Please. I’ll be careful, I promise.”

Spike rolled his eyes, but he also stood and held an arm out. “All right. Up with you, then.”

Xander used Spike to pull himself up. He felt a little wobbly, but more from all the time lying down than from his injuries, which were mostly just pink scars now. Spike clucked over Xander like a mother hen and Xander made his way to the bathroom, and, for the first time in days, managed to piss standing up. Glory hallelujah. Then Xander washed his hands and face and looked at himself in the mirror. Not too
bad. A little pale, maybe, but nothing like the
vampire he could hear hovering over his shoulder,
even if he couldn’t see him.

Xander spun around and rested his hands on Spike’s
you please tell me what the hell happened?”

Spike sighed. “All right. But you have to get back in
bed first.”

“Not getting in bed now. How about if I sit?”

Spike frowned and then nodded. He followed
Xander very closely as Xander made his way to the
loveseat, and then Spike folded himself onto the
cushion beside him. “What do you want to know,
pet?”

“Last I remembered, you were throttling McDonald
and I was dying, I thought. How’d you get loose? I
thought he said those chains were vamp-proof.”

“They weren’t enough to hold a truly angry
vampire, it seems."

“So you were Supervamp?” Xander used his right hand to play with the curls at Spike’s neck. It worked just fine. “Huh. I guess we ought to be thanking Vega, for once.”

Spike rolled his head back more firmly against Xander’s fingers.

“How did we get back here?”

“Cowboy had a set of keys in his trousers pocket. I unchained Angel and brought him up to Lindsey’s truck. Had to half-carry him up those stairs. When he was sorted, I came back for you, carried you up and put you in Peaches’ lap.” Xander pictured himself and Angel, both unclothed, and him in Angel’s lap. He shuddered, and was glad he’d been unconscious. And invisible. “Then I grabbed Lindsey and threw him in the back of the truck. Hauled you all back here. Got the pouf a load of blood and then had to doctor you sight unseen, which was bloody difficult. Did all right, though. You didn’t die on me.”
“Why didn’t I? I think that hole in my stomach was pretty bad, and I know I lost a lot of blood. And now I’m healing way faster than usual. Did you do something to me?”

Spike looked extremely uncomfortable and shook his head. “No,” he said. “Though I nearly turned you.”

Xander stared at him. “You—“

“Couldn’t bear to lose you. I expect that witch of yours could find some way to stick your soul on.”

Xander blinked slowly at him, processing these words.

“Anyhow, I didn’t have to, did I? You kept right on breathing, all on your own, and then you mended very fast.”

“Why?”
Spike looked away. "’T’s bloody hard to kill a were, innit?"

Oh.

But Xander was still firmly in denial about that.

“What happened to McDonald?”

“He’s in the cellar.” He snorted. “Pouf has a sodding cage down there, strong enough to hold a demon. Quite handy.”

“What if he does that spell or whatever that conks out vampires?”

“Wouldn’t do him any good, all locked up. Besides, Peaches is keeping him gagged most of the time.”

“What are you going to do with him?”

“I expect that’s up Angel. Can’t really kill him, can we? That doesn’t seem to do any good.”
Xander rested his head on Spike’s shoulder. “I’d better call London,” he said.

“It’s three in the morning there, love.”

“Fine. I’ll call later.” He shut his eye and listened to Spike breathe. He noticed for the first time that the odors around him were stronger. He could smell Spike, of course—leather and hair gel and copper and whiskey—but also Angel, who had the scents of charcoal and more hair gel and copper and coffee, and the antiseptic Spike had used on him, and the detergent from the sheets he’d been lying in, and the soap in Spike’s bathroom, and the wood and plaster and dust smells of the old hotel itself, and the ghosts of the scents of a thousand people who’d passed through the Hyperion’s doors. It was...interesting. It made him want to wander around and sniff at things, see what kind of tale they would tell. He hoped he wouldn’t start lifting his leg and pissing in the corner next.

“When...when do you expect they’ll come for you?” Spike said quietly.
Xander opened his eye and sat up straight. “Is that what you want?”

Spike shook his head and looked miserable.

“Spike, you know how I feel. I told you. If it were up to me, I’d stay with you.”

Spike looked at him incredulously. “What you said, then...you meant it?”

“Spike, I thought I was dying. I wasn’t gonna lie.”

“Thought you might have been delirious.”

“I wasn’t.” Xander breathed in and out, deeply, three times. “I love you, I think. I’m not very good at this. I’ve never really loved anyone before, not like that. Not even Anya.”

“Oh, Xan—“

Xander stood. “Look, I know this is stupid. You’ve
been under that spell, and soon you’ll be all better, and the last thing you’ll want is a goddamn puppy slobbering after you.”

Spike stood too, and grasped Xander’s shoulders. “The spell doesn’t.... I told you before. These feelings, they’re real. They’re mine. The spell only makes them...more intense. I want you. Not because you make me feel safe, although you do, and I couldn’t explain that if I tried. Because you...you give me meaning. I’m dead, Xander. Been dead a long time. You make me feel alive.” He mouth twisted into a small smile. “And you make me sound like a bloody big girl’s blouse.”

They folded into an embrace, and Xander sighed. “Will you still want me when I’m Rover?”

“I’ll get you a nice collar.”

“My fangs will be bigger than yours.”

“Fang envy, pet?”
“Pet is right.” Spike nuzzled against his old spot on Xander’s neck, which sent a small thrill down Xander’s spine. “How will you keep me from eating the neighbors when the moon is full?”

Spike chuckled into Xander’s skin. “I’ll ask Peaches for some tips. He dated a dog-girl for a while, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Spike sucked softly on Xander’s neck.

“When the spell wears off, if you don’t want me, you have to promise you’ll tell me, okay?”

“I promise, but it won’t happen.”

~*~*~*~*~

In the morning, Xander picked up the phone and stared at it gloomily. He wasn’t looking forward to this.
“Xander! Oh my goddess! What happened to you? Why haven’t you called? If my magic was back at full strength I would have teleported myself there days ago, mister. Buffy was practically ready to strap Emily in an airplane and come after you, and Giles just keeps mumbling things. What were you thinking?”

“Hi, Will.”

She sighed. “Hi, Xan. Sorry. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m doing fine, and Angel’s okay, and everything’s good.”

“Angel! Oh, that’s wonderful! But why wouldn’t you talk to us? And when are you coming home?”

Spike was sitting on the bed. With vamp hearing, Xander was sure he could hear both sides of the conversation. When Willow asked this last question, Spike tensed and looked away.
“Will, I’m.... I have a few things to tell you. And they’re kind of hard to say, so will you please just let me spit them out before you go ballistic?”

She was quiet for several moments, and then, in a calm, measured tone, she said, “Okay, Xander. Go ahead.”

Xander closed his eye and allowed himself to collapse back against the loveseat cushions. “Okay. Here’s the thing. I, um, got bit by that werewolf in Lincoln.” He heard her gasp. “The bite was no big deal or anything, but, um, I’m fairly certain that when it’s my time of the month I’m gonna get furry. But that’s not such a big deal, is it? Oz managed. And it actually kinda saved my life, because I got staked and I should’ve died, but I didn’t. I healed really well.”

“Xander—”

“Wait. There’s more.” He wondered if her eyes had gone black. “I’m in love with Spike.” Willow gasped again, but Spike blew out a puff of air and looked
relieved. “That has nothing to do with the whole wolf thing. I loved him before that. And...and he kinda likes me, too.” Spike nodded. “So I’m gonna stay with him. Here, at least for now.”

Spike closed his eyes and slumped, as if a weight had been taken from him.

“Oh, Will. You can talk now.”

He winced and waited for an outburst, but all he heard was a little static. Finally, still calmly, she said, “I’ll call you later, Xander.” And she hung up.

Xander closed his phone and groaned. Spike stood and came over, and he sat next to Xander and smoothed at his hair and kissed his forehead and sucked his neck, which Xander now found as comforting as Spike did.

About ten minutes later, the phone rang.

“Hi, Giles.”
“Xander. I just had a rather interesting conversation with Willow.”

“I bet.”

“She seems to be under the impression—”

“That I’m a gay, vampire-loving werewolf?”

“Erm, yes.”

“I am.”

“Xander—”

“Look, Giles. I’m almost thirty years old. I’ve seen a lot. I’m not stupid and I don’t need an intervention. I know what I want. Honestly, I’ve never wanted anything so much. I want Spike. And...as for the wolf, I’ll deal. I’ve got a couple vamps here to babysit me when I go all Call of the Wild.”

Giles sighed loudly. “Very well, Xander. We will discuss this more later. But if you should need
help...we’re here.”

“Thanks, G-Man.”

Spike had resumed nursing on Xander’s neck, and Xander was just recovering from that phone call, when the phone rang again. He looked at the number and moaned.

“Hi, Buff.”

“Xander—”

“How’s the baby? Willow says she looks just like you.”

“She’s great, Xander. But you know that’s not why I called.”

“No.”

“Xan, how does Spike feel about you?”

Xander looked at Spike, who was gazing back
intently. “He says he wants me, Buff.”

“I used to think he couldn’t love anyone. But he did. He does. More intensely than anyone I’ve ever met.” Spike’s mouth was hanging open in surprise. This wasn’t the response from her either of them had expected. “Oh, Xander. If this is really what you want...you deserve someone who can love you that hard.”

“Are you giving us your blessing, Buff?”

She laughed. “Something like that. Be happy, Xander.”

Fuck. He was going to cry. “Th-Thanks.”

“I’ll get Willow and Giles to chill, don’t worry. They’re both kind of freaked right now.”

He just sniffled at her.

“And, um, Xan? Does Spike still do that thing? With his tongue? When you’re, um—”
Xander let out a completely undignified snort of laughter. “I don’t think I’m quite ready to discuss my sex life with you, Buff.”

She sighed. “Sorry. With Em and everything—never mind.”

They chatted for a few more minutes about diapers and shapeshifters and car seats. When Xander put down the phone, he felt relaxed. Happy.

“Slayer came through for you, yeah?” Spike said.

“Yeah. She did.”

~*~*~*~*~

They were on the bed, shirts off, and Xander was trying to convince Spike that he was well enough to do more than just make out. The convincing was going pretty well, actually, but then there was a loud knock at the door.
“Shit!” Xander said.

At the exact same time, Spike exclaimed, “Bugger!”

They exchanged glances and shrugged. “Come in then,” Spike grumbled.

Angel scowled at the sight of them, and made his way across the room. He sat in the hard wooden chair and looked uncomfortable. Xander hadn’t exchanged more than a few words with him since the rescue. He was looking much better now; his wounds had disappeared and he was once more muscular and substantial-looking.

Angel had told Spike the basics of what had happened to him, and Spike had passed the tale on to Xander. Angel had stopped another apocalypse. Shortly afterward, though, McDonald had showed up at his door. And just like that, he’d said the magic word, and Angel was out. He dragged him away to his lair across town and spent most of his time torturing him, just for the hell of it.
“What do you want, Peaches? You could join us, but I don’t think my boy’s up to it.”

Xander pressed his hand against his mouth to stifle a snicker, and Angel rolled his eyes. “I just wanted to know how much longer you’re planning to stay. That’s all.” He looked down at his big hands.

Xander suddenly remembered the desperation in Angel’s voice when he’d begged Xander to keep searching for Spike, just a little longer. Spike opened his mouth to say something, probably something snarky, and Xander jabbed him with an elbow. “Actually, we were thinking of sticking around for a while. If that’s all right with you.”

Angel’s head snapped up. “You’re—“ He swallowed. “That’s fine. There’s enough room for the three of us here,” he said gruffly.

Xander smiled at him, actually not detesting the vampire for the first time ever. “Good.”
“And Xander, um...thank you. For....” His voice trailed away and he couldn’t meet Xander’s eyes.

“Sure. I got something out of the deal, too.” He slapped Spike’s flank. “But McDonald. What’re you doing with him?”

Angel looked at him, his eyes flat and a little scary. “Want to see?”

Spike and Xander followed Angel down the stairs, across the lobby, and through a door that led to another stairway. This one descended into the basement. The basement was full of boxes and stacks of things, and old, dusty furniture. But in one corner was a cell. Did everyone in LA have a cage in their basement? The stone walls of the basement itself made up two sides of the cell, and the other two were heavy iron bars. The floor was bare cement.

McDonald was hunched in the corner of the cell. He was naked. His hands, ankles, and neck were shackled together, so that if he could walk at all, it
would only be in a shuffling crouch. A large ring gag was stuffed in his mouth. He was filthy and battered-looking, but nowhere near as damaged as Angel had been in his basement. The only other thing in the cell was a bucket, and Xander didn’t need his enhanced sense of smell to tell him that it was being used as a toilet. McDonald was glaring angrily at them.

“The gag keeps him from talking, but he can still eat and drink that way. But it’s kind of messy. I’m considering just ripping out his tongue.” Xander watched Angel as he spoke, and he shivered a little. Angel was looking awfully Angelus-like at the moment.

“You just gonna keep him here, then?” Xander asked.

“Yeah. Eventually his employers are gonna notice he’s gone, and maybe they’ll be able to find him here. Maybe they’ll even try to get him back. But I’m betting he’s gonna be my guest for a good, long time.” Angel had been staring at McDonald as he
said this, but now he turned to Xander. “Is that gonna be a problem for you?”

Xander could feel Spike stiffen beside him. He waited for a pang of sympathy for the man to hit him, or anger at his treatment at the hands of a demon. But neither of them did. Instead, he felt kind of relieved McDonald was locked up safely out of his own reach. Xander smiled easily at the dark vampire. “No problem at all.”

“You won’t feel sorry for him? Want to rescue him? He’s human, more or less.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m not anymore. Thanks to him, actually. And he tried to have Spike rubbed out, just to get him out of the way. Not feeling a whole lot of pity, here. Let him rot.” He was gratified to see that McDonald looked terrified.

Spike came up close behind Xander and pressed his body into the back of him. “Lovely, pet,” he growled into Xander’s ear.
Xander wondered how much of himself had been changed—by his various demonic possessions, by his transformation to a were-creature, by taking a vampire, albeit a souled one, as a lover. And then he decided he just didn’t give a fuck. He clapped Angel on the shoulder and led his vampire out of the basement and back into their bed.

~*~*~*~*~

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, pet. We’re nearly there.”

Xander tripped over another...something...in the hall and once again questioned the wisdom of allowing a vampire to lead him, blindfolded, through the old hotel. But then they stopped, and Xander heard a door open, and Spike tugged him through.

As soon as the warmth hit his skin he panicked and tore the cloth off his eye. “Fuck! Spike it’s day—“
The words died on his lips.

They were on the roof. Several large towels were spread on the flat surface. A big metal chest was full of ice and bottles of beer. An assortment of small containers was scattered to one side—lube and massage oils, it looked like.

And Spike.

Spike was completely naked, and his head was thrown back, his radiant smile glittering in the sunshine. His cock was fully erect. He was ethereal, otherworldly, like an angel without wings, like a statue come alive, like a deity walking the earth.

“Spike....” Xander managed.

“It’s going to be eighty degrees today, with just a bit of a breeze. Good day to work on a tan. Did you know you can see the Pacific up here?”

“Spike, why—“
Spike turned his smile toward Xander. “Full moon tonight, love. We’ll have to keep you locked up for a few days, I expect. So what better way to spend today than here, together?” He stepped closer and cupped Xander’s jaw in his hand.

“But…but didn’t you want to save the salve for...for something important?”

“This is important. You’re important. And the sodding hex is finally gone and we need to celebrate. Now, stop wasting the day with your gob hanging open. Let’s have us a pint or two.”

Before he knew it, Xander was as bare as Spike and stretched out on his back on one of those towels. The cold glass of his beer bottle was sweating pleasantly in his hand, while Spike was rubbing some kind of lotion into his chest. He thought it was heaven. But then Spike gently took the bottle away and layered himself over Xander, and he knew he was one of very few people in the world—maybe the only one—who knew the pleasure of having a
sun-warmed vampire writhing deliciously on top of him.

They kissed deeply. Spike tasted of beer and blood, and the flavor of blood got Xander even more excited, until he was trying to lick every trace of it out of the inside of Spike’s mouth. Absently, he noted that he’d be wanting some very rare steak for dinner tonight. Then Spike was nibbling and licking at his neck as Xander clutched at the slightly slippery silky skin of his ass. “Maybe I can tame my wolf,” Spike purred into his ear. “Teach him to bite nicely, yeah?” Deep inside of Xander, something growled an affirmative. It felt familiar, like the hyena, only stronger. He liked it.

Spike sat up and smiled broadly. He grasped Xander’s cock firmly in one hand and then lowered himself down on it. Xander moaned and watched Spike ride him, his face turned up to the sky and the sun shining like a halo over him.

When he couldn’t stand it a second longer, Xander grabbed Spike’s hips. With strength and speed he
hadn’t possessed a few weeks ago, he flipped them over without disengaging from his lover. Spike wrapped his legs tightly around Xander’s waist and grinned. His face morphed, and now the eyes looking up at Xander were yellow and the teeth in the smile were long and sharp.

Xander howled.

And then he bent down, and Spike bit him, and a climax rumbled through both of them like a freight train. Minutes later, they were still thrusting against each other, still shuddering with the strength of their release.

Spike withdrew his fangs and ran a sharp tongue up Xander’s jaw.

Xander bent his head a little and gnawed lightly on Spike’s neck until Spike gasped and mewled beneath him. “Hey,” Xander said. “Didn’t you say something about a collar?” Spike laughed and squeezed his ass, and Xander laughed back at him.
“You know, I was thinking,” Xander said, flopping beside Spike, and reaching over to play with one of his vampire’s hardened nipples.

“Dangerous, that.”

Xander tweaked a little harder. “If I’m gonna stay here a while—“

“We’re going to stay here a while.”

“If we’re gonna stay here a while, I can knock the wall between your room—“

“Our room, pet.”

“Between our room and the next. Maybe even the one after that. Make us a nice suite.”

“Bigger than the pouf’s?”

“Bigger than the pouf’s.”

“You can do that, love?”
“Sure. I was a carpenter once, remember? And I’ve kept my hand in, every now and then, fixing stuff up for the Council.”

Spike caught at Xander’s hand and sucked for a moment on Xander’s index finger, which felt incredibly nicer than it should have. “That’d be nice, Xan. Could you install a big bath for us? Big enough for two?”

“Can do. And I was thinking, maybe a nice, comfy, secure cage.”

“Kinky.”

“For when I’m more of the canine persuasion. ‘Cause...if I’m gonna be incarcerated, I’d rather it be near you.” Xander pulled his hand out of Spike’s grip and moved it to Spike’s belly, which was sticky. He rubbed his fingers in the fine hairs that led south of Spike’s navel. Then he grasped Spike’s cock, which was hard—still or again, he wasn’t sure—and softly stroked the damp, silky skin.
Spike rolled onto his side and nuzzled against Xander’s neck. “Sounds lovely,” he purred. Then he pushed Xander onto his back and his mouth began working its way down Xander’s body.

They spent the whole day on the roof, making love, dozing, sipping beer, talking. By late afternoon, Spike’s skin had turned slightly pink from the sun, and both of them were feeling perfectly sated. They sat against the wall of the stairwell, arms around each other, watching the waves far away. Spike’s head rested on Xander’s shoulder.

Xander wondered how we was going to gather the energy to go back downstairs before sunset, so Spike could chain him up for the night. Spike would eventually tame the wolf in him, he could feel it. Hell, he could be a big help to the vampires, taking a bite out of crime and everything. But for a while some security was called for. Would the vampires be able to get him something tasty to chew on tonight, maybe a big hunk of meat with the bone still on, or, hmmm, even something still alive? He
remembered the feel of Herbert the pig in his jaws, and instead of being grossed out, he felt his stomach rumble hungrily. So yeah, he was going to have to build a really strong cage, but maybe he ought to make sure it was easily cleaned. But not too uncomfortable. Did they have dog beds in his size? Speaking of comfortable, if Angel was going to keep Lindsey for a while, Xander could probably find a way to get some plumbing going in that cell, because the bucket was pretty offensive to everyone’s noses. Hmm. Maybe Willow could give them a spell to keep Lindsey quiet without removal of body parts. Not that the bastard didn’t deserve to have several removed. And in his and Spike’s room, with those walls torn down, he could build a big bathroom, and put in a giant tub like Spike asked for, maybe with Jacuzzi jets, yeah, that’d be good, and he could expand one of the windows, install some shutters so there’d be better sun protection. He could build a little kitchen, too, like Angel had, because the big one downstairs was too big and kind of creepy, really, and besides the fridge and microwave Spike already had, all he needed was a sink and a small stove, and—
Spike tilted his head up and gave him a slow, sweet, sexy smile, filled with true affection and the promise of what was to come. Xander grinned back. And he realized that, while his head was full as ever, now so was his heart.

The End
Twice Bitten

Summary: Sequel to Hard-Bitten (a quick synopsis of which you can read here). Several years post-Chosen and post-NFA. Spike and Xander are with Angel in LA. They have a number of issues to deal with, though, including Xander's werewolf bite, Lindsey in the basement, and Wolfram &
Hart.
Author's Note: The fic is complete and I'll post daily. Thank you very much to <textarea>sentine</textarea> for the stunning banner and to <textarea>whyskeyeyes</textarea>, who gave me the prompt for Hard-Bitten!

Part One

“So. Gay now?”

Xander shrugged and grinned. “Looks that way.”

“That’s cool. But Spike? Didn’t see that coming.”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t really have predicted it myself. I mean, a demon, sure. But this particular demon...well, not so much.”

“But you two, you have a thing.”

Xander was aware that a sappy smile had settled on
his face, but he couldn’t help it. “Yeah. We really do.”

“Pirate, too?”

Xander automatically felt at the patch over his missing eye. “Nope. This is a souvenir from Sunnydale, actually.”

The other man tilted his head a little and peered at him. “Suits you.”

“Thanks. But hey, what about you? It’s been a long time. Willow said she tracked you down in Vermont?”

The other man nodded and had a sip of his coffee. “Been there a couple years. Was in New York a while. Sound engineer. Got tired of the crowds. Now I run an organic grocery.”

“You like Vermont?”

“Lots of trees.”
“And on the homefront? No vampires, I take it.”

“Nah. You got all the good ones here. Girlfriend, though. Wolf.”

It was Xander’s turn to nod. “That’s great.” There was a short pause. “Well, thanks for coming all the way to LA.”

“It’s good to catch up, man.”

They drank silently for a few minutes as Xander considered how best to approach the real reason for this visit. The sounds of LAX eddied around them, mumbled gate announcements and clattering suitcases and squealing children. His old friend looked pretty much the same, he thought. Red hair gelled in short spikes, he wore a faded t-shirt from some band Xander had never heard of and jeans so well-worn they were nearly white. He had a hemp bracelet around his right wrist and a silver-colored paw pendant on a chain around his neck.
In the end, it was Oz who spoke first. “So. Wolf?”

Xander sighed, deeply and loudly. “Yeah. Will told you?”

“Yep.”

“It happened a few months ago, in Nebraska. It was...this whole fucked-up mess, really.”

“How’ve you been handling it?”

Xander grimaced. “I dunno. I mean, I haven’t eaten anyone yet. I built this big cage, and it’s not too bad.”

“Better than the book cage, huh?”

“Yeah. I even installed plumbing in there. It’s strong. Spike babysits me. Angel’s there, too, in case I ever get loose. But....” He stopped, not quite sure how to articulate the rest. Oz waited patiently, toying with the cardboard sleeve to his coffee. “It’s kind of a hassle,” he finally said, a little lamely.
Oz glanced up at him. “The wolf wants out, huh?”

Xander grunted his agreement. “Yeah.”

“Man, you can’t make it go away, you know?” Oz frowned at him, and Xander realized that that was exactly what Oz himself had once wanted—to get rid of the wolf. But Xander shook his head.

“I don’t want to. I...I kinda like it, actually.”

Surprise flickered across Oz’s face. Either his old friend was less stoic than he used to be, or he’d been genuinely shocked by what Xander just said.

“Spike and Angel, the old gang from Sunnydale, they’re always fighting evil. Me too, I guess. But they have all these superpowers. Well, except Giles, but he’s got that Watcher stuff going on. Me, I’ve always been just a guy. But now I can have superpowers, too. Spike doesn’t have to worry so much about me getting killed. Hell, I’m almost as strong and fast as he is. And my teeth are bigger.”
He smiled a little and Oz’s lips twitched, too.

“So you want...?”

“I want to be able to control the beast. Get out of the fucking cage and...and use the wolf. And not worry about hurting anyone but the bad guys. I was hoping maybe you could help.”

Oz stared at him for a moment, considering. “So...you accept that the wolf is always gonna be part of you?”

“Yes.” Xander smiled again. “I embrace the beast within.”

“Then you have already mastered the first lesson, padawan.”

~*~*~*~*~

Oz admired the car as Xander tossed Oz’s duffle bag into the trunk. It was Spike’s car, actually. He’d
made Angel buy it as a replacement for the one that had been impounded back in Chicago, which they’d never bothered to retrieve. This one was a ’65 GTO, black, of course, and Spike liked it so much that Xander pretended to be jealous. Xander still drove the van, but he’d wanted to greet Oz at the airport with something a little cooler. Besides, Spike was probably still sound asleep.

“It’s okay if I crash with you guys for a few days?” Oz asked.

Xander snorted. “Yeah, I think we can probably find some space for you.”

They spoke only a little as Xander wound his way through the dregs of rush-hour traffic. It was nearly an hour before they pulled to a halt in front of the Hyperion. “Home, sweet home,” Xander said.

The wards were still up, but they seemed to recognize Xander as a resident now, because once Xander invited his friend inside, Oz was able to enter. Oz whistled quietly as he looked around the
lobby, and Xander dumped the duffle bag on the floor. “Honey, I’m home!” he called.

But it was Angel who appeared first, from his office behind the reception desk. He and Oz exchanged long looks with each other. “Hi,” Angel finally said.

“Hi.”

Apparently that was sufficient for both of them, because then Angel nodded and ducked back behind the door.

“You live here?” Oz asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Just the three of you?”

“Yeah. Oh, and the evil resurrected lawyer guy in the basement. He’s locked up and everything, but I’d stay away from him.”

“‘Kay.”
Bootsteps thundered down the stairs, and then there was Spike, mostly dressed but his hair still sleep-tousled, bounding toward them and wrapping a possessive arm around Xander. “Didn’t scratch the car, pet?” he rumbled.

“Nah. Just put a couple big old dents in it.”

Spike swatted Xander’s ass and then put his arm back around Xander’s waist.

“Uh, you guys know each other, right?”

Spike tipped his chin at Oz. “Dog-boy.”

Oz nodded back. “Spike.”

Spike’s arm around Xander tightened a little and Xander, who’d learned to read Spike’s moods very well, realized that Spike was jealous. Xander turned his head and pressed a kiss to Spike’s cheek, and heard Spike sigh quietly in response. Even without the csípés spell his vampire had a tendency to be a
bit emotional.

“Spike, I’m gonna get Oz settled in his room. And then I thought maybe we’d go out to dinner, okay?”

“Thought the two of you would be rounding up sheep for supper,” Spike said slightly petulantly.

“Not my time of the month, dear.” Xander kissed him again. “C’mon. We can go to that place with the spicy ribs, if you want.”

Spike sighed again, this time in resignation. “All right.”

A third kiss, and then Xander grabbed Oz’s bag and led him up the stairs. They’d decided to give Oz a room on the second floor. Angel’s suite was on the third, and they were sleeping in a room on the fourth floor while Xander remodeled the adjacent rooms into a big suite. The work was going well, and he hoped to be finished in another week or so. Optimistically, Xander had decided to leave his cage in the old room. It was hard to fit it into the décor of
the new one.

Oz’s room was a nice one with a view of the courtyard. Xander had cleaned it the previous day and put in fresh bedding. Now, Xander gave Oz a quick overview of the facilities while Oz nodded approvingly.

“So, if you want to crash for a while or whatever, I was thinking we could leave in an hour or so. I think I need to go deal with a grouchy vamp first.”

“That’s cool.”

Xander found Spike slouched on the loveseat in their room, remote control in his hand and scowl on his face. Spike pretended to ignore Xander as Xander collapsed beside him.

He tried reason first. “Spike. You know I need to figure out how to control myself.”

Spike’s scowl deepened. “Don’t know why you need that toser.”
“Okay. First, Oz is not a tosser. He’s an old friend and a good guy, and he’s come all the way from Vermont to help me out. Second, it’s not like accommodating werewolves are a dime a dozen. He knows how to handle himself and he’s willing to teach me how. And third, he’s straight and he has a girlfriend, and you are my one and only squeeze. Got it?”

Spike made a discontented noise and didn’t look at him.

Fine. Xander knew how to handle the crabby undead.

He stood up again and then straddled Spike, plopping himself inelegantly onto his vampire’s lap. Spike growled, not very convincingly, and craned his neck to look around Xander toward the television screen. So Xander captured Spike’s head with his hands and leaned their foreheads together, wiggling his crotch a little closer to Spike’s.
“Spiiiike,” he sang. “We have an hour.”

There was no way Spike could ignore him like this, but Spike did his best, closing his eyes and keeping his body tense.

But Xander knew how to break down Spike’s defenses. He tilted his head and then latched his lips onto Spike’s cool, delicate neck, sucking and then softly biting. Spike groaned and immediately loosened his muscles. Chuckling to himself, Xander continued working on Spike’s skin while palming the hardening bulge in Spike’s jeans. Spike groaned again and let his head fall back against the cushions, further exposing himself to Xander’s busy mouth. The remote control dropped from his slack hand, bouncing off the seat and onto the floor. Neither of them paid it any attention.

Without detaching himself from Spike’s neck, Xander fumbled at the vampire’s fly, finally managing to release the trapped erection. He felt Spike’s hips straining slightly upward under his weight. With another silent chuckle, Xander moved
his hands up so they were clutching Spike’s shoulders, and scooted a bit more forward so that Spike’s cock was held against the denim at Xander’s groin. Xander’s own cock twitched its approval, and for a moment Xander considered unzipping himself, too. But Spike was already writhing and panting underneath him, and Xander didn’t want to break any contact, even just for a moment.

Xander bit down again on Spike’s tender skin, just a little harder this time, and Spike gasped, “Xan!” Xander loved the sound of him like this, deep and hoarse and all because of what Xander was doing to him. Even though the full moon was a week away, it made the wolf stir inside him. He heard a low, purring growl and realized it wasn’t the vampire, it was himself, happy to be in possession of his mate, pleased to have the powerful creature beneath him thrumming with want and need.

Xander allowed his teeth to dig in a little more, and he ground his lower body into Spike’s.

Spike made a desperate bleating noise and his
entire body went rigid, and then Xander could feel tepid fluid soaking through his jeans and the hem of his t-shirt. Spike collapsed backward bonelessly. “Bloody hell!” he rasped.

With a final lick of Spike’s salty-sweet skin, Xander removed his mouth and sat back a little, grinning. “Feel better?”

Spike blinked at him, then shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. “Pet,” he began.

“No, wait. Listen for a minute. I need Oz’s help. It’s really good of him to come here, and I need you to be nice to him. I’ll make it worth your while, okay? And you can stop with the jealousy because I love you, and only you, and that’s it.”

Spike looked slightly chastened. “Sorry. I only...he’s a wolf like you, yeah? Thought maybe you’d rather—“

“Rather screw him because we’re the same kind of monster?”
“Yeah.”

“I told you, he’s not interested. Believe it or not, not everyone finds me irresistible. I’m not interested either, no matter what he is. No matter what I am. Do I have to worry about you and Angel because you’re both vamps? You two go back a hell of a lot longer than me and Oz.”

Spike shuddered and shook his head forcefully. “No. I do not want to shag the pouf.”

“And I do not want to shag Oz. Got it?”

Spike nodded slowly. “All right. ‘M sorry. I....” He sighed. “Can’t bear the thought of losing you.”

It still sent a thrill through Xander to hear those words. Probably always would. “I don’t want any losing either,” he replied softly. “With Oz’s help I’ll be safer, stronger. Able to stick around a lot longer as a thorn in your side.”
Spike smirked. “Doesn’t feel like my side is where you want to be, love,” he said, pressing his palm to Xander’s still-hard cock.

Xander bent down to kiss his lover’s cheek. “I think where I want to be right now is in the bathroom, watching you shower so we can get going. I’m hungry.”

“Stomach outvoting your dick, love?”

“Hmm. Maybe we can please them both.” Xander dismounted Spike and then tugged him to his feet.

Their shower was too small to share. The new one, which was nearly complete, would be plenty big enough for two, but for now, Xander sat naked on the closed toilet, stroking himself and watching Spike leisurely, teasingly, scrub every bit of his beautiful body. By the time the shower was over, Spike had only to climb out, drop to his knees in front of Xander, and open his mouth, and then Xander was emptying himself between those full, water-warmed lips.
Dinner went better than he’d expected.

They’d been about to walk out the door of the hotel when Angel materialized again, and he looked so much like someone who was fishing for an invitation that Xander and Spike rolled their eyes at each other, and then Xander said, “Hey, Angel. Want to come with?”

“Oh, no thanks. I’ve got... that paperwork on the Hrilkot treaty from last week, and some bills, and—


Xander suppressed a snicker and he saw the corner of Oz’s lips quirk, too. Angel glowered. But then he shrugged on his coat and he joined them as they
walked outside.

Spike and Angel raced each other to the restaurant. Angel won by half a block, and Spike blamed his loss on Xander’s roving hands.

Xander and Oz each ordered about half a cow’s worth of ribs. Xander was finding himself more carnivorous nowadays, even when the moon wasn’t full. Spike had a plate of onion rings and snagged some of Xander’s food, too. Angel didn’t eat at all, but he drank, and by his third beer he was actually looking almost relaxed, for him.

Willow had told Oz only the basics of what had happened, so now Xander filled him in on the details, with Spike adding his perspective now and then. Apparently he’d managed to master his emotions for now, and, although he still touched Xander more often than usual, he was actually pretty pleasant to Oz.

Oz was a good listener. By the time Xander was finishing the last mouthfuls of chocolate cake, the
other three had told their guest about Angel’s battle with Wolfram and Hart, and Xander’s time in Africa, and Spike’s death and resurrection.

“Wow,” Oz finally said. “And it’s a big deal for me when I get a bad shipment of lettuce.”

“But your wolf?” Spike asked.

“Pretty mellow, mostly. Couple times a month, Cammie and I hunt deer.”

“So you tamed it,” said Spike.

“No. Just learned to use it wisely.”

“Like the demon,” Angel said thoughtfully. “It’s still there, underneath, but…but it doesn’t rule you. Especially if you let it out to play, now and then.”

Xander made a face. He’d seen how Angel’s demon liked to play. But Oz nodded and downed the last of his Heineken.
“And you can show my boy here how to do this?” Spike asked. His arm was resting on the back of Xander’s chair.

“Yeah.”

“All right, then.”

The waitress came by and dimpled hopefully at Angel. She was blonde and cute, and she’d been flirting with him all night while Angel had been pretending not to notice. Xander was fairly certain he’d be blushing, if vampires could. But maybe the flirting was a good thing, because Angel ended up fumbling for his wallet and paying for dinner, either to get rid of her quickly or to impress her, Xander wasn’t sure. Angel had plenty of money, of course, and Spike always seemed to manage to get his hands on cash somehow, but Xander was dead broke. Most of the time that didn’t bother him, but he didn’t really want to advertise the fact to Oz.

They went out for drinks afterward, at a club where the music wasn’t too bad, and Oz turned out to
know the band. Spike and Xander danced together for a while as Oz and Angel sat. When the band took a break, the singer and one of the guitar players joined them, and Xander basked in the other customers’ envious looks. Here was Xander Harris, one-time Zeppo and doughnut boy, with his gorgeous boyfriend and supernatural friends, chatting with half of The Awful Mess. Tonight, Xander Harris was cool.

~*~*~*~*~

Angel had set up the hotel’s old ballroom as a training room. Every now and then he and Spike sparred there. Xander liked to watch—the deadly dance of those two powerful bodies was a thing of beauty. Lately, Spike had been bringing Xander there, too, teaching him some fancy fighting moves. Nobody had ever really bothered to do that with him, and it turned out he wasn’t as awful as he’d feared. Maybe the wolf helped, even when he was in human form. He still ended up bruised and battered, but he healed a lot faster, and Spike was
always happy to kiss him better.

This afternoon, though, Spike and Angel were still asleep as Xander and Oz sat on the floor in the middle of the big, nearly empty room. Xander was yawning himself—he kept mainly vampire hours, these days—and wishing he’d had a third cup of coffee. He was wearing a pair of sweats and an orange Spongebob tee that he’d bought mostly to tease Spike, whom he’d once caught clandestinely glued to Nickelodeon, caught up in adventures in the pineapple under the sea. Spike had not been amused at the shirt at all, and had responded when he first saw it by wrestling Xander to the ground, tugging Xander’s jeans down over his hips, and giving him a good spanking.

So that had worked out pretty well.

“Stop thinking about Spike, man.”

Xander blinked back into focus. “How could you tell?”
“Goofy smile. You two have it bad.”

“Yeah, I…. Sorry. I’ll pay attention now.”

“Like you did in school.”

“Mmm, better. Much better.” Xander tried to empty his overfull mind, to focus on what Oz had to say. This wasn’t algebra—he was actually going to need this in real life. “Go ahead.”

Oz looked a little skeptical. “Okay, so you know the wolf is you and you’re the wolf, right?”

“Right.”

“That doesn’t bug you?”

Xander shrugged. “Like I said, I kinda like it. It saved my life once already. And, well, it feels good.” He was a little embarrassed to admit this, but Oz nodded sagely.

“Yeah. Okay. So if you want to control a wolf, you
gotta think like one. You ever have a dog?”

Xander shook his head. “Parents wouldn’t let me. Probably just as well. On the Hellmouth it’d probably have turned out to be some kind of brain-eating demon in disguise or something. Or a weredog. Are there weredogs, too? Or maybe werecats? Because—”

“Focus.”

“Sorry.”

“So wolves, dogs, they like a pack. They respect pack structure.”

“Respect the pack. Got it.”

“Who’s your pack, Xan?”

“Uh...does it have to be wolves?”

“No.” Oz shrugged. “Dogs make humans their pack, right?”
“So...I guess mine is Spike and Angel. Huh. I’m probably the first werewolf with a vamp pack.” He couldn’t help laughing a little at the thought.

Oz looked thoughtful, and Xander remembered that his old friend was actually a pretty smart guy—Willow-smart, almost—even though his grades had never reflected it. After a few minutes, Oz said “I think it’ll help if you let one of them be alpha.”

“Alpha. Like, the boss of me?”

“Head of the pack. They’re strong enough for it. When you’re being wolfish, you’ll tend to follow your alpha’s lead. It’ll help with your control.”

Xander folded his arms stubbornly across his chest. “I am so not letting Angel be my alpha.”

“Spike, then.”

“Does than mean I have to obey him all the time?” Spike would probably like that, but only for a little
while, Xander suspected. And obedience wasn’t really Xander’s strongpoint anyway.

But Oz shook his head. “Just when you’re furry. You can boss him the rest of the time.”

Xander thought this over. He rolled the idea around a little in his head, and then let the wolf taste it. The wolf silently bayed its approval. It wanted a pack and a strong pack leader.

“Okay,” Xander said at last. “I can do that. How much power can I have over this thing, Oz?”

“It took practice. A lot. But now I don’t have to change when the moon is full. And I can change the rest of the month, if I try.”

This was better than Xander had hoped for. It would mean that he could shift only when he wanted to, when it would be useful, or when Spike was close by to keep him from chowing down on the good citizens of Los Angeles.
“Okay,” Xander said. “Teach me how.”

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By the time Oz had been there a week, he’d taught Xander all he knew. The rest, he said, would come with practice. Already, Xander felt more confident, more in command of himself. When the moon rose in its full glory, he still changed, but this time it was different. They’d told Spike how to take on the mantle of alpha, and he had, gladly. Xander-as-wolf looked to his leader, and his leader guided and calmed him, and this month Xander didn’t need to be caged. He didn’t feel ready yet to leave the Hyperion on all fours, but he was pretty sure he’d be able to do that in a month or two.

Angel gave Oz a quick goodbye, and Spike flung an arm around him and thanked him for helping his boy. And then Xander and Oz piled into the GTO—it was still too early for the vampires to be outside—and drove to LAX.
Standing a little awkwardly in the drop-off zone, Xander finally gave in and hugged Oz. “Thanks, man. I mean...you’ve saved me, you know?”

“It’s all good, Xan.”

“Take good care of those groceries. And your girlfriend.”

Oz’s face suddenly split into a huge grin. “Did I tell you? She’s pregnant.”

Xan whooped. “Puppies! You’ll make a great Dad, Oz.”

Oz looked solemn again. “Not like mine.”

“Or mine.”

They nodded in mutual understanding, and then Xander clapped Oz once more on the back. “You’re welcome here anytime, you know?”
Oz smiled and gave him a little salute, and thenshouldered his bag. Xander watched as his oldfriend disappeared into the airport crowds. Then hehopped in the car and sped off, anxious to get homebefore the sun set

Part Two

It was Xander who found him.

That was no surprise. In this form, Xander’s sense ofsmell surpassed even a vampire’s, and scentslayered all around him like another world, telling amillion stories at once. For a day or two after themoon began to wane, Xander always felt a little as ifhe was stumbling around blind. For that reason andothers, he was extra needy those days, and Spikehad to hold him extra tightly, and suck at Xander’sneck, and whisper filthy sweet words in his ears.

Not that Spike minded.

Tonight, though, the moon was perfectly round and
bright, grinning down at them through the smog, and Xander padded confidently through the streets on four paws, his nose reading the ground and the air as if they were newspapers. Spike jogged alongside. He had a leash in his hand, supple black leather that matched his duster, and ready to snap it onto Xander’s collar should they encounter a police officer. Neither of them wanted Xander to end up at the pound, especially since anyone who knew animals would soon realize that the one-eyed canine was not exactly a golden retriever.

They’d jogged up to Griffith Park tonight. Xander caught a rabbit. In the back of his mind he knew he’d feel a little guilty about it later, when the wolfishness had receded for four more weeks, but the hunt and the crunch of bones and the taste of hot flesh were too tempting now to resist. Besides, it was better than eating the neighbors. The previous month they’d driven into the mountains and together they’d chased down a deer. Spike had enjoyed that as much as Xander. When they’d returned to the Hyperion, filthy and happy, Angel shook his head and grumbled, but they’d both
caught the flash of longing in his eyes.

For tonight, though, the rabbit and the run were enough, and Xander was ready to return home and wait for the sun to rise so that he and Spike could shower together and then tumble into bed. Less than a mile from the hotel, though, he caught an odd odor. He stopped and thrust his muzzle into the air. Spike waited patiently, not breaking his concentration with questions.

Xander opened his mouth and drew air in deeply. Yeah, there it was. Blood—not human—and fear and something tingly that made him want to sneeze. Magic.

He took off at a swift and businesslike trot, and Spike followed. “Timmy’s in the well?” Spike asked as they ran.

Xander whined an answer. It was damn frustrating not being able to speak. Spike tried to understand Xander’s various barks and growls and moans, and he usually got a general idea, but it was impossible
to convey specifics. When he was in this form, Xander didn’t even think in words so much as in pictures and emotions and smells.

They rounded a corner into an alley. The tall buildings blocked most of the moonlight and Xander wouldn’t have been able to see a thing with human eyes, but now his night vision was as sharp as Spike’s. And mostly what he saw was the expected scattering of garbage. But there in the corner something was huddled, unmoving and pale.

Xander and Spike slowed, uncertain whether there was a threat. The thing remained still as they stalked closer. Xander stopped perhaps ten feet away and so did Spike, and they tried to get a better look at it.

At first glance, it appeared to be a naked human curled in a tight fetal ball so that only the back and buttocks and a little of the bald head were visible. It didn’t smell at all human, though, and its skin was an odd tone. Xander couldn’t see color well like this, but he was fairly certain it wasn’t the normal beige
or brown hues. He could also see now that the flesh
was badly torn, vivid slashes of blood criss-crossing
the shoulders and spine and ass. This close, the
scent of it was strong and heady, and Xander
panted heavily as he kept himself under control.
Spike placed a calming hand at the base of his neck,
and that helped.

“Oi,” Spike said, his voice echoing off the bricks.
“Show your face.”

The...whatever it was...responded, but only by
trembling and coiling even more into itself.

“We don’t mean to hurt you,” Spike said, his voice
softer. It didn’t help, though. Xander could taste the
terror rolling off the creature. Xander whined
quietly and looked up at Spike, who patted between
his shoulders. “Stay here for a mo, yeah?”

Xander sat.

Moving very slowly, Spike crept closer until he was
only inches away. “Do you need help?” he asked,
and he lightly touched its shoulder with the fingertips of one hand.

The thing wailed, a nearly-human sound that made Xander shiver. Spike glanced back over his shoulder at Xander, who shook his head and snorted lightly. He sensed no threat from the creature. To the contrary, it smelled of fright and desperation. It smelled of prey, actually, and although Xander had learned to restrain the beast in himself, it was only the stern look from his alpha that kept him from springing and sinking his teeth into the helpless thing. “Steady,” Spike whispered, both to Xander and to the shaking creature beside him.

Xander watched impatiently as Spike gently tugged at the thing until it was on its back. Its chest and belly were in worse shape than its back, mottled with bruises and streaked with jagged tears. It whimpered and tried to hide its face, but Spike pulled at its arms.

It looked, Xander thought, like a drawing a young child might make. Its eyes were huge and nearly
lidless circles, the right one noticeably larger than the left. Its nose was simply two holes, and its mouth was a wide, thin slash, now turned down in dismay. The proportions of its limbs were uneven and wrong, and it had far too many fingers on its huge hands. Too many toes, too, and Xander didn’t see any way it could walk on feet shaped like that. Maybe it couldn’t, because its knees were badly scuffed.

His knees, Xander mentally corrected himself, because he had male organs at his hairless crotch. They looked bruised and misshapen as well.

“It’s all right,” Spike crooned softly. “Let us help you.”

The creature’s gaze darted frantically between the vampire and the werewolf. His chest was rising and falling rapidly, and Xander could hear the dance of his heartbeat. Then he heard something else, the rumble of a truck engine, and he looked up at the sliver of sky that was visible between the buildings. The sky was beginning to lighten. He barked sharply
and pointed upward with his nose.

“Right,” Spike said. “Time for the monsters to get inside.” He turned back to the creature, which was making garbled little sounds. “’M gonna carry you, yeah? Just lie still.”

The thing went very tense for a moment, and then relaxed. The expression on his face was of resignation, not trust, but at least he didn’t struggle as Spike scooped him into his arms and then stood. Xander barked again and then turned and ran. Spike was close behind as they made their way back home.

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“What the hell is that?”

Spike and Xander gave Angel twin glares as the creature cowered even more against the headboard. As if he wasn’t terrorized enough by a werewolf and one vampire, now he had to
encounter a second vampire, this one bigger and loud. Honestly, though, Xander was probably giving their unwilling guest the biggest wiggins, because a few minutes ago he’d morphed from an enormous wolf into a naked, one-eyed human man. Well, nearly naked. He was still wearing his collar.

It was Spike who finally answered Angel. “We found him not far from here. Haven’t sussed out what he is yet.”

“I’ve never seen a demon like that.”

“I don’t think he’s a demon,” Xander said. The vampires looked at him and he shrugged. “He doesn’t smell demony.”

“What does he smell like?” Angel demanded impatiently.

“Like a spell.”

The creature shifted slightly on the blankets, sending up a small cloud of dust. Spike had set him down in a room across from their suite, and it had probably been years since anyone was in here.

Spike sat on the edge of the bed and gazed at the thing with his head slightly tilted. The wounded creature had evidently decided that Spike was the least scary of the trio, because he looked back at Spike with huge, pleading eyes. At least his breathing had calmed a little, and his tremors had stopped.

“Can you understand me?” Spike asked quietly.

Hesitantly, the thing nodded. His head was too big for his body and his neck too long and thin. And now Xander could see that his skin was a pale, bluish-green color.

“Can you talk?”

The response was a series of unintelligible noises.
That mouth was not constructed for human sounds. The creature slumped unhappily.

“Are you a demon?” Spike asked.

The creature shook his head.

“This is going to take all day,” Angel complained.

“Hang on,” said Xander. He ran out the door and then into his and Spike’s suite. He quickly yanked on a pair of green sweats and then he grabbed a pad of lined, yellow paper and a pen. Angel had boxes and boxes of legal paper in the basement along with lots of other office supplies; apparently, he’d stolen them from Wolfram and Hart before he destroyed the firm. Xander had used this pad to write a letter to Willow.

Back in the other room, Angel was still frowning while Spike waited as patiently as he could. Xander held the pad and pen out to the thing in the bed. The thing took them awkwardly in his bizarre hands. He placed the paper on the bed and then tried for a
few moments to grasp the pen properly, but he wasn’t built right. Finally he just held it between his palms. The three of them craned their necks to see what he wrote. The letters were messy, but not much less legible than Xander’s chicken scratches.

HUMAN, the paper said.

“Are you under a hex?” Spike asked.

The man—because, apparently, that’s what he was—shrugged. It looked very strange on his skewed frame.

“Did somebody do this to you?”

The man shrugged again.

“Is there somebody you want us to contact?”

He shook his head slowly, then he swayed and almost fell over. He must be exhausted, Xander thought, and probably in a lot of pain. “Hey,” he said. “How about if you just tell us your name, and
then get some rest. We can figure this out later.”

The man shot him a grateful look, Xander thought, and then struggled again with the pen. And again, the rest of them craned to see. It took a long time for him to write all the letters, but finally he dropped the pen and looked up at them.

LAMONT MCDONALD.

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“It’s a common name.”

Angel shook his head. “No. It’s too big of a coincidence.”

“Why don’t we go ask him?”

Spike and Angel swiveled their heads to look at him. They’d left Lamont to sleep and now they were gathered in the suite across the hall. Angel leaned up against one chocolate-colored wall while Spike
paced and Xander sprawled in his favorite chair.

“Because he can’t talk. Because even if he could, I wouldn’t believe a word he said.” Angel had his arms crossed on his chest. His shirt was buttoned wrong, Xander noticed. He’d been in bed already when they’d brought Lamont home, and he’d thrown his clothes on in a hurry. He was barefoot, too.

Spike came over and bent down to press his lips to Xander’s temple. “No, Xan’s right,” he said, straightening. “We should at least ask.”

Angel rolled his eyes, but he trailed behind them as they walked down the stairs to the lobby, and then down into the basement. Lindsey looked at them with alarm as they stood outside his cell.

His living conditions had improved some. Xander had installed a toilet, one that was usually sold to prisons and had a sink in the lid. There was a shower spigot, too. Cold water only, but better than nothing. Angel had replaced the lawyer’s chains
with slightly longer ones as well. Lindsey still could take only short strides and the range of motion in his arms was limited, but at least he could stand fully upright. Angel had thrown a mattress in, a thin one that once belonged to a rollaway cot, and he’d even given Lindsey a blanket.

Lindsey, however, did not seem appreciative. Maybe because he still had no clothes. But more likely because Willow had given them a spell that kept the man from making a single peep. It meant the ring gag was gone, and it also meant Lindsey couldn’t utter his magic demon-conking words. Considering what Lindsey had done to Angel and Spike, and also considering he was an indirect cause of Xander’s own furry predicament, Xander figured Lindsey ought to be thankful he was being treated as well as he was. Sometimes Xander remembered the anguish Spike had gone through as a result of the csípés spell, and how close his beloved vampire had come to being dusted, and Xander had to stop himself from storming into the cell and ripping the bastard to shreds.
Lindsey sat on his mattress and moved his gaze from one of them to another, as if, a year into his captivity, he still hoped to find a savior.

“Do you have a relative named Lamont?” Angel asked.

Lindsey’s eyes went round with shock, which was answer enough.

Angel stalked over to the corner, where the boxes of paper were, and pulled out a fresh yellow pad. Another box contained pens, and he took one of those, too. Then he came back and thrust the items through the bars of the cage. “Need some answers,” he said.

Xander could actually see the wheels turning in Lindsey’s head as the lawyer considered how to react. But before Lindsey made a choice, a huge wave of exhaustion crashed over Xander. He would have fallen if Spike hadn’t caught him. Shape-shifting was enormously taxing on his body, and he needed to recuperate.
Spike held a strong arm around Xander’s waist, and Xander leaned against his vampire, barely able to keep his one eye open. “You sort this, Peaches,” Spike said. “Going to put my boy to bed now.”

Angel may have grunted a reply of some sort, but Xander wasn’t really sure. It didn’t matter anyway, as Spike nearly carried him up to the lobby, and then up more flights of stairs until they were in their own room. Xander collapsed onto their big bed and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

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“It’s his brother.”

Xander yawned hugely and Spike took advantage of the opportunity to stuff a forkful of barely-cooked bacon in Xander’s mouth. Xander chewed and grinned at him thankfully. Werewolfery was hungry work, it turned out. The three days a month when the moon held the strongest sway over him, he
always felt like he could eat a horse. Literally. Bacon was good, too, though, especially when it was being fed to him by a beautiful, shirtless vampire whose hair was still in sleep-tossed curls.

Angel frowned at them and they ignored him, as they often did. He was still wearing his misbuttoned shirt and looked like he hadn’t slept at all. Spike shoved another mouthful of food into Xander, who smiled, well, wolfishly, and wished Angel would go away. Breakfast wasn’t the only thing he was hungry for. “Tasty,” Xander said, and Spiked leered happily back at him.

“Knock it off, you two. This is—“

Spike whirled to face Angel. Xander couldn’t see his vampire’s expression, but he was guessing it wasn’t friendly. “My boy needs feeding,” he growled. “If you want to natter on, we’ll listen, but be nice or bugger off.”

Angel made a long-suffering face—he was really good at that—and sighed. “Fine. Maybe someday
you’ll figure out some things are more important than sex.”

“Nothing is more important than what my Xan needs,” Spike replied, and a small shiver of joy ran through Xander’s body. He still found it hard to believe that Spike felt that way about him. Spike turned back towards Xander and scooped up a big spoonful of scrambled eggs. Mmm. Runny, with a dash of hot sauce. Just how Xander liked them.

Angel shook his head, but he walked farther into the room and sank onto the most uncomfortable chair in the room, a hard wooden thing that Xander thought of as the Punishment Seat. They kept it just for Angel, actually, and it was the one he always chose.

“Lamont’s still sleeping. Whatever happened to him, he looks like crap. Lindsey says Lamont’s his younger brother, and last he heard from him was several years ago, when Lamont was in high school in Texas. I don’t think he knows what’s going on.”
“Did you tell him what his baby brother looks like now?” Spike asked.

“No. I didn’t tell Lindsey he’s here, either.”

“So then what’s the scheme?” Spike lightly slapped at Xander’s hand as Xander reached for a piece of toast. Spike had decided that it was his personal mission to feed and generally baby Xander during Xander’s time of the month, and he couldn’t be persuaded otherwise. Not that Xander was especially inclined to try persuading him, because it was awfully nice to be fussed over like that. And in any case, Oz had said it would help strengthen Spike’s status as alpha for him to take charge of Xander, although when he said that he probably wasn’t picturing Spike hand-feeding bits of whole wheat with strawberry jam into Xander’s smiling mouth.

“I dunno,” Angel said. “We should get Lamont cleaned up, I guess. Then see if we can get more information out of him.” He scratched at the back of his head. “I’m really not comfortable letting him
have the run of the place.”

“Could lock him up with the cowboy,” Spike said.

“Yeah, I guess so. I was hoping to keep them apart, though, at least until we know what’s going on. There’s no way Lindsey’s brother just accidentally showed up a few blocks from the Hyperion.”

“Use my cage,” Xander offered. He hadn’t needed it himself for several months.

“Good idea, pet.” Spike held out a glass for him, full to the brim with cold milk. The full-fat stuff, because he needed the extra calories during the full moon. There was a blue and white striped straw in the glass and Xander grinned at the thought of Spike going to the store and buying him drinking straws. He took a long, satisfying slurp.

“Yeah, okay,” Angel said, but he didn’t move.

Spike turned his head to look at him. “You’re knackered. Go have a bit of a kip. Xan and I can get
him sorted.”

Angel thought for a moment, and then levered himself to his feet. “Thanks. I just need a couple hours.” He shambled out of the room, and then Spike grinned at Xander.

“Shower first, love?”

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Their bathroom took up all of what had formerly been a single guest room. Xander had done it in Art Deco style, with tile in white and black and pale grayish aqua. He’d installed a deep pedestal sink with chrome fittings. The tub was oversized, roomy enough for the two of them, and the shower with its frosted glass surround was plenty big enough to share as well. He’d surprised his cold-blooded lover with a towel heater, a gift that had earned Xander an exhausting and thoroughly wonderful romp in the sheets.
Now, while Spike stripped and turned on the tap, Xander unbuckled his collar and set it on the wooden cabinet where they stored their towels. The collar was black leather like the leash, and inset with sharp, shiny spikes, of course. Wolfish Xander didn’t mind wearing it at all—it was his alpha’s mark, after all—and the rest of the month, sometimes Spike would wear it instead, which was nice, too. Oh, if Anya only knew the amount of cash Xander and Spike had dropped at their friendly neighborhood sex toy shop. They didn’t really need the toys—the sex was fantastic even when it was just their two bare bodies—but neither of them minded a little extra fun now and then.

“Pet?” Spike said. “Where are you in your head now?”

“Someplace nice,” Xander replied, stepping into the shower beside Spike.

“Would the rest of your body fancy following?”

“Mmm.” Xander couldn’t answer properly because
he was nuzzling up against Spike’s wet shoulder, drawing the scent of the vampire deeply into his lungs. Gods, Spike always smelled so good. He wrapped his arms around Spike and clasped them in front of the vampire’s middle so that Spike’s body was pulled back, flush against his. His cock hardened against Spike’s ass and he couldn’t help but moan a little.

“In the mood for some dessert, pet?” Spike’s voice was full of humor.

“Mmm,” Xander said again, and he stuck his tongue out and licked along Spike’s jawline.

Now it was Spike’s turn to groan, and he tilted his head to give Xander better access. For several months, Xander hadn’t quite trusted himself to give Spike what he wanted, not when the moon was full, anyhow, but now he knew he could control himself enough to bite only hard enough to make his lover scream with pleasure, and no more.

He began with just a tiny nibble. Spike undulated
against him and whimpered softly. “In,” he said, his voice gone deep and gravelly. “Want you in.”

Xander looked around for some lube. Goddammit, he knew there was a bottle somewhere nearby! But then Spike reached behind himself with his left hand and grasped Xander’s cock, and he guided it between his cheeks.

Oh. Already slicked, the sneaky bastard. You’d think Xander was predictable or something.

Spike wiggled a little and Xander moved his hands down to rest on Spike’s hips. They both gasped and sighed as Xander breached the tight ring of muscle and then slowly sank deeper.

Xander didn’t try to hold back or take it slow. They really did need to deal with Lamont, and anyway, there’d always be time later to make love more leisurely. Now, Spike moved both his hands back to Xander’s ass and they moved their hips in tandem, both making panting little grunt noises. Xander’s fingertips dug into Spike’s hipbones, creating
bruises he could kiss better later.

With his eye clenched tightly closed, Xander was lost now, lost in the cool tightness that clenched around him and the hard, water-warmed body that strained against him, and the sound of their breaths echoing and mingling with the splashes, and the scent of his lover’s arousal. All he needed was taste, and when Spike choked out his name—“Xan!”—Xander opened his mouth wide and bit hard at Spike’s carotid with his blunt teeth. Coppery sweetness trickled onto his palate and Spike bucked hard and yelled. Just as the scent of semen hit Xander’s nostrils he came, too, thrashing his hips quickly and still sucking on the small wound he’d made.

When he stilled, Spike slipped off of him and turned around, then drew him against himself for a kiss. Spike shuddered again when his tongue found the flavor of his own blood in Xander’s mouth. And then they hung limply in one another’s arms, allowing the steaming water to sluice off their heads and shoulders and backs.
Eventually, they managed to get scrubbed and shampooed. Xander turned off the tap and they dried quickly before pulling on some clothes. Xander always wore his oldest, most ragged clothing during the full moon, in case the change hit him before he had the chance to undress. It had only taken one favorite shirt ruined to teach him that lesson. Spike, of course, pulled on his usual black jeans and black tee, but this time he also shrugged into a silky blue button-down Xander had bought him, which matched his eyes exactly.

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Lamont was awake when they went into his room, huddled miserably under the dusty blankets. He looked alarmed when he saw them, but not terrified. And he definitely looked interested in the tray of food Xander was carrying.

He made a mess while he was eating. His hands just didn’t work well for grasping things, and he didn’t
appear to be very used to managing with them, which made Xander suspect that whatever had happened to him, had happened recently. In any case, though, he managed to get some breakfast inside himself, and then he lay there patiently while Spike and Xander cleaned him up and bandaged his wounds. Looking more carefully, Xander could see now that Lamont also had vivid bruises and deep lacerations around his wrists and ankles, clearly the result of having been bound.

They didn’t bother to ask him any questions as they worked on him. Angel would be pissed if he missed anything, and neither of them felt in the mood for laborious interrogation anyhow. So they just wiped him down and patched him up, and then the three of them looked at one another.

Finally, Spike asked, “Do you know who we are?”

Lamont shook his head.

“’M called Spike. ‘M a vampire, yeah?”
Lamont looked unhappy but not altogether surprised.

“I have a soul. Doesn’t mean I don’t have fangs, though, and I use them if necessary, right?”

Lamont nodded.

“My boy here is Xander.”

“Werewolf,” Xander added helpfully.

Spike, who was standing beside Xander at the bedside, put a proprietary arm around Xander’s waist. “My wolf, yeah? You be nice to him or you answer to me.”

Xander really didn’t need protection like that. He could hold his own nearly as well as Spike, actually. But he didn’t mind because it was nice to feel like someone treasured him. This was one case of demon possession he wholeheartedly embraced.

Lamont nodded again at Spike’s warning.
“All right, then. We’re going to get you sorted. But in the meantime, we can’t have you just running about the place, can we?”

Lamont looked pointedly down at his own feet. Running was probably not in the cards for him anyway. Xander didn’t contradict Spike, though; he just let him keep talking.

“We’ve got a place to keep you. You’ll be safe there, and comfortable, until we suss out what’s going on with you.”

The creature didn’t look thrilled about it, but he didn’t resist as Spike picked him up and then carried him into their old room, where the cage was. Xander had already put some clean blankets inside. As Lamont looked around the cage, his eyes huge, Spike set him inside and then locked the door. Xander brought him the remote control. “Think you can work it?” Xander asked.

Lamont poked at it with a spidery finger and then
nodded.

“Okay, then,” Spike said. He was kneeling beside the cage. “We’ll chat later.”

Lamont nodded one more time. He seemed reasonably content, for now. And, in fact, he looked as shocked as Xander felt when, a second later, Lamont snatched Spike’s hand off the bar of the cage, yanked it inside, and then bit down hard.

Xander wasn’t sure whose screaming it was that brought Angel running, his or Spike’s or Lamont’s. Maybe it was all three. In any case he came tearing into the room at top speed, wearing only a pair of maroon silk boxers, which would have been kind of amusing under very different circumstances.

Xander was certainly not amused now.

Instead, he was trying desperately but without any success to figure out how to help Spike. Spike was writhing on the ground and shrieking in agony. Xander couldn’t see anything wrong with him, other
than the nearly inconsequential toothmarks on his hand, and yet the vampire was arching his back and flailing his limbs, and his mouth was stretched in a rictus of pain. His eyes were wide open, the pupils nearly eclipsing the blue irises. Worst of all, though—and the rest was bad enough—Spike smelled wrong.

“What the fuck!” Angel shouted, adding his voice to the general ruckus.

“What! Help!”

Angel ignored the cries coming from the cage and rushed to Xander and Spike. At this point, Xander was actually straddling Spike, trying to hold him still so Xander could get a better look, but Spike was strong, and it was like trying to ride one of those mechanical bulls, only worse, because the bulls didn’t scream in pain, and Xander wasn’t in love with them.

Angel pushed Xander off and climbed on top Spike himself, and with his greater weight and strength
was able to keep Spike pinned beneath him. Spike’s eyes wouldn’t focus, though, and he didn’t seem to be aware of anything other than whatever was hurting him.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“Don’t know. Lamont bit his hand, and then he just started yelling and he smells like magic and I can’t figure out what’s going on. Oh, god, what’s wrong with him?”

By now, Spike had been shrieking long enough that his voice was hoarse. Then he seized once more, this time so violently that he actually managed to throw Angel off, and then went completely still. His eyes remained open, staring at nothing, and he wasn’t breathing, and he looked so absolutely and completely dead that Xander was almost overcome by panic. But Spike wasn’t dust, and that was a good sign, at least.

Dimly, Xander noticed that the room had gone silent and he glanced at the cage. The creature was
gone, and in his place was a naked and battered man who appeared to be unconscious. He looked like a younger, less muscular version of Lindsey. Xander sniffed in his direction. The scent of the spell or whatever it was had faded almost entirely away. Now he just smelled of human and blood and urine, because he’d evidently pissed himself at some point in the proceedings.

Xander and Angel stared at each other, both of them wide-eyed and gaping with shock. In the end, it was Xander who recovered first.

“I’m calling Willow,” he announced

**Part Three**

He petted his beloved’s pale forehead, pushing back a stray curl or two. He wanted to cry. Already *had* cried, actually, in front of Angel and everything, and that was really fucking humiliating, but he couldn’t help it. It wasn’t fucking *fair*! After all Spike had been through last year—hell, after all Spike had
been through for the last one hundred and fifty years!—and all he was doing was trying to help some guy that Xander had found, and now here he was, motionless. Bespelled.

Willow hadn’t helped much. Maybe that was partly Xander’s fault at first, because he was so overcome with horror that he was pretty much babbling incoherently. Angel had finally taken the phone from him, surprisingly gently, and had tried to explain what was going on in somewhat calmer tones. Willow said she’d call Giles and they’d get right on it, but Xander wasn’t feeling optimistic. They hadn’t really given her much to work with.

Lamont was still out of it, so there was no help there. Angel had gone down to the basement for a while to see if he could extract any information from Lindsey. But he came back upstairs a couple hours later, his face desolate. He smelled faintly of Lindsey’s blood and fear, and Xander had a pretty good idea the questioning hadn’t been especially gentle. But Angel was convinced that Lindsey didn’t have a clue what was going on. He had demanded
to see his brother, though—Angel showed Xander the piece of paper, on which the lawyer’s writing was so forceful he’d scored the paper—but that was out of the question right now.

And as if all that wasn’t enough, it would soon be sundown and it was the last night of the full moon, and there was no way Xander had the emotional stability right now to keep himself from going lobo. And all their cages were occupado.

Xander looked wearily at Angel. “You’re gonna need to chain me up,” he said.

“I thought you had things under control.”

“Normally, yeah. But not with Spike....” He swallowed. “Not this time.”

Angel sighed. “Okay. What do you want—“

“You still have those extra chains and stuff from Lindsey?”
“Yeah.”

“Use one of them to chain me to this pillar.” He’d left the support pillars intact when he tore down the walls to form their suite. He was fairly certain they were strong enough to hold him. “You’re gonna need a collar. Not my usual one. I could probably tear the leather.”

“I have a metal one in the basement.”

Xander lifted his brows slightly at that but didn’t comment. “Okay, fine.”

“How long a chain?”

Xander measured the distance with his eyes. “Fifteen feet? That’ll keep me in the room, but I want to be able to reach Spike.”

“You won’t hurt him?”

Xander looked down at his vampire, suddenly so vulnerable. “No,” he said shortly.
It was almost dusk, so Angel hurried down to gather his bondage gear. When he came back up, Xander had taken off everything but his boxers, and he was waiting. He stood still as Angel fastened the iron around his neck. His skin itched and rippled as if it had fur on the inside, and his bones and jaw ached. Not much longer now.

“Uh, Angel? Stay away from me until morning, okay?”

Angel looked slightly hurt, but he nodded. Really, Xander in wolf-form was fine around Angel now, at least as long as Angel didn’t come too close to Spike. But in the mood he was in, Xander didn’t trust himself, and he didn’t want to risk getting into a tussle with Angel. That would certainly end up with both of them seriously injured, at least.

Angel left the room and shut the door behind himself. Only a few minutes later, ripping, horrible pain shot through Xander’s body. He dropped to the floor and curled into a ball and waited for the
change to be complete. Christ! It was so much easier to go through this with Spike at his side, stroking him and humming and calling him all the sweet names he never used at any other time. It was like he was being stretched on the rack and flayed at the same time. He yelled and swore until his mouth could no longer form words, and then he just howled.

It always seemed like it took days to change, but he knew it really lasted only minutes. When it was over, he lay on the cool floor, panting heavily, until he noticed the delicious scent of blood. He lifted his head up and looked around him. Several feet away, between him and the door, a large plastic tarp had appeared. On top of that was a big hunk of bone and meat. His stomach growled and he walked over to it. Cow.

Usually, his alpha made sure he had something to eat when he changed, but his alpha was...oh, no. Over on the bed. Hurt.

Xander looked back and forth between the bed and
the food, whining softly. A voice came to him from outside the closed door: “Eat first, Xander. He’s okay for now.”

Ah. The other one. His head was always especially muddled right after he shifted, and his feelings for Angel were complicated at best. But he was just rational enough to realize that it must have been Angel who had left him the meat, and that the big vampire was probably right. He needed to be strong for his Spike.

Xander ripped savagely into his meal, tearing off big chunks and practically swallowing them whole. He didn’t stop this time to gnaw on the bone, to feel it crack satisfyingly between his jaws and to lick out the tasty marrow. He merely pulled off as much of the flesh as he could, then ran a long tongue over his muzzle. His hunger sated for now, he trotted quickly to the bed and leaped beside Spike.

The vampire was still unmoving, cold as any corpse. He smelled wrong, and Xander whimpered and snuffled at him, searching for traces of the familiar
scent of his alpha. They were there, but just barely. Xander whimpered again and licked at Spike’s face, but there was no response. So he did the only thing he could: he curled up next to Spike, keeping his hot, furry body as much in contact with Spike as possible. He rested his chin on Spike’s chest and waited.

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Still mostly asleep, he felt fingers lightly clutching his hair and hard muscles moving beneath him, and he wondered whether maybe Spike would make him French toast this morning, mmm, with lots of maple syrup, and some greasy sausages, and....

And then he woke up enough to remember.

He sat up abruptly. His immediate response was relief because Spike’s eyes were open and looking at him. But it only took him a split-second more for the relief to be replaced by abject horror.
Something was wrong with Spike.

His skin was more than pale, it was the bluish-white of skim milk. His hair was the color of a robin’s egg. His beautiful features were skewed as if by a reflection in a funhouse mirror. Nothing was symmetrical. He had the right number of fingers and toes, but each digit was bent and twisted like it was badly broken, and the joints of his arms and legs were misshapen.

He was breathing now, quick shallow breaths that rattled in his chest. His eyes were wide and terrified.

Xander managed to choke out a single word: “Spike?”

“Xan. Please. Help.” Spike was hard to understand, the language garbled as if his tongue was too slow and too thick.

“Oh, gods, Spike, what’s wrong? What’s happened?”
Spike struggled to sit up, and he reached out a single shaking arm toward Xander. “Can’t... please... can’t....” And then, to Xander’s absolute dismay, Spike began to cry. His shoulders shook and great, painful-sounding sobs tore from his throat, and fat tears coursed down his twisted face.

Xander gathered him in his arms, holding him tight. Spike clutched back so hard Xander could barely breathe. He buried his face in the crook of Xander’s neck and wailed and Xander rocked him and smoothed at his hair. “It’s okay,” Xander crooned. “Everything will be all right.” He pretended that he had confidence that this was true.

They huddled together for a long time, as Xander tried to ignore his bursting bladder and the grief and worry that were washing through him. Eventually, though, Spike’s crying subsided, and then he was just collapsed against Xander, snuffling softly.
“Spike?” Xander whispered.

Spike pulled slightly away so he could look at Xander’s face. His distorted eyes were red and still brimming with tears. “Help,” he said in the tiniest voice imaginable.

Xander swallowed thickly. “Do you know what’s wrong?”

“Can’t...head....” Spike struck his forehead hard with the heel of his hand. “Can’t. Broke.”

“Does it hurt?”

Spike shook his head, and then hit it again. “No. Slow.” He grimaced. “Thick.” He was going to hit himself once again, so Xander caught his wrist and held it tight.

“You’re having trouble thinking straight?”

Spike frowned like he was processing Xander’s question, and then nodded.
Xander stroked Spike’s face with his free hand. “Fuck. Are you...are you in pain?”

Spike thought again and then nodded and waved vaguely at his knees, then wiggled his fingers slightly.

“Okay,” Xander said. Outwardly, he was trying his damnedest to remain calm, while inwardly he was reeling. “We’ll deal. We’ll figure this out.”

Spike made a small, mournful sound that broke Xander’s heart.

Xander leaned forward and pressed his lips against Spike’s brow. “I love you. We’ll fix it.”

Spike looked as if he might begin crying again, and then Xander was just going to end up sobbing along with him. So he kissed Spike again, and stood. “I’ve gotta take a piss. And then...you must be hungry, right? I’ll heat you some blood.”
Spike gave a tiny nod. Xander used the bathroom and splashed some water on his face, and then pulled on his green sweats. Spike was still sitting on the edge of the bed, his head deeply bowed. It occurred to Xander that Spike probably wasn’t going to be able to manage his usual jeans with his deformed legs so, with a lump in his throat, he fished another pair of his sweats out of his dresser—gray, this time—and brought them over. “Want to put these on, sweetheart?”

Xander had to help him. His fingers wouldn’t cooperate and the tie at the waistband bewildered him. At least he could walk, although slowly and awkwardly and, judging by the look on his face, painfully as well. He settled in one of their kitchen chairs and Xander kissed him again and then brought him a mug of blood. When he had trouble holding the cup, Xander plunked a straw in it. Spike looked up at him with sad, glittering eyes.

Xander caressed his shoulder and then walked over to stare in the refrigerator. He had to eat or he’d be no good to anyone. Last month, Spike had made
him pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse, with blueberries for eyes and noses and tiny little mousy fangs he cut from slivers of apple and dipped in strawberry jam. And then Xander had refused to eat them until he gave Spike a nice blowjob to show his appreciation for a lover who made him vampire rodent breakfasts and who could be so sweet and funny and scary and sexy and oh, god, here he was choking back tears again. He pulled out a carton of milk and three-day-old leftover pizza. He zapped the pizza for a few seconds and brought it over to the table.

Under normal circumstances Spike would never have allowed him to eat this for breakfast, but today Spike just sipped at his blood and stared at his twisted hands. Xander reached over to capture one of those hands in his own. “C’mon. We got through the csípés shit and the wolf thing, and you’ve made it through how many deaths and apocalypses? We’ll be all right.”

Spike shook his head slowly. He rubbed his free hand against his face. “Won’t...want me. Ugly.
Stupid.”

Xander dropped his food and rushed around the table to kneel beside Spike. He reached up to cup Spike’s face in his palm. “I will always want you, Spike, any way I can get you.”

Spike sighed heavily and looked like he was crafting a reply, but then startled when there was a knock at the door.

“Spike? Xander?”

“Come in.” When Xander had first moved to the Hyperion, Angel used to barge right on into their room without knocking. Then, predictably, he’d caught them very much en flagrante, and he’d immediately mended his ways.

Angel came inside somewhat hesitantly, as if he was afraid of what he’d discover. Nevertheless, when he caught sight of Spike he gasped and froze. Spike, on the other hand, jumped to his feet and then stumbled around the table until he was pretty much
cowering behind Xander. Xander stood and put his arms around Spike, allowing the vampire to hide his face against Xander’s chest. Xander could feel him trembling.

“What the fuck?” Angel said.

“He woke up like this,” Xander replied, keeping his voice carefully modulated. “And...and he’s having trouble thinking clearly, too.”

“Shit.”

“Do you know what this is, Angel?”

But Angel shook his head. “No. Shit, Xander—“

“Shh.” Xander glared at him as he stroked the back of Spike’s head. He didn’t want to upset him more than necessary.

Angel rubbed his face hard with both hands. “Lamont’s awake. Maybe he has some answers.”
“Is he still in the cage?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

Xander wolfed down the rest of his food and made sure Spike drained his blood as well. Then they all trooped next door. Spike held Xander’s hand and his steps were ungainly.

Lamont was pressed against the back of the cage with his arms crossed protectively over his chest. Xander had to close his eye and breathe deeply to remain calm, when what he really wanted to do was drag the bastard out of there and tear him to shreds. It was probably just as well that he’d built the cage as sturdily as he had, because if he couldn’t break out in wolf form, then he couldn’t break in in human form and kill Lamont.

Still, he dropped Spike’s hand and stomped over and grabbed the bars in his fists. “What the fuck did you do to him?”
Lamont cringed even farther away. “I’m...I’m sorry,” he said in a very small voice.

“Fucking fix it!”

“I don’t know how.”

Xander growled and only Angel’s big hand on his shoulder kept him from changing to a wolf right then and there. “Xander, let me, okay?”

And wasn’t that great? The mass-murdering vampire once known as the Scourge of Europe was the voice of reason now. But Xander stepped away and toward Spike, who was slumped against one wall. Xander sank to the floor and Spike instantly collapsed into his lap. He sucked at his favorite spot on Xander’s neck then stopped and looked at Xander, as if to check whether it was all right. Xander gently pressed Spike’s head back into place and Spike relaxed a little against him.

Xander watched as Angel vamped out. Lamont
squeaked. In his very most Angelusy voice, with a hint of brogue and everything, Angel said, “Now, boy. You’re going to tell us your story. And you’re going to satisfy all of us with it, or else we’ll be picking our teeth with your bones. Follow?”

Lamont squeaked again and nodded vigorously.

Angel dragged a chair over and smiled evilly at the man, fangs flashing. “Go ahead, boy.”

Lamont suddenly looked very young. “Can...can I have some water first? Please? I ain’t had any, and—“

Angel growled. “Drink it from the toilet.”

Lamont blinked at him, then knee-walked over to the toilet. He scooped several handfuls of liquid into his mouth, and then scooted back to his former spot.

“Getting impatient.”
“I...uh...I was lookin’ for my brother. Lindsey.”

Spike growled almost inaudibly against Xander’s skin.

“He’s a lawyer, and he works...well, he used to work for this fancy law firm. Wolfram and Hart. I ain’t heard from him in years, and I wanted...I just wanted to see him, you know? So I came to LA, and I found out somethin’ had happened to that firm, and they ain’t here no more.”

Angel smiled in a way that made Lamont cringe.

“I Googled them. Found out they still had offices in other cities. It even turned out they have one pretty close to home, in Dallas. I went back there to see if somebody could help me track down Linds. The folks there got real interested in me when they found out who I was. Brought me into some hotshot’s office, bigger’n my old apartment. He gave me some fancy liquor and asked me a lotta questions. And finally, this guy says Linds ain’t workin’ for them no more, but he can help me find
him.”

He had been speaking very quickly, the words tumbling out of his mouth so fast it was hard to catch them. But now he paused and shuddered.

“He got on his phone and talked to someone, and a few minutes later these two dudes came in. They was really tall and skinny, and they was wearing weird clothes, like these long sort of cape things. And they didn’t look right. Somethin’ wrong with their faces. They looked at me with their piggy li’l eyes and said a bunch of stuff in some language I ain’t never heard before. All hissy and spitty, like an angry tomcat.”

“And then?”

“They touched me with a big ol’ purply rock. Then it hurt. Like I was on fire or somethin’. And they just watched me while I screamed and screamed, and when it was over...well, you saw what I turned into.”
Spike whimpered and Xander kissed him.

“The boss-man told me they was gonna take me to where Lindsey was. And he said when I got there, I was supposed to find a vampire with a soul. An’ I had to bite him, or I’d be stuck like that forever.”

“You bit the wrong vamp, fucktard!” Xander yelled.

Lamont looked at him in confusion. “But…but he told me he had a soul.”

Angel snarled at him. “He does. So do I. They sent you after me.”

“I’m…I’m sorry! I didn’t know!”

“So you think it would have been okay if you’d bit me instead, boy?”

“No! But…I didn’t have no choice,” Lamont whined.

“There’s always a choice.”
“They tied me up real tight and threw me in an airplane. Durin’ the flight, these guys...they hurt me real bad. I don’t know why—I couldn’t hardly even move or nothin’. So we landed and they put me in the trunk of a car. When the car stopped, they dragged me out, and one of ‘em—he was huge, biggest guy I’ve ever seen—pointed down the block to a big old hotel. Told me Linds and the vamp were in there. They cut the ropes off me and drove away real fast.”

Angel leaned in close to the bars. In a low voice, he said, “Xander and Spike said they found you a way from here. How’d you get there?”

“I was scared. Didn’t want to meet no vampire. Thought I’d find help somewhere. But I couldn’t walk. Couldn’t even stand. Had to crawl, and there was nobody around, and I hurt so much. Finally collapsed in that alley.”

“Where Xander and Spike thought to save you. And this is how you repaid them.” Angel gestured toward Spike.
“I’m sorry. I didn’t...didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t want to stay a monster.”

“You’re still a monster,” Xander said. He helped Spike stand and led him back to their suite.

**Part Four**

Spike huddled against him, small and fragile. Sometimes he whimpered a little in pain or distress, but mostly he suckled on Xander’s neck and kept his eyes squeezed tightly closed as if to shut out the world. Xander wanted to pace and shout, wanted to go shake answers out of Lamont, but instead he held Spike tight and prayed for his phone to ring with good news.

Instead, Angel knocked and then strode in, as angry as Xander had ever seen him. Xander was reminded again that the big vampire had been genuinely upset when Spike was missing in Chicago. Despite appearances to the contrary, he really did care
about his grandchilde.

“He doesn’t know anything else,” Angel growled. “I’m going to go to Dallas and—“

“And get yourself dusted? Or hexed? They were gunning for you. I don’t think they’re just gonna hand over the cure.”

Angel growled again, but didn’t argue with Xander’s logic. He collapsed heavily into the Punishment Seat and buried his face in his hands. Spike moaned softly and twitched in Xander’s arms.

Then, suddenly, Angel lurched to his feet and stomped over to the couch. He stuck his arm out a few inches in front of Spike. “Bite me!” he commanded.

Spike burrowed more into Xander’s side, hiding his face against Xander’s neck.

“Bite me, Spike!” Angel repeated.

Angel sighed heavily and moved back a step. “Look. Spike got fucked up when Lamont bit him, but Lamont got cured. So maybe if Spike bites me....”

Xander mulled this over. It made some sense, and there was justice in it, besides, since Angel had been the intended target anyway. And if someone had to be all mangled, Xander would rather it not be his own beloved vampire. But still, and even though he was never much of an Angel fan, it didn’t seem right to just pass the misfortune on to him, even if he was willing to martyr himself. Besides, if they were going to have to tangle with Wolfram and Hart, Xander wanted Angel in good shape.

He had another idea, though. “Why doesn’t Spike just bite Lamont back?” His conscience didn’t twinge at all at the thought of re-magicking the younger McDonald.

Angel nodded and let his arm drop. “Okay. Wait
here.”

Xander did wait, smoothing at Spike’s tousled blue curls as Angel clomped out of the suite and then, a few minutes later, returned. He was dragging Lamont, who was still naked and was now heavily trussed in chains, and who looked about ready to piss himself in terror.

Spike cringed and Xander snarled, and Angel nearly had to carry Lamont, but the vampire managed to get the very unwilling human squished between his own large body and the couch. “Bite him,” said Angel. Lamont squeaked.

When Spike didn’t move, Xander whispered into his ear, “C’mon, honey. Take a nice big chunk out of the bastard.”

Spike puffed out a breath of air against Xander’s skin and then twisted his face around to look at Lamont. “Wanker,” he said, his voice garbled but understandable. Then, without bothering to drop his fangs, he leaned over and latched his teeth hard
into the man’s shoulder.

Lamont shouted, “No!” and tried to get away, but Angel held him firmly. Spike sort of gnawed at him a moment more and then retreated back against Xander. They all waited expectantly.

Nothing happened.

When it was clear that neither Spike or Lamont was going to change, they all slumped, three of them dejection and one in relief. “Maybe...maybe he can’t be reinfected once he’s had it already. Kind of like the chicken pox,” Xander finally said.

“Fuck,” was Angel’s response, and Spike buried his face against Xander again. Once again, Xander comforted Spike wordlessly while Angel took a much more eager Lamont back to the cage.

When Angel came back, his face held a look of purpose. “Let’s try Lindsey,” he said.

Xander wasn’t feeling particularly optimistic, but it
wouldn’t hurt to try. Well, it’d hurt Lindsey to try, but Xander didn’t especially mind that. He’d be happy to sink his own teeth into the fucker if he had half an excuse. So he urged Spike to his feet, and the three of them walked slowly down to the basement. Spike held Xander’s hand hard enough that it hurt.

Lindsey was hunched miserably on his mattress, his face bruised and bloodied. When he caught sight of Spike, though, his eyes grew huge, and Xander didn’t have to read lips to know that their prisoner was swearing silently.

“Your brother did this to him,” Angel said, his voice soft and menacing.

Xander could taste the fear that rolled off of Lindsey as the man lurched off of his bed and back against the far corner of his cell. He held his hands up, palms out, as high as his chains would permit, and he frantically shook his head. His hair had grown very long and it swung around his pale, bearded face.
“This was courtesy of your former employers. Do you know what it is?”

Lindsey’s eyes got impossibly wider, and he shook his head emphatically.

“Little brother’s upstairs in a cage, Linds, and I’m not too pleased with him as it is. Want to rethink your answer?”

Lindsey dropped to his knees in supplication and shook his head some more. It was hard for Xander to sense whether the man was lying now, since his body was already shaking in terror, but he was fairly certain Lindsey honestly didn’t know what had been done to Spike.

Spike sagged against Xander, whether for physical or emotional support Xander couldn’t tell. Maybe both. In any case, Xander clutched him and glared at the former lawyer.

“Come here,” Angel said. His voice was as flat as his
eyes.

Lindsey swallowed audibly and appeared to think it over. But he knew he wouldn’t be able to escape, and Angel would only be angrier if he had to go into the cell and get him. Awkwardly, he rose to his feet, and then he shuffled to the bars. His breaths were harsh and rapid.

Angel unlocked the cell door and, as soon as Lindsey was within his reach, grabbed him by his hair. He propelled him toward Spike and Xander, as Lindsey automatically struggled to stay away. Of course, his struggles were useless, and then the bound, shivering man was inches away.

“Bite him before I do, sweetheart,” Xander rumbled.

Lindsey stiffened in Angel’s grip, but Angel tugged him even closer until he was nearly touching them. Spike made a sound—something desperate and feral—and, again without vamping out, latched his teeth onto Lindsey’s bicep.
Lindsey howled silently and Spike collapsed against Xander. A second later, he was howling, too, only loudly, and Xander eased him to the floor. As heartbreaking as his lover’s shrieks were, Xander was also relieved, because this time something was obviously happening, as both Spike and Lindsey shook and seized on the cold cement. Xander and Angel watched anxiously for a few moments, and then Angel dragged Lindsey back into the cage and slammed the door shut. Xander knelt beside Spike, stroking his skin, murmuring soothing words.

It was better this time. Spike quieted and stilled within a few moments. And then, as Xander let out a long, relieved breath, the unconscious vampire slowly morphed into his familiar shape, symmetrical and perfect.

Lindsey was still clearly in pain, but Xander couldn’t bring himself to care. He stood and bent and gathered Spike into his arms.

“I can carry him,” Angel said.
“I’ll do it,” replied Xander, maybe more harshly than necessary, but he just wanted to get Spike upstairs, and tucked into their bed, where Xander could wrap himself around him and warm his chill flesh. Besides, it wasn’t the first time he’d carried Spike.

He didn’t know whether Angel stayed to watch Lindsey. He simply trudged up the stairs, across the lobby, and then up endless more stairs until he came to their suite. He was huffing and puffing by then. Fortunately, the door was open, so he entered, kicked it shut behind him, and then gently lay Spike on their rumpled sheets.

Spike was still out of it, but at least his face looked peaceful. He looked, in fact, absurdly young, and Xander planted a kiss on his unlined forehead before stripping out of his sweats and tee, climbing in beside him, and pulling the blankets over them both.

~*~*~*~*~
“Pet.”

He was trying out for the swim team again, or at least trying to, but the pool was bone-dry and his miniscule Speedos had disappeared. Along the side, Buffy and Cordelia were shouting a cheer—“Two, four, six, nine, Doughnut Boy is really fine!”—while a tweedy Giles and overalled Willow took notes. Spike was there in his black-dusted glory, swiping pieces of cheese off of a platter held by Principal Snyder. Lindsey and Lamont were waving to him from perches atop the diving board. And nobody except him seemed to notice the pack of—wolves? Hyenas? He wasn’t sure—that was howling from the bleachers.

“Pet.” Something was grabbing at his shoulder. He swatted at it, determined to jump into the empty pool. But then someone was kissing his nose, and it was Larry, and he sputtered, and....

“Spike,” he complained sleepily. Then his brain woke enough to register what was going on, and his
bleary eyes shot open. “Spike!” he cried.

“Who’d you expect to wake up beside?” Spike’s voice was clear and full of humor.

Xander grabbed his shoulders and looked him up and down. He was still wearing Xander’s gray sweats, but his torso was bare and as beautiful as usual. “Gods, Spike! Are you feeling okay? Is everything all right? Are you hurting anywhere? How about your head?”

“Love, you’re making my head spin with all the questions at once.” Spike reached up and gently stroked Xander’s face. “I’m fine. All mended.”

“Oh, merciful Zeus!” Xander almost melted in relief, and he and Spike rested their foreheads together.

“Like me better now that I’m pretty again?” Spike whispered.

“Spike, I’d love you no matter how you looked. But to see you hurting like that, and with your brain all
muddled....” Even now, his voice caught with emotion.

“’S all right, Xan. You got me sorted again.”

“Me and Angel.”

Spike made a noncommittal sound.

“We ought to go tell him you’re okay.”

“Wanker can wait. Only want you now.”

A few minutes later they’d gathered the strength for a long, tender kiss. That kiss was gradually building in intensity and was about to be joined by a little hand action south of the border when a loud pounding sounded on their door.

“Bugger,” murmured Spike, pulling slightly away.

“Come in,” Xander called.

The door opened and Angel came in. Plain relief
flashed across his face as he saw Spike sitting up and smirking at him, but it was quickly chased away by his more usual expression of annoyance. “Back to the usual,” he grumbled.

“Jealous?” Spike said. “Don’t know what my boy thinks, but I might—“

Xander swatted him. For all his blustering and brooding, Angel was there when they needed him. And, it occurred to Xander, they were all the guy had, and later when he had time he might actually find himself feeling sorry for Angel, and wasn’t that a strange turn of events? But now he poked Spike, who was still chuckling, and said, “He’s all better. How’s Lindsey?”

“Twisted,” replied Angel, with no small bit of satisfaction. “Now on the outside, too.”

“So...what are we going to do?”

Angel shrugged. “Nothing. Spike’s fine. I’ll probably throw Lamont down with his brother. They’re
harmless now.”

“You can’t keep him like that.” Spike’s voice was low and serious.

“Why not? Lindsey’s managed a year down there, and now they’ll have each other for company. It’s better than anything they planned for us.”

Spike shook his head. “Keep ‘em locked up, that’s fine. But we can’t let the lawyer stay hexed.”

“Why not?” Angel repeated.

“It’s…. Nobody deserves that.” Spike shuddered and Xander’s throat felt tight. “Better just to kill him, Liam.”

Angel looked at him gravely.

“What do you want to do, Spike?” Xander asked.

Spike sighed loudly. “I expect we need to find a way to unmagic the pillock.”
As always, Willow was Xander’s go-to witch. Xander dialed her number as soon as the time difference permitted. He gave her a quick rundown of the most recent events.

“Oh, goddess, Xan, I’m glad that Spike’s better.” She sounded sincere. She still wasn’t exactly thrilled over the direction Xander’s life had taken, but over the last several months she’d become first resigned to the Spikiness of it and, more recently, maybe even happy for them.

“Me, too, Will. But now Lindsey’s got the curse, or whatever it is, and I guess we have to help him. Have you learned anything?”

“Not yet, sorry. But now that I know it’s contagious, that might be helpful, ‘cause not many magics work that way. I’ll dig around some more, okay?”
“Thanks. And maybe...this thing with Wolfram and Hart is getting old, you know? I’m getting really tired of Spike getting zapped because of them. Do you think there’s some way to...I don’t know...ward him? Or keep them away?”

“Gosh, I don’t know. That’s tricky, Xan. People—or vamp-people—they’re not like buildings.”

He laughed and glanced at Spike, who was standing in the bathroom wearing only a black t-shirt, gelling his hair and humming to himself. “No, definitely not like buildings.”

“But I’ll see if I can figure anything out, ‘kay?”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you, Miss Rosenberg.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Harris.”

They spent a few more minutes chatting about Buffy and the baby and Giles, who she thought had been acting strangely wiggy lately, and then they hung up. Spike was dressed by then and sitting at
the table in their small kitchenette, sipping from a red and black mug.

“Red doesn’t know anything?”

“No. Not yet, anyway.”

“I was thinking...why not bring in a backup?”

“Huh?”

“Ring up your wizard friend in Chicago.”

Xander was dumbfounded. “Vega? You want me to talk to Danny Vega? The same guy whose heart you were threatening to rip out?”

Spike shrugged. “I reckon it’s safe enough from this distance. Wanker can’t molest you from two time zones away.”

Xander sat at the table, too, opposite Spike. “You really want to cure Lindsey, don’t you?”
Spike closed his eyes and nodded once. “It was bloody horrible, pet,” he murmured.

Xander captured Spike’s free hand in his and squeezed. “I’m sorry. If I hadn’t found him—“

“Not. Your. Fault.” Spike put down his mug to cover Xander’s hand with his. “Ring your wizard.”

Xander reached for his phone. It was an iPhone that Spike had bought him a few weeks earlier and given to him already loaded with a large selection of late 70’s punk. Spike had chosen a ringtone as well: Warren Zevon, of course, and it made Xander laugh, although he liked to point out that the werewolf was from Sunnydale, and it was the vampire who was from London. Now, he happily used it to go online and search for the number for Vega’s shop.

As he scrolled, Spike said, “He won’t be able to help with the Wolfram and Hart bit, you know.”

Xander paused and looked at him. “Why not?”
“Pet, those tossers are old and powerful. Look what it cost when Angel went up against them. And he had years to prepare for the battle. In the end, all we did was evict them from the west coast. They’re still strong and happy everywhere else, as our mate Lamont has demonstrated.”

“I don’t want to try to destroy them, Spike. I just want them to stay away from you. And Angel, because they seem to sort of keep missing him and getting you.”

Spike snorted. “Luck of the Irish, yeah?”

“Well, there must be some other good guys somewhere else they can pick on for a while.”

Spike gave him that look. It meant, “I love you but you are only a whelp and I’m an ancient vampire and know better than you.” Xander gave him back the look that said, “I love you too and I know you’re older but I’m really stubborn and I’m going to try anyway.” Then Spike rolled his eyes and Xander dialed Chicago.
“Vega’s Books,” said a familiar voice.

Spike’s eyes narrowed and his jaw worked—he could hear just fine—but he waved at Xander impatiently.

“Uh, Danny? This is Xander Harris. I don’t know if you remember me—“

“Xander! How are you doing? What happened with you and Spike?”

“Um…we had sort of an interesting trip back to LA, but we’re fine.”

“‘We.’ You two are ‘we’, huh?”

“Yeah, we are.” Spike looked smug.

“That’s great, Xander. A loss for me, but I’m happy for you.” Vega sounded sincere, anyway. “And the spell?”
“It wore off.”

“Fantastic! How about Angel?”

“We found him. That was also...sort of interesting. He’s okay now. Your presents came in handy, by the way. Thanks.”

“It was the least I could do.”

“Actually, I was hoping maybe you could do a little more for us, maybe.”

Vega’s response was quick and sharp. “Are you in trouble again?”

Xander couldn’t help but laugh. “Man, I’m always in trouble. But yeah, we have a new problem.”

“How can I help?”

It took a while to fill the wizard in on what had happened. Xander let it slip that he’d become a werewolf, and Vega was clearly shocked and upset.
until Xander made it clear that he didn’t especially view that particular accident as an unhappy one. Spike fidgeted impatiently while Xander talked, first noisily slurping his blood and then doodling little pictures of punctured magicians in the margin of a take-out menu from Pearl of the Orient.

Vega listened carefully, occasionally making small sounds or asking a question. When Xander was finally done talking, the wizard said, “Wow. You lead an interesting life, Xander Harris.”

“Yes, well, I’m hardly ever bored.”

Vega didn’t know what Lamont had done to them either, but he promised he’d look into it right away. As for the evil lawyer problem, he’d heard of them, of course, and didn’t sound optimistic about being able to help much in that department, but he said he’d try. When Xander disconnected, he felt slightly better, knowing he had two magic-types on the case.
It was more or less a waiting game after that. That was okay. Xander and Spike could entertain each other just fine, thank you very much. Sometimes Xander wondered if becoming a werewolf had ramped up his libido, or if it was just a side-effect of living with a gorgeous, sexy, nearly insatiable vampire. He wondered, but he didn’t really care which it was.

They had a few of their usual calls for help. A couple vamps eating people in Compton. A nest of Ornlechi seducing teenagers in Irvine. Three clans of Pah’h’tls at war with each other in Laguna Niguel. Just normal life in LA. They took care of the problems and everyone went momentarily back to their humdrum existences.

Spike was anxious and moody, though—well, moodier than usual—clearly distracted by their problem in the basement. Killing or shagging got his
mind off it for a while, but Xander could tell when his lover’s thoughts turned back to Lindsey and what had become of him.

Xander had reminded Angel of his plan to lock Lamont in with his brother, and Spike had immediately supported the idea. Angel was a little hesitant, but Xander pointed out that his cage wasn’t really meant for long-term occupancy, and it was kind of a pain having to feed prisoners in two separate areas. Plus, Lindsey was a mess, unable to feed or care for himself very well with his mangled hands, and Xander figured Lamont could help. Besides, Lindsey still couldn’t speak, and it didn’t seem very likely they’d be able to cause any trouble together.

So Angel dragged the terrified younger McDonald out of the cage and down all the stairs and into the basement. Lamont wailed when he saw Lindsey, and Lindsey looked even more scared than usual. When Angel shoved Lamont into the cell, the brothers clutched at each other, and, for the first time, Xander actually felt kind of sorry for the
Angel scowled at the captives. “Neither of you sons of a bitch deserve it, but Xander and Spike are trying to figure out how to undo the hex. If either of you have any information to share, now would be a really good time for it.”

Lindsey blinked at Xander and Spike in surprise, his too-big eyes still a pretty blue color, but now his skin was, too. Then he shook his head slowly, sorrowfully.

“I don’t know nothin’ I ain’t already told you,” Lamont said. “I don’t—God, please don’t leave him like this!”

“You would have left me like that. Or Angel,” Spike said, his voice low and menacing.

“I know. I’m sorry!” Lamont was still crying and he used his arm to wipe the snot from under his nose.

So the brothers remained in the basement. Three
times a day someone brought them food. The prisoners seemed to spend most of their time hunched on the mattress, staring dully at the walls or Lamont talking quietly. Spike and Angel used their vamp hearing to spy on the one-way conversation, but it was mostly about their hometown, and who’d gotten who pregnant or ended up in jail or crashed their pickup. Nothing important.

Nearly two weeks passed like this, and then, one evening as Spike and Xander were curled together in a just-woken, post-coital torpor, Xander’s phone buzzed: “He’s the hairy-handed gent who ran amok in Kent....” Xander grabbed it and glanced at the number.

“Vega!” he said, sitting up abruptly. Spike pulled himself away slightly, frowned a little, and then cocked his head to listen.

“Hey, Xander. How are you doing?”

“I’m good.”
“No disasters this week?”

“Don’t jinx me, please.”

Vega chuckled. “Well, I have some news for you about your mystery spell.”

“Yeah? What? How do we get rid of it?”

“Hang on! Okay, it’s not strictly a spell, actually. It’s sort of a…mystical virus. It’s called the Blight of Karthos and it’s really rare.”

It had a name, though. That had to be a good thing, Xander thought. “So how do we cure it? Mystical penicillin?”

Vega’s sigh was loud, even two thousand miles away. “No. No magic pills, I’m afraid.”

Of course not. “So?”

“Only two ways to get rid of it. You can pass it on to
someone else who hasn’t already had it. Or you can destroy its original source.”

“Which is?”

“The Stone of Karthos.”

Xander and Spike exchanged unhappy looks.

“Uh, Vega? This Stone? It’s not a purple rock by any chance, is it?”

“I’ve never seen it myself, but yeah, that’s what the book says. Why? Do you know where it is?”

They knew exactly where it was. In the hands of Wolfram and Hart.

Part Five

The easiest thing, of course, would have been to infect someone else. No, that wasn’t right. The easiest thing would have been to let Lindsey stay
Blighted, let him and his brother rot together in the basement. Angel probably would have gone for that plan. But Spike wouldn’t and, honestly, Xander’s conscience was digging at him, too.

So then the three of them argued about whether there was someone else they could pass the Blight onto. Vega had warned Xander that it would infect only humans. Or demons in dead human bodies, but even then it wasn’t quite as effective. That was why Spike hadn’t ended up in as bad a shape as the McDonalds. None of them could think of a human who was any more deserving of the Blight than Lindsey, and they didn’t much care for the idea of bringing in a vampire and trying to contain it, too.

“So why don’t we just send Lindsey back to Wolfram and Hart and let them deal with him?” Xander asked.

Angel shook his head. “Either they’ll let him stay like this—and you two have a problem with that—or they’ll cure him. And then he’ll be free to come after us again, and probably even more pissed off
Xander swallowed his bite of pad thai. “We could keep Lamont here as a hostage. We’d tell Lindsey that if he hurt any of us, Lamont would suffer.”

“Nah, pet. Cowboy would just try to rescue him. He’d be even more trouble that way.” Spike stole a noodle from Xander’s plate and slurped it down noisily, earning him an eye roll from Angel.

“Then what do we do?”

“I’ll go fetch the magic pebble.”

Xander and Angel made emphatically negative noises. “You will not!” Xander said, clutching at Spike’s arm as if that could keep him in LA.

“You’re going to do what, Spike? Just waltz in and ask nicely? I shouldn’t have to remind you what Wolfram and Hart are capable of, not after—“

“You don’t have to remind me of anything,
Peaches,” Spike snarled. “I know what wankers they are. I’ll...I’ll think of something.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll come up with some sort of half-witted plan that you’re too impatient to carry out, and then they’ll get you.”

Xander had to bite his lip, because Angel was actually right. Not that he was going to tick off his beloved by saying so, but still. Spike was probably upset that Xander didn’t back him up, though, because he growled slightly and snatched his arm away, then crossed his arms sullenly on his chest.

“Look, Spike. If you go, I go too.”

Spike shook his head forcefully. “No. I’m not letting them have you, pet.”

Xander suddenly had a mental picture of Spike sneaking off to Dallas without him. “I mean it, Spike. You try to leave and I will track you down. I can do that now, you know. The whole smelling and tracking thing. And it’s not as gross as I used to
Spike made an exasperated sound, and then the three of them sat silently for several minutes, each of them mulling over their dilemma. Finally, it was Angel who said, “We need Lindsey.”

“Need Lindsey? He’s the pain in the arse that started all of this!”

“Yeah, but he’s got the best chance of getting us inside Wolfram and Hart.”

“Yeah? And how do you propose to have that happen, Liam?”

Angel shut his eyes. “I’m gonna let him bite me.”

~*~*~*~*~

It was, Xander thought, a phenomenally stupid and dangerous plan. But since none of them could think of anything better, they were stuck with it. Vega
had told Xander that the Blight eventually became permanent, so time was of the essence.

The crew in Britain was not at all happy with the plan, either. There was much transcontinental shouting and yelling. Xander was just relieved when he wasn’t the shoutee, and he actually enjoyed seeing the look on Angel’s face when Buffy told him exactly what she thought of his grand scheme.

But in the end, nobody at the other end could come up with anything better. And that’s why, three days later, Xander was at LAX again, this time to pick up a jetlagged and cranky Slayer named Kyna. Kyna was tall and blonde, with a sharp nose and sharper green eyes. She was not happy to have spent eleven hours stuffed in the middle of the middle row, with a pair of obnoxious American tourists on one side and a harried woman with a toddler on the other. She was not happy to be in LA. And most of all, she was not happy with the task assigned to her. She didn’t hesitate to tell this to Xander in an Irish accent so thick he only understood about half of what she said anyway. He meekly carried her bags
to the van—she didn’t like the van, either—and tuned out her death glares as he threaded his way through traffic.

Xander was fairly certain Buffy had chosen this girl on purpose.

She sniffed at the Hyperion and, standing in the lobby, bristled at Spike. Wisely, Spike backed away, probably concluding, as had Xander, that Wolfram and Hart suddenly sounded like a much friendlier place to be.

Xander showed her to her room on the third floor, right across from Angel’s. She cast a skeptical eye around the room and then put her hands on her hips. “Let’s get this done with,” she ordered.

So Xander led her back down, and Spike trailed behind them to the basement. Angel was down there already, staring at Lindsey, his thoughts opaque. Lindsey was slumped crookedly against the wall, his ruined face downcast, while Lamont glared at all of them.
Angel looked over at them and stiffened when he saw Kyna. Being close to Slayers was difficult even for vamps with souls. But he was clearly trying to be polite, because he said, “Hi. I’m—“

“Angel. I know. The vampire with a soul.” Her voice was cold, but she said the word “vampire” as if it was a curse.

“Uh, yeah. One of them, anyway.” He glanced quickly at Spike, who put his hands up and shook his head. Obviously, Spike had decided that this Slayer was all Angel’s. “Did Buff—Did they explain what was going on?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course. I’m to mind you while your...” she waved dismissively at Xander and Spike “…your friends go off on some wild goose chase.” Xander had the idea she’d rather scrub sewers.

“Well, yeah,” Angel answered. He didn’t look very pleased with the idea, either.
She and Angel stared at each other, and they might have stood there all night, but finally Spike stomped forward. “Look, Slayer. You’re to make sure the pouf stays fed and safe, yeah? And play waitress for that one, too.” He pointed at Lamont. “None of us may be thrilled with the scheme, but we’ll be back as soon as we can, and you’re strong enough for this, yeah?”

She squinted at him and then nodded. “Yes. I promised I would do it.”

They all relaxed a little. “Ta, then.”

“What about...that?” she asked, pointing at Lindsey.

“That one’s coming with us.”

Lamont jumped to his feet at this, and Lindsey crawled awkwardly to the front of the cage. He wrapped his twisted hands around the bars and looked up at them imploringly. Angel stepped in close, almost close enough to touch.
“Listen up, boys. In a minute, I’m gonna stick my hand out, and you’re gonna bite me, Lindsey.” Xander didn’t think Lindsey’s eyes could get any bigger, but they did. His enormous mouth hung open in shock. “As soon as you’re together again, you’re gonna take Spike and Xander to your old lawyer pals, and you’re gonna help them get hold of the Stone of Karthos. And then all three of you are gonna come back here, all safe and sound, or else your baby brother is gonna be looking fondly back on the days when he was just hexed and jammed in a little cage. Right?”

Lindsey blinked up at him. Lamont started to say something but Angel shut him up with a flash of yellow eyes. Lindsey looked over at Kyna, who was scowling, and then at Spike and Xander, who were standing shoulder-to-shoulder. And then he nodded.

Kyna left the basement when Angel started to
scream and spasm. Xander couldn’t blame her; he was pretty tempted to flee himself. But he didn’t. Instead he stayed, and he and Spike did the best they could to keep Angel from injuring himself while he thrashed against the floor. When Angel was finally still, unconscious on the cold cement, Xander glanced over at the cell. Lindsey was still down for the count, too, but he’d at least returned to his regular pretty-boy looks. Lamont was carrying handfuls of water over to his brother, trying to clean him off. He’d pissed himself during the transformation. Xander was glad Angel hadn’t been able to empty his bladder, too.

Spike and Xander stood wearily and then Spike heaved Angel over his shoulder. He muttered darkly about broody poufs and their fat arses, but still he carried Angel all the way up to his suite and set him down carefully on his bed. It occurred then to Xander that if Angel’s limbs ended up as twisted as Spike’s had been, the fancy clothes he was currently wearing were not going to work. So he ran upstairs and grabbed a pair of his own sweats, then ran back down.
It was a very strange thing, to be helping strip Angel. But he did, and he ignored the evil look Spike gave him when Xander maybe allowed his gaze to linger a bit too long over the unconscious vampire’s big, muscular body. “Oi, wolfboy! Remember who you belong to!”

Xander walked around the bed and smacked Spike’s perfect ass. “Yeah, I’m all yours, bleachie. Just...curious.”

Spike blew out a puff of air and then the two of them wrestled the sweats onto Angel’s legs and up to his waist. Then went to the sitting area to wait. Spike turned on the television, but neither of them really watched it.

A few hours later, Angel’s moans got their attention. They hurried to his bedside. He looked as horrible as Xander had expected, skewed and discolored, his tortured eyes wide with shock and pain. But Spike, who of course hadn’t seen his own transformed self, gasped and swore.
“Angel?” Xander said.

Angel looked at him plaintively. “Hurts,” he said. And then Xander and Spike both found themselves sitting beside him, smoothing his now-stringy hair from his face, patting his arms reassuringly.

“We’ll get you sorted quickly,” Spike promised.

There was a sharp knock at the door, and Xander went to answer it. It was Kyna, of course, now looking slightly more rested but no less grouchy. She wasn’t especially pretty. Her frame was large and bony and her jaw too square. Her hair, which really was gorgeous, was pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail, and her clothes reminded Xander of his outfits when he was younger: shapeless, too-large, and garishly colored. He wondered what she was hiding. She was probably in her mid-twenties but her face was hard, like someone who’d had a difficult life, and who expected the worst out of everything and everyone. But there was also a certain set to her eyes, a
mixture of determination and masked vulnerability, that he liked very much. It reminded him of Anya.

“Well?” she demanded.

“He’s, uh, awake. C’mon in.”

She followed him inside, not even looking curiously around Angel’s suite, until they were at the stricken vampire’s bedside. When she saw what he’d become, she let out a soft “Oh!” of surprise, and Xander thought he saw a tiny crack in her shell. Angel looked at her miserably and then turned his face away.

“He’ll be in loads of pain,” Spike said. “And his head is all...muddled. Slow.” Xander noted without any jealousy at all that Spike was tenderly, probably unconsciously, stroking his grandsire’s hand as he spoke. Despite all the fighting, there really was a strong bond between them, though neither would probably admit it.

“All right,” Kyna said, her voice firm.
“You’ll need to be a bit patient with the pillock, yeah? Perhaps...a hot soak might help his joints. And make sure he drinks plenty. There’s blood in his fridge, and we’ve arranged to have more brought every couple nights.”

Kyna nodded, while Xander felt absurdly like a parent leaving his kid with the babysitter.

“There’s a grocers about a mile and half up the street, and the keys to the Viper are over there.” Spike pointed at Angel’s dresser.

“I’ve never driven on the right,” Kyna said, a trace of doubt in her voice.

“Um, then maybe the Viper’s not such a great idea,” said Xander. “That’s okay. I know a store that’ll deliver. I’ll write down the number for you. And there’s a bunch of cash—“

“I’ve been provided with enough money already,” she said. Spike and Xander gave each other a small
grin. Hooray for the Council.

“You have my cell number and Spike’s, and—“

“I shall be fine. I’m quite capable, you know.”

“I’m sure you are, love. Only things tend to go wonky ‘round here, yeah? Watch yourself.” Spike patted Angel’s hand once more and then stood. Xander scribbled down the phone number for Pavilions, plus those of a couple of his favorite pizza and Chinese places.

Angel sat up in bed and gave them both an intense stare. “Fast,” he said, his voice guttural and thick. “Careful.”

Spike set his jaw and nodded, then left the room without looking back. “We’ll hurry,” said Xander and followed his vampire.

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Down in the basement, Lindsey was waiting for them, standing anxiously by the cell door. Spike narrowed his eyes at the man. “You know what happens if you fuck up,” he said, and cut his glance meaningfully toward Lamont. Lindsey nodded.

Spike unlocked the cell and opened the door. Lindsey came out slowly, cautiously. It was the first time he’d been out of the cell in over a year. Spike relocked the door behind him and then Lamont rushed over to clutch tearfully at the bars. “Linds....”

Lindsey patted his brother’s cheek. Then, as Lamont continued to sob, he turned and followed Spike up the stairs. Xander walked behind them, trying hard not to appreciate the guy’s rather shapely butt.

Up in Spike’s and Xander’s suite, Lindsey took a hot shower. After, Xander handed him a pair of scissors and a razor, and Lindsey hacked away at most of his beard before shaving his face clean. Then Spike pushed him down onto the closed toilet and cut his hair. He was good at it—150 years of grooming
himself without a mirror had honed his skills, it seemed. Finally, Xander handed Lindsey some clothes: some boxers and a pair of jeans, a brown t-shirt, and some boots. The clothes were new, but the boots were the lawyer’s own. Angel had stashed them away for reasons known only to him. Everything fit, but Lindsey looked a little uncomfortable, dressed. Xander supposed that’s what happened after months of nudity.

When the man was looking presentable again, Spike ordered him to sit in the Punishment Seat. He did, eyeing them both warily.

“Gonna give you back your voice, cowboy. But your demon hex won’t work on my boy here, and I promise you, you don’t want to tangle with him. So you’ll keep a civil tongue, yeah?”

Lindsey nodded vigorously.

It was actually Xander who said the spell. It was a short one, nice and easy, and Willow had made him practice several times. Still, the magic made him
uneasy. Spike too, for very good reason. The vampire stood far away as Xander chanted.

But then it was done. “Well? Can you talk now?” Xander asked.

Lindsey rubbed at his throat. “Y-Yeah,” he said. He sounded awful, but he smiled broadly anyway, clearly pleased to be able to speak again.

Spike strode forward and grabbed his duster off a chair. “Night’s not getting any younger,” he announced.

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Xander had a string of unfortunate road trips in his past. There were times when he was a kid and his parents took him to visit his grandparents in Denver. Sometimes their car, which was always a piece of shit, would break down, or sometimes his parents would get in a huge screaming fight before they made it over the California border. Then there
was the summer after high school, when he’d meant to have a great adventure, and instead ended up bussing tables and avoiding grabby hands at the Fabulous Ladies’ Nightclub in Oxnard. And, of course, there was last year’s cross-country excursion, complete with bespelled vampires and werewolf attacks.

Good times.

And now he had the joy of traveling fourteen hundred miles across the desert in August with a periodically homicidal former lawyer and a temperamental vampire boyfriend, all so they could mess with an enormously powerful, evil law firm.

This seemed destined to be his best road trip yet.

Spike was taking first shift as driver, while Xander sat in the passenger seat, eating a burger and fries. Lindsey was eating, too, clearly appreciating the first decent food he’d had in a while. He was kneeling in the open entry to the van’s cargo area, craning his neck to look out the windshield. It had
been a long time since he’d seen anything but Angel’s basement, too.

“So, tell me how you guys plan to get your hands on that Stone,” he said, licking at his fingers.

Spike glared at the highway, so Xander supposed he got to be explanation guy. “We’re gonna go to Dallas. Do you know who’s in charge there?”

“Yeah. Well, I used to, anyway. Guy named Novak. He’s a pretty big prick. Kinda reminded me of my old boss, actually.”

“Great. You’re gonna give him a call when we get there. Tell him Spike and Angel have been holding you all this time, but you escaped, and you’ve got Spike ready to hand over to him. Maybe even tell him you can get him Angel, right? And then you say your magic demon word to Spike and bring him to Novak’s office with you. And when Novak’s real close, you unhex Spike and Spike snatches Novak and demands the rock. When you get it, you guys leave, taking Novak with you. We can dump him
somewhere after we’re away.”

“And you?”

“I’m driving the getaway van.” And playing backup if things went spectacularly wrong, as they probably would. But he didn’t say that part aloud.

“Okay, I got it.” Lindsey crumpled his hamburger wrapper and threw it in the corner. “What happens when we get back to LA?”

“We fix the pouf, and you return to your cozy little hole in the cellar. But we let little brother go.” Spike’s eyes gleamed in the light from the dashboard.

“Fuck. I don’t wanna be locked up anymore. Can’t you let me go if I promise to be good?”

Spike snorted. “Yeah, ‘cause your promises are worth so much.”

“The fucker had me shot, man! I was on your side
and the fucker had me shot.”

Spike turned his head and looked at Lindsey, long enough that Xander started to worry about the van staying on the road. “If he’d let you live to join us in that alley, would you have fought on our side? Or would you have turned on us?”

Lindsey opened his mouth, started to say something, and then stopped. His shoulders slumped and he dropped his head. “I dunno, man. I dunno.”

Spike grimaced at the windshield. “Finally an honest answer from a lawyer.”

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After several hours, Spike pulled over at a rest stop and Xander took a turn behind the wheel. Spike sat beside him, smoking and humming to himself, but Xander knew he was nervous. Hell, so was he. Sometimes one of them would reach over and put
his hand on the other’s knee, and that was nice.

“So, like, have you always been gay, Spike?”

Spike shot Lindsey a filthy look. “What’s it matter to you, twat?”

“Just wonderin’. I always kinda thought you and Angel....”

“Pffft. Jealous, are we?”

Lindsey sputtered. “Of what?”

“The big ponce. You’ve wanted him for ages.”

“I have not! For one, I don’t like guys, and for another, I can’t stand the asshole.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Xander saw Spike give an evil grin. “Can’t lie to me, cowboy. I smell it on you. ‘Sides, why else were you so stuck on him? Surely he’s not the only git who done you wrong.”
Xander had no idea whether Spike really could smell Lindsey’s attraction to Angel, but pulling the lawyer’s chain was amusing. “Yeah, I smelled it, too.” He tapped his nose. “The wolf nose knows.”

Lindsey sputtered some more and Spike snickered. But then Lindsey crawled all the way into the cargo area and shut the door behind him, so there went that fun. Spike went back to humming and smoking.

The highway was really, really boring.

Xander stopped once to refill the tank and take a leak, then climbed behind the wheel for more hours of nothingness. When the sun rose, Spike went into the back and kicked Lindsey out, and then Xander had to contend with the lawyer’s presence next to him. Sometimes Lindsey asked a question, and Xander answered in as few words as possible. He wasn’t this guy’s buddy, after all.

Xander’s lids were growing increasingly heavy, and then Lindsey poked at him. “C’mon man, You’re gonna fall asleep. I’ll take a turn.”
Xander’s tired brain mulled this over for a moment. They did need to travel quickly, and if he couldn’t even trust Lindsey to drive for a while, how could he ever trust him to take Spike into the belly of the beast, all zapped by the spell? “Okay,” he finally said. He took the next exit and pulled off to the shoulder. He unbuckled and began to climb in the back as Lindsey steered the van back on the road.

Xander shut the partition behind him. Spike was fast asleep in the dark, curled up comfortably in the nest of blankets they’d put back there. “Who’s driving?” he asked sleepily as Xander draped himself around him.

“Lindsey.”

“’Kay.” Spike pressed himself against Xander in a familiar and comfortable way, and sucked lightly at his spot on Xander’s neck. For a moment, Xander considered a quick little grope session. They could even be noisy about it, just to tick Lindsey off. But
he was exhausted, and his mind was still weighing
the pros and cons when he fell asleep.

Part Six

Even though they arrived in Dallas in the middle of
the night, it was hot out and sticky, and the air felt
heavy and sort of tingly. Little flickers of sensation
tickled at Xander’s nerves and there was an odd
scent in the air. He didn’t like it. It made him
feel...jangly. And speaking of odd scents, twenty-
four hours or so cooped up in a van hadn’t done
much for Lindsey’s personal odor, or Xander’s own,
for that matter. He badly wanted showers all
around. Spike was less stinky—one of the side
benefits of being undead, apparently.

Spike was driving when they came to the city limits,
but he’d never been to Dallas before, nor had
Xander, so it was Lindsey who directed them
through the sparse traffic and to a hotel he said was
about a mile from Wolfram and Hart’s offices. Spike
parked the van and they grabbed their bags, and
then the three of them trudged into the lobby.

It was a nice place, kind of fancy but not too corporate looking. A skinny young guy smiled at them from the registration desk, way too perky for this hour of the morning. Maybe he had a vamp lover, too. Xander noted happily that the hotel was run by the same company that owned the Monaco back in Chicago. He’d liked that place, even after being stuck there for weeks.

“Can I help you?” the perky guy asked.

Spike pushed his way slightly forward. “Yeah. We need a room, mate.”

The clerk looked at the three of them. “Just one?”

“Yeah. But with two beds, if you’ve got one.”

The guy didn’t bat an eyelash. “For how many nights?”

“Erm, three.” They’d discussed this in the van.
Ideally they’d be done here sooner than that, but it might take a day or so for things to get in place.

“Let me see what we have. Hmm....” He clicked and clacked at his computer. “I have a couple rooms available with two double beds. Or...” more typing, “I have a Luxury Suite available. It has a king bed and a queen sofa sleeper.”

Spike and Xander glanced at each other. “We’ll take it,” Xander said. He hardly even winced when they were told it would run $450 a night with tax. Angel could afford it, or the Council. Whichever.

They went up to their room, and it was a nice one. Roomy. Xander made sure the drapes completely covered the window, but they were facing north anyway, so Spike was probably reasonably safe. Meanwhile, Spike rooted through the minibar while Lindsey collapsed onto the couch with a satisfied whoosh. Xander was just about to invite Spike to join him in the shower when a tremendous crash came from outside. Thunder. Maybe the storm would cool things down a little.
“You hungry, Spike?” he asked.

“Yeah. Might as well finish off the blood before it goes off.” They’d brought a small cooler with them, containing a couple days’ worth of pig blood for Spike. Mindful of their experiences last time, they’d also made sure to get the address of a local demon bar, someplace that could probably set them up with some human stuff if the need arose. Plus, Angel had pointed out when they were making plans, Spike could live off of Xander and Lindsey for a few days without taking enough to harm them. Xander had growled at the mental image of his vampire feeding off the lawyer.

Xander fetched the last foam container for Spike and Spike gulped it down, then had a chaser from a tiny whiskey bottle. “Have to wash the taste of that shite out of my mouth,” he muttered.

“Shower?” Xander asked.

“Nah, you go ahead, pet.”
Xander shrugged, slightly disappointed. “Okay.”

“You don’t have to babysit me, you know. I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

Spike ignored Lindsey. “Go ahead, Xan.”

It wasn’t that big of a tub anyway. Not that he would have necessarily minded the tight quarters, but he did truly want to get clean. So he scrubbed down quickly and then emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips. Spike was reclining on the bed, shoes and duster off, watching television. Lindsey was still on the couch. He’d kicked off his shoes, too, and his arms were crossed behind his head.

“Next,” Xander said.

“Go ahead, cowboy,” Spike said. “You reek.”

Lindsey sat up with a shrug. “Don’t mind if I do,” he said. “I’ve missed hot showers.”
Xander dropped the towel and climbed under the sheets beside Spike. “I rang home,” Spike said. “Talked to the Slayer. Captain Broody is all right.”

“Kyna looked pretty capable.”

Spike chuckled. “Yeah. I’d almost fancy the evil lawyers’ company more.”

They leaned against each other and watched CSI until Lindsey reappeared, damp and shirtless, with his slightly too-large jeans falling down over one hip. “Nice shower,” he remarked. Neither of them answered.

Spike kissed Xander’s cheek and then stood and stretched and sauntered off to the bathroom. Xander watched him, slightly mesmerized by the denim stretched tightly over his lover’s ass.

“Weren’t you one of those Sunnydale people?”

Xander glanced at Lindsey, who’d started to pull
apart the sofa bed but had stopped to look at him.

“Once upon a time, yeah.”

“So, how’d you end up with him?” Lindsey gestured with his thumb toward the closed bathroom door.

“Just lucky, I guess.”

“Lucky? From what I gather, if it wasn’t for him, you wouldn’t have been bit by that werewolf. You wouldn’t be riskin’ your neck with my old firm. Seems like he’s been pretty unlucky, dude.”

Xander didn’t raise his voice. “I was getting munched on by monsters well before Spike came on the scene. You know,” he added conversationally, “I heard about your little visit to hell. So by the way, let me promise you if you ever do anything to hurt him, I’ll personally make you wish you were back there instead.”

Lindsey looked uncertain about whether to take the threat seriously. “He’s just a vamp, man.”
“Yeah, but he’s my vamp. You know, my best friend, Willow—she’s a witch—when someone killed her honey, she skinned him alive. I bet she’d show me how to do the same.” Actually, he’d bet she’d do no such thing, but Lindsey didn’t know that, and now the man swallowed nervously and looked down at the partially assembled bed.

“I ain’t gonna hurt Spike,” he mumbled.

“Or Angel. ‘Cause I can barely stand him most of the time but he’s sort of my in-law, you know.”

“Or Angel.” Lindsey’s shoulders slumped and he looked exhausted. “I’m...I’m tired of this all. You know what I wanna do? Buy myself a little ranch. Go fishin’. Play my guitar. That’s all I wanna do.”

Xander thought he was telling the truth, but he wasn’t about to offer Lindsey false promises. They both knew that if they survived their time in Dallas, Angel would never just let Lindsey go.
Lindsey turned away from him and finished setting up his bed. He had slipped off his jeans, revealing the oxford blue boxers Xander had bought him, and was about to get into bed, when Spike emerged. The vampire was nude and magnificent, his hair tousled and his lips set in a delicious smirk.

“For Christ’s sake, put some clothes on!” Lindsey complained.

“Bothers you, does it? Oh, I forgot. You don’t fancy blokes.”

Lindsey made a disgusted noise and lay down, pointedly turning his back to Spike. Spike prowled across the room, as predatory and feline as ever, his bright eyes now locked on Xander. Xander smiled. He liked to be stalked like this, and he wasn’t about to let Lindsey’s presence ruin his time with Spike. Not when it could very well be their last time.

Xander clicked off the light, knowing Spike would have no trouble finding him in the dark. And Spike didn’t, slipping under the covers and then pressing
himself against Xander. He was warm from the shower and his hair tickled Xander’s face, soft and ungelled. “Have a nice chat with Linds?” he asked quietly.

“Mmm.” Xander always had trouble thinking straight when Spike was near him like this, his cool breaths wafting across Xander’s neck, making him shiver with need. “I’d rather chat with you.”

“Could do something more than chat,” Spike said, and he reached down to caress Xander’s half-hard cock.

“Mmm,” Xander repeated, only with more enthusiasm this time, as his left palm found its favorite spot on the firm swell of Spike’s ass. Then he didn’t say anything at all, because Spike was kissing him.

Spike was a very good kisser. Decades of practice, he said, and lots of experience doing things with his mouth. Sometimes they’d kiss while he was in gameface, and he’d accidentally-on purpose press a
fang’s edge against Xander’s mouth, then suck at the tiny wound he’d made. But tonight he kept his human face, which was just as good. His full lips were soft like ripe fruit, and his questing tongue tasted of whiskey and blood and smoke and barbecue spices from the chips they’d been munching on in the van.

As the kiss became more insistent and Spike’s pelvis flexed against him, dragging the vampire’s hard cock against Xander’s hip, Xander couldn’t help but let a moan escape.

“Oh, Jesus Christ!” exclaimed Lindsey, and they broke off their kiss to laugh into one another’s necks. Gods, how Xander loved Spike’s laugh, low and sexy. It never failed to send a prickle straight to Xander’s cock, even when that cock wasn’t being stroked with nimble, adept fingers.

Outside, more thunder rumbled, and it vibrated deep inside Xander. Maybe inside Spike, too, because he moaned and trembled against Xander. “Xan?” he whispered. “Not gonna last tonight
anyhow. Can I—“

“Bite me, Spike.”

Spike shuddered again and his hand squeezed Xander just on the good side of painful. He licked at the skin above Xander’s carotid, only the tip of his sharp tongue, and it was Xander’s turn to convulse slightly. His body had been trained very well over the past year. So when he heard the soft crunch of bones reshaping themselves, he arched up into Spike’s grip and gasped. Before he felt the sharp ecstasy of Spike’s teeth, though, he thrust his hand under his lover and dampened his index finger on the precome that had collected on the head of Spike’s cock. He reached around again then and carefully inserted that finger into the cleft of Spike’s cheeks and, just barely, into his twitching hole.

Spike hissed and still for a moment. But then he arched his back a little so that Xander’s finger slid farther inside him. He was tight and cool, and Xander concentrated on that feeling briefly, but then he was distracted by the muscular body
undulating atop him and the strong hand quickly rubbing him and then—and then came the bite and that was all. His body practically levitated as sweet lightning flashed through him, ruining him, making him fall apart.

He cried out.

When he could feel himself again, he realized that Spike had stilled, and that his groin was wet from his own come and Spike’s, and that Spike was human-faced again and nipping lightly at his jawline.

“Lovely, pet,” Spike murmured, and his voice was so hoarse and panting that Xander felt his sated cock twitch with interest.

Spike laughed again. “Get some sleep, Xan.”

“Yeah. You, too.”

“Both of you sleep, please!” Lindsey called, and Spike threw a pillow at him.
Spike remained half wrapped around him with his lips just barely touching Xander’s neck and his hand resting against Xander’s flank. Xander refused to think about what was likely to happen in the next couple days. Instead, he let Spike’s slowing breaths guide his own, and soon they were all fast asleep.

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The first thing he saw when he awoke was an empty sofa bed. He had a moment of panic, thinking Lindsey had fled. But then he heard the toilet flush and the sink briefly run, and Lindsey came out of the bathroom, still in his boxers.

“You two are noisy,” he announced when he saw they were awake.

“Sorry we didn’t ask you to join us?” Spike curled his tongue behind his teeth. “Cause let me tell you, my boy here feels so good when he’s moving inside me, filling me so nicely. Or when I’m in him, and
he’s so hot and tight. It’s—“

“Cut it out! Are you trying to make some kind of point?”

Spike smiled wickedly and stood, his pretty cock all morning-rampant. “Yeah. My Xan’s a bloody treat and you’ll never taste him.” And he marched off to the bathroom.

Xander ordered room service for himself and Lindsey, and by the time it arrived everyone was dressed and they were ready to set their stupid plan in motion. Even though he was nervous, he was still hungry—he was always hungry, thanks to his wolfish metabolism—and he sat at the room’s small table and shoved a decent steak and thick fries into his mouth. Lindsey had a steak, too, his first since they’d captured him, and as he ate it he moaned almost as rapturously as Spike and Xander had during the night.

But then Xander glanced at Spike, who was sipping at another tiny liquor bottle, his gaze turned deeply
inward, and all Xander could think was “last meal.” Suddenly his sirloin tasted like cardboard and he pushed his plate away. “Can we get this over with?” he asked, wiping his mouth.

“Yeah.” Spike stood and walked to where his duster was draped across a chair. He fished in a pocket and came out with a cell phone, which he tossed to Lindsey. Lindsey caught it neatly. “You’re up,” Spike said.

Lindsey swallowed the last of his meal and dialed the phone. His first call wasn’t to Dallas, but rather to his last boss in New York. He made a pained face and took deep breaths as he waited for an answer.

“Hey, Chuck. Guess who?”

Unlike Spike, Xander couldn’t hear the voice on the other end, but still, he could get a pretty good idea from this end how the conversation was going.

“Yep….Yeah, it’s really me, man….No, it’s…it’s kinda a long story, actually….That bastard Angel had me.
But I got loose....That’s why I called. I’m in Dallas now, and I sorta got a present for the firm. I need to talk to Novak....No, I can’t get to New York now. Gimme Novak’s number, and you can meet us here....’Kay, hang on.” Lindsey stood and grabbed a notepad and pen from the desk. “Hit me.” He wrote as he listened. “Got it. I’m gonna call him now, and—....Okay. See ya.”

He disconnected and frowned at them slightly. “He’s insisting on coming out here himself. He’ll be here tomorrow afternoon.”

Spike tossed his empty bottle into the trash. “Not pleased about a reunion?”

“No. He.... I didn’t exactly have permission to take off after Angel last year. They’d kinda given up on him, for now, anyway. I was supposed to be handling this thing in New Jersey, and...and the old man’s not real happy with me.”

Xander couldn’t help but grimace. He’d heard the stories—when Wolfram and Hart was unsatisfied,
its employees could expect more than a bad performance review.

Spike shrugged. “You play this well and we’ll be long gone when he arrives, yeah?”

Lindsey nodded. “Yeah,” he muttered, and he peered at the notepad and punched numbers into the phone.

“Hi, Mr. Novak. Um, this is—....Sloane gave me your number, sir. My name is Lindsey McDonald, and—....Yeah. That Lindsey McDonald.” The man hunched uncomfortably, apparently unhappy that others in the firm knew who he was. “I was in LA, sir. I got...captured.....No, he’s not here. He... got your surprise. I escaped.”

They’d discussed their strategy at great length, and finally decided to play it as if Lamont had directly infected Angel, just as Wolfram and Hart had planned. Spike had even taken a picture of Angel in his current state, using the camera in Lindsey’s phone, so that if necessary Lindsey would have
proof of the transformation. Angel being Blighted would also give Lindsey a reasonable explanation for how he’d managed to get free.

“Well, that’s why I’m calling sir. I wanted to tell you I was coming. I’m just down the road from you right now. And I’m bringing something for you....Spike. He’s kinda Angel’s—....Yeah, exactly. But I got him now....Well, I figured you might have use for him in his own right, you know? He’s a vamp with a soul, too.”

There was a long pause, as Lindsey and Spike listened intensely. “Yes, sir. An hour.”

He slid the phone shut and sighed. “He’s waitin’ for us.”

~*~*~*~*~

They’d decided it would be best if Spike looked a little disheveled. So the three of them trouped out to the van using a blanket they’d brought to protect
Spike from the sun, Once they were inside, Xander helped Spike rough up his clothing a bit, tearing the cloth here and there. He ruffled Spike’s hair, too, secretly delighting in the tumbled curls that Spike hated so much.

“Hit me, pet.”

“No!”

“I need to look a bit banged up. Just...punch my eye, maybe.”

“Spike, I can’t hit you!”

From the driver’s seat, Lindsey said, “I’ll do it.”

“Sod off! C’mon Xan. Not like you haven’t done it before.”

“Yeah, but I was just a kid, and you were trying to kidnap Willow.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “Or I’d shagged your
demon bint.”

Xander frowned at him and made a fist. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m not happy about it.”

“You can make it up to me later, love.” Spike looked up at Xander through his eyelashes, the way he knew made Xander helpless. With a loud sigh, Xander pulled back his arm and then socked Spike pretty hard in the face. Spike said oof and his head snapped back. “Nice one. Another one now, about the mouth, I think.”

Xander bit as his lip. Then he uncurled his hand and slapped hard at Spike’s soft lips with his open palm, in a manner he knew from unfortunate personal experience was guaranteed to puff a face right up. It stung him, too, which was only fair.

Spike spat a mouthful of blood out the open door. “Brilliant, love. How do I look?”

“Like you need me to kiss you better.”
Spike grabbed at Xander’s shoulders and pulled him close “Give us a kiss, then, and let’s get this farce moving, yeah?”

Neither of them said what they were thinking, that this could be the last time they did this, but they made it a memorable one anyway. Spike tasted of his own blood, but that only added to the intensity of a kiss so passionate that Xander’s toenails tingled, and an embrace so fierce he heard their ribs crack. They were breathless when they pulled apart and Xander’s cheeks were flushed. “Spike—“ he began.

“Shh.” Spike rested a long finger across Xander’s lips. Then he took his hands away and called to Lindsey, “Do it.”

Lindsey said some words, just a few harsh syllables like rocks grating together. Spike collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, and only Xander’s enhanced speed allowed him to catch the vampire before he fell to the floor. Swallowing thickly, pretending to ignore the very cadaver-like way his
lover was looking now, Xander eased him down, gently arranging him on his belly. He chained him, then, in the bonds they’d brought with them. They looked strong enough but Spike could break them if he had to. There were manacles for his wrists and a hobble on his ankles. Worst to look at, though, was the collar around his neck, to which Xander buckled a short leash. This wasn’t the kind of bondage he liked, not at all.

“He’ll only be out for a half hour or so,” Lindsey said. “We gotta go, man.”

Xander stroked Spike’s back gently, one more time, feeling the delicate vertebrae beneath him, and then curled up in the corner of the cargo area, ready to pull blankets over himself when they got there.

“All right. Let’s go.”

~~*~~*~~*~~*~~
There were a limited number of things one could do, while sitting in a van and waiting for one’s beloved to escape evil demonic lawyers with a magic rock. Pretty soon Xander had done them all, and then all he had left was fidgeting impatiently, pushing the light button on his Indiglo every thirty seconds or so.

Time dragged on, worse than back in his eighth grade geography class, where Mr. Lee could spend an entire class period speaking about the major exports of Paraguay without ever once changing the tone or inflection of his voice. And for once, Xander’s over-full head was mercilessly empty, with just a single thought bouncing around relentlessly: “What the fuck is happening to Spike?”

And as the minutes crawled by, one after another, Xander’s heartbeat grew gradually faster, his breathing more harsh, his stomach more tightly clenched, until he was on teetering on the edge of full-blown panic.
Once again he pressed the little button that made his watch face glow blue. It was 5:37. Spike and Lindsey had been in there almost two hours, and that was much, much too long.

Xander considered his options. He could go marching into the building and demand that they give him back his vampire. Yeah, that would work out just dandy. He thought about the men in suits—the very big men in suits—who’d come to the van when they’d arrived. Xander had peeked from under his camouflaging blankets and watched as one of them slung Spike over his shoulder like a sack of laundry, not even grunting with the effort, as the other two glared at Lindsey and kept their right hands inside their jackets. Their bullets wouldn’t kill him unless they were silver—not that he would put something like that past these people—but he’d be hard pressed to overcome these three, let alone the untold numbers of others inside.

But he didn’t really have a Plan B.
He looked at his watch again. 5:41. Fuck.

A moment or two later he heard voices and footsteps approaching. Not Spike’s. These voices were light and high—women’s voices—and the footsteps were the sharp clackity-clack of high heels. Xander scrunched down into his seat, hoping to make himself invisible, as a trio of women in dresses appeared to his left. They stood a few cars over, laughing and chatting, and then one of them got into the Accord next to him, while the others left for their own cars. Engines roared to life. As they pulled out of the garage, more people arrived, and then more, in ones and twos and threes, all heading home to whatever passed for normal family life for Wolfram and Hart employees. Soon the garage was nearly emptied of cars.

Then all was silent and still again.

An eternity later, and Xander was about to go in anyway, when another voice sounded out. Male, this time.
“Is that his van?”

Xander dropped to the floorboards and crawled into the back, quickly pulling the blankets over him. He metaphorically pricked up his ears, thought about shifting so he could prick them up for real. But it was impossible for a wolf to drive, and he could hear just fine like this anyhow.

“Yeah, that’s it.” The second voice was deeper, less cultured.

“Call and have it towed away.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sloane from New York will be arriving tomorrow at eleven. Make sure there’s a car waiting for him at the airport.”

“Of course, sir. And McDonald?”

“He’s Sloane’s. I promised. But the vampire’s mine. Call Morris, tell him to show up with his tools by
ten. This vamp’s going to tell us how to get to that fucker in LA. We may have to rally some forces, but this time we’re going to do it.”

“Very good, sir.” The minion sounded happy, smug even. “Have a good evening, Mr. Novak.”

“You make sure they’re closely guarded. I’m going to have myself a very good evening.”

There was the purr of a powerful engine—obviously, the black BMW M6 parked a couple rows over—and the swish of tires on concrete.

Xander waited, his head reeling, until he was sure the coast was clear. Then he crept back into the driver’s seat and looked around. Nobody was visible. There must be cameras, though, and he had no way to tell whether anyone was monitoring them. Well, but he couldn’t just wait here, could he? He was no use to Spike like this, and even less so if he got caught in the morning when the tow truck arrived.
He swore, loudly and forcefully, and slipped his keys into the ignition. Then he drove away.

He drove around aimlessly for a while, not wanting to get lost in this unfamiliar city, but also wanting to make sure nobody was tailing him. It was possible that Lindsey had turned on them, that he’d told them everything, including which hotel they were staying at. It didn’t sound like it, though—it sounded like Lindsey was as screwed as they were. And nobody had descended on Xander as he hid in the garage, so he took that as a sign that Wolfram and Hart didn’t know he was there. It was the only advantage he had right now.

When he was certain he was clear, he returned to the hotel.

The room was quiet and empty. Xander had a moment of pure weakness, when he collapsed on the bed and buried his face in Spike’s pillows, drinking in the vampire’s scent. Then he straightened his shoulders, figuratively and literally, and got hold of himself.
He had to find a way to rescue Spike. Okay, he’d done that before, hadn’t he? So what if this time he was up against the same group of bastards who’d nearly taken Angel and Spike and their whole crew down. So what if he only had until ten tomorrow before Morris showed up with his tools to do something to Spike, something Xander didn’t want to even think about.

He could do this.

He had to.

Part Seven

Xander was good at some things. Really good, even.

You could ask him to build almost anything—a picture frame, a chest of drawers, a whole fucking house—and he could. He wouldn’t be especially fast at it, but he’d do the job, and the end result would be sturdy, pleasing to the eye, elegant even.
Something to be proud of.

You could ask him to comfort someone in distress, like a potential who’d suddenly found herself turned into a Slayer, or a witch who’d lost her love and become carried away with dark magic, or a vampire under an emotion-boosting spell. He could do that. He’d lead the baby Slayer to a place where she could fully realize her powers, he’d remind the witch of the power of friendship and save the world, he’d babysit the vampire until the curse was all gone and the vampire had fallen in love.

And now, you could ask him to track someone by scent alone, days after the person had passed, or to hear a mouse gnawing at a baseboard four floors away, or to see a bad guy slipping away on a street with all the lights busted out. He’d do those things, too, and run faster than any human and bring down nasty demons with his powerful jaws and long, sharp teeth.

You could even ask him to hop into bed, and to impress a vampire with a century and half of
experience with his enthusiasm and aptitude for sex. He’d be more than happy to do that, thank you very much.

But strategizing, planning rescues against impossible odds — those were never going to be his forte. So, with no other choice before him, Xander did what he had to do.

Xander called England.

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There was a considerable amount of dear Lording and what were you thinking mistering and I should’ve kicked their asses years agoing. He’d expected that, and he weathered it as patiently as he could. Eventually it all died out, though, and, as he’d hoped, it was replaced with an intense discussion about what to do.

He didn’t say much. He mostly listened in as the cell phones on the other side of the Atlantic twittered
urgently. Eventually, there was a plan of sorts.

Buffy would stay there. Somebody had to supervise the Slayers, and there was the baby, of course, and Buffy’s boyfriend was out of town at some sort of conference. A whole army of Slayers might actually help against Wolfram and Hart, but there was no way to get them to Dallas within—fuck. Within fourteen hours.

Giles and Willow, on the other hand—they could manage.

Xander hung up and paced the room restlessly. Spike’s duster was still there, and Xander stopped and petted it sometimes, but that didn’t really make him feel any better. It occurred to him that he ought to eat, so he ordered a burger from room service, but when it arrived he couldn’t stomach more than a bite. He tried not to wonder what was happening to Spike right now. Was he in pain? Was he frightened? Did he know that Xander would try—no, would succeed, dammit!—to save him?
And suddenly there was an enormous whoomph of air that made his eardrums ache and the scent of Earl Grey and sage, and a clatter as one of the chairs fell over.

Willow and Giles were standing in the room. Giles was holding his glasses in one hand and looking pretty green around the gills, but Willow looked flushed and triumphant. “Xander!” she exclaimed, and, almost before he could brace himself, she flung herself against him, all gauzy skirts and fuzzy sweater and pomegranate-smelling hair.

“What!” he managed with the small amount of breath left in his lungs.

She peeled herself off him a few moments later. “Hi, Giles,” Xander wheezed.

“I think I shall take an airplane when we return,” Giles replied weakly.

Willow grinned. “Teleporting takes a little getting used to. But, hey, cheer up. No airplane food and no
long lines for security, and no staticky announcements from the captain that you can’t quite understand so then you worry that you’ve missed something important.”

Giles dropped into one of the chairs that was still upright and put his glasses back on. He was wearing jeans and a pale blue shirt and a tan leather jacket, and he was going to roast if he stepped foot outside the air conditioned hotel. Willow, too, for that matter.

“How are you doing, Xan?” Willow asked.

He hadn’t seen either of them since he left for Chicago last year, and he realized they were both looking him over curiously, carefully. He didn’t understand why. He was the same old Xander as last year, just out of the closet and in love with a vampire and, occasionally, furry. Okay. Maybe the staring made sense.

“I was fine until this happened. Happy, even.”
“And you and Spike...?”

“I love him, Will.” He said it plainly, because when it came down to it, it really was that simple. He shrugged. “He loves me back.” Then he felt his face start to crumple and he had to turn away and bite his lip hard.

She patted his shoulder reassuringly. “We’ll get him back. We will.”

Gods, he wanted to believe her.

He cleared his throat and turned back around to face them. “Thanks for coming, guys. I really... I appreciate it.”

Giles mumbled something and then stood. He walked over to the coffee maker and rooted through the basket beside it, grumbling to himself about Americans and their appalling ideas of tea. It made Xander grin a little despite the grim situation.

“So. What do we have to do?” Xander asked.
“You have to get some sleep, Xan. Giles and I can work on the preparations and we’ll be fine, ‘cause we’re still on English time and it’s morning for us.”

Xander shook his head. “There’s no way I’m gonna be able to sleep. I can’t even sit still. Not when Spike—Gods, Will, they could be doing anything to him right now.”

“I can do a spell, Xan. You’ll have a nice, dreamless nap.”

Xander started to protest, but then Giles chimed in. “She’s right. You won’t be any good to anyone if you’re exhausted in the morning.”

Xander opened his mouth again and then shut it. They were right. He wasn’t going to do anything now except get in the way. He walked over to the bed and flopped backward onto it. “Fine. But you better make sure I wake up in time.”

“We wouldn’t dream of allowing you to miss the
festivities, Xander.”

Xander stared at the ceiling. “Go ahead, then. Hit me. But I don’t think it’s gonna—”

~*~*~*~*~

The sun was in his eyes and his first thought was panic. *Sun! Spike was going to burn!* But then he remembered where he was and what had happened, and the panic turned into near-despair. Sunlight was probably the least of Spike’s worries right now.

Xander groaned and sat up.

Giles was at the little table, cup in hand, reading a newspaper. A crumb-covered plate was in front of him and the room smelled of bergamot and marmalade.

“Willow?” Xander asked groggily.
Giles looked up at him. “She’ll be along shortly. She needed a few supplies, and she went to hire a car.”

“A car? What’s wrong with the van?”

“Nothing, except Wolfram and Hart saw Spike and Lindsey appear in it yesterday, and then you drove it away. I expect they’d be quite suspicious if we pulled up in the same vehicle.”

“Oh.” Of course. Xander shook his head to clear it of the last wisps of sleep. “So...shit. They know Spike has help, then. They’ll be expecting us.” His spirits, already low, sank even more.

“Yes, but I doubt they’re aware that Spike’s help consists of a powerful witch, a werewolf, and...and a decrepit Watcher.” Giles smiled a little at him, and Xander gave a small smile back.

“I bet you still have a few good moves in you, G-Man.”

Giles rolled his eyes. “Yes, well.” Then he looked
more serious. “How well can you control your...transformation, Xander?”

Xander stood and stretched and noticed that someone had removed his shoes for him. He glanced at the clock. 7:04. Okay, still some time. “Pretty well,” he finally answered. “Oz makes a good teacher.”

“Can you shift at will, even when the moon’s not full?”

“Yeah, if I get myself riled up. Which I’m guessing isn’t going to be a problem today.”

“How long does it take?”

“About five or six minutes. If I really push it I can do it faster, but that hurts like hell.”

“All right.” Giles looked thoughtful, like he wanted to be taking notes. “And to change back?”

“Depends. If I’ve used up a lot of energy it can take
a while—maybe fifteen minutes.”

“And I take it that while you are in wolf form you are a formidable fighter?”

Xander’s lips lifted into a feral grin. “I am. I took down a Haxil Beast all by myself a couple months ago. Spike just watched and cheered me on. Afterward, he called me a bloody brilliant fighter and then we...uh...celebrated.”

“This isn’t going to be easy,” Giles said, clearly choosing to ignore the end of Xander’s last sentence. “Wolfram and Hart is an ancient—“

The door opened just then, and Xander was grateful because he so didn’t need to hear a lecture on the history of evil law firms right now, and he was already well aware of the potential for disaster. Spike and Angel had told him all about their conflict with the firm, and he knew the conflict had cost them several friends.

Willow walked in, holding a paper bag by the
handles in one hand and balancing a cardboard tray in the other. “Morning, sleepyhead,” she smiled at him.

“Good spell, Will. Thanks.”

She put the bag down, walked over to him, and held out the tray. He smiled happily at the green logo on the cups. “Venti triple espresso mocha,” she chirped at him. “A whole day’s worth of caffeine and sugar in one convenient package. I’m on my third, and I really gotta pee. Here.” She shoved the tray at him and ran off to the bathroom.

One of the cups was empty but the other was full, and he didn’t care that he burned his tongue on the first mouthful. It’d heal soon anyway.

By the time Willow re-emerged, he’d swallowed half his coffee, and he was feeling human again. Well, as human as he ever felt, nowadays.

“You were gone some time,” Giles said, a little accusingly.
“Yeah. I took a detour by Wolfram and Hart, just to see what I could do? But you were right—they’ve warded the building and I couldn’t do anything from the outside. Well, I probably could have just leveled the whole place, but that’s not so much a good thing with Spike still inside, is it?”

“Not so much,” said Xander. “Does this mean you can’t use your magic?” If he sounded worried, it’s because he was. Magic was just about all they had.

Willow’s face was serious. “No, I can use it. This just means we’re gonna have to go inside.”

It looked just like an office building. Smelled like one, too: floor cleaner and electronics and paper and aftershave and perfume and coffee. But something about it felt off, and made the little hairs on Xander’s neck stand up and his skin prickle. Spike was in here somewhere. Suffering.
On top of that, Xander was uncomfortable in the suit he wore. Willow had conjured it somehow, along with the things she and Giles were wearing, and he was pretty sure from the feel of it and the way it hung on him that it was a very expensive outfit indeed. But it was still a suit, and there was still a tie around his neck like a noose, and he wished he was in his usual faded jeans.

But he managed to keep his face neutral as he trailed behind Giles and Willow, across the wide, polished floor of the lobby to the reception desk. The woman sitting there was blonde and pretty, but there was something off about her, too. When she caught sight of Xander her eyes widened and her smile brightened, and he knew she was yet another demon inexplicably drawn to him. “Can I help you?” she asked, glancing momentarily at Giles but then looking around him at Xander again. Willow she ignored completely.

Giles cleared his throat. “Yes. We have an appointment with Mr. Novak.”
She looked surprised. Probably not too many people had meetings with the boss. “Your name, sir?”

“Lord John Hawkridge,” Giles said in his very most British accent. “And do hurry, please. We are running quite late due to your horrid traffic, and we have an another engagement shortly.”

The woman’s eyes had grown even bigger at the title and she spared another appreciative look at Xander before she tapped at her computer. Then she frowned. “Sir, I’m afraid I can’t find any record of an appointment for you today. Are you sure it was with Mr. Novak?”

Giles glowered at her. “Young lady, I am quite certain. But if your firm is unable to keep track of a simple thing like a business engagement, perhaps I ought to take my family’s business elsewhere.”

Xander gave her a look of faux chagrin, as if he was sorry he couldn’t stay any longer, and they turned to leave. “Wait!” she called. “I’m sure it was just an
oversight, I’m very sorry. I’ll just call Mr. Novak’s secretary and let him know ya’ll are on your way up, okay?”

Giles rolled his eyes and looked put upon. He was really good at that. “Very well. But I shall expect better in the future.”

She nodded and spoke quickly into her phone, then turned another bright smile on them. “He’ll be ready to see ya’ll. Fourteenth floor. The elevators are right over there.”

Giles dipped his head magisterially, Xander quirked an eyebrow at the receptionist, who dimpled, and then they made their way to the elevators. They didn’t talk at all on the way up; the whole place might be bugged, for all they knew. Xander could hear all three of their hearts pounding away like the drums in one of the songs Spike listened to.

Novak apparently had the top floor all to himself, because when the doors swished open, they were greeted by another reception desk. Behind was a
double set of mahogany doors, heavy and imposing. They didn’t really match the décor, Xander thought. A man was waiting for them in front of the desk. He was thirtyish and blandly handsome, with a careful haircut and squinting eyes. “Lord Hawkridge?” he said. Xander recognized the voice immediately from last night. “I’m so sorry about the confusion. Mr. Novak will be with you in just a moment. Can I get any of you something while you wait?”

Yeah, how about my vampire, Xander thought, but he said nothing, and Giles shook his head. “No. But do hurry.”

“Of course. Just a moment, please.” They sat in uncomfortable green chairs and the man disappeared behind a much smaller door to their right. Giles was smirking slightly with satisfaction. He’d done his homework before they came, betting that Wolfram and Hart would look up whatever name he gave them. If they did, they’d discover that there really was a Lord Hawkridge, some kind of baron or something, and he owned about half of England. He had a son and daughter in their late
twenties, too, who probably didn’t look anything like Xander and Willow, so the three of them fervently hoped the lawyers didn’t manage to dig up any photos right away.

Willow smiled nervously at Xander, who realized he was jiggling his leg. He stilled it and tried to practice calming breaths like Oz had taught him. It helped, a little. At least he hadn’t yet burst out of the fancy clothes and into a fur coat.

The flunky popped back out. He was still smiling, but Xander could scent the adrenalin running through the man’s body, and he knew they’d been found out. No big surprise there, really. Novak would have to be really stupid not to see through their very transparent ploy. But that was okay—the main point now was to keep playing the game, to see how close they could get before their bluff was called.

“Lord Hawkridge, Mr. Novak will see you now.”

They all stood and followed the man as he opened
the double doors and ushered them in.

It was a very large office with dark, expensive furniture and what was no doubt a sweeping view of the city. But Xander didn’t much appreciate it, because he was too busy staring at the three enormous men, each of whom had a gun in his hand and a frown on his face. To his left, sitting comfortably on the edge of a desk, was a small man with a little potbelly. What little hair he had was gray, but his slightly red face was unlined. His shoes probably cost more than Xander’s first car.

“Well,” he said, his voice surprisingly resonant for his frame. “A visit from nobility. Aren’t we lucky?” He chuckled as if he found himself very amusing. When none of them answered, he smiled easily at them. “So. *This* is the rescue party?”

Xander wanted to rip the bastard’s throat out. He could almost taste the man’s blood, could almost feel skin and muscle giving beneath his jaws. But Willow and Giles were likely to get hurt or killed if he tried, and anyway, it wouldn’t get him his Spike.
Oh, but it would be so satisfying.

Xander made a huge effort and managed to remain in control.

“Bring us the vampire and your former employee, and allow us all to leave peacefully, and you won’t have any problems with us.” Xander was impressed with how calm and authoritarian Giles could make himself sound.

But Novak only laughed. “Problems! That’s funny. Now, why don’t you call your boss and tell him he can stop wasting perfectly good humans, and he should run his own errands.”

“My boss? I don’t know what—“

“Oh, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Maybe he likes his humans to call him something else. Master Angel, maybe?”

Xander let out a snort and everyone’s eyes turned
from Giles to him. “Angel is in no way my boss, and they’ll be snowboarding in hell before I call him ‘master.’ Asshole.”

Novak scooted off the desk and stepped close to them. Most people would have found his demeanor threatening, but Xander was delighted, because everyone was concentrating on him now, and that meant they’d mostly forgotten about Willow, who’d been trying to make herself seem small and assuming. Not a hard task for her really. But Xander heard her heart speed up for a few beats and then slow way down, and, in a voice that didn’t sound at all like herself, she spat out a few words in, he was pretty sure, Sanskrit.

There were quadruple *thunks* as the goons and Novak’s assistant fell to the floor, conscious but paralyzed. Novak scurried backwards, aiming for the other side of his desk, and Xander could have laughed at the look of surprise on his face. Willow said another few words, and Novak collapsed, too, hitting his head on the edge of the desk as he did.
As Giles hurried over to relieve the men of their weapons, Willow pointed at the double doors and then at the room’s two additional doors, each time saying a single word. Xander heard locks snicking into place, and he’d be willing to bet no key was going to work on them right now.

The three of them stood over Novak’s body. His eyes were wide and he was breathing very quickly, as if he’d just run a race. His heart rate was so rapid Xander could barely make out the individual beats. Xander was no cardiologist, but he was pretty sure that Novak was close to a heart attack.

“Listen carefully,” Giles said. “You are going to call and have Spike and Lindsey brought here immediately. You will also have the Stone of Karthos brought up. You will not tell anyone why, or in any way indicate that there is a problem. If you do not follow these instructions, Willow is quite capable of removing all of your skin.”

Novak’s pale blue eyes rolled toward Willow, who smiled sweetly at him and said a single, harsh word.
A strip of flesh about as wide as Xander’s thumb and a little longer peeled off the back of Novak’s right hand, revealing muscles and tendons below. Novak made a horrible, choked noise, a scream that was caught in his paralyzed throat. And Xander did something he’d tried only a few times before: he allowed his face to change just a little bit so that his eye flashed from warm human to wild wolf, and so that his fangs extended from the hint of a muzzle. He couldn’t hold this for more than a few seconds, but it was enough to send Novak completely over the edge into raw panic. His heart actually stuttered and stopped, but Willow said another word and it restarted, still racing and fitful. A large wet spot appeared at the crotch of Novak’s expensive gray pants and that made Xander grin gleefully.

“I’m gonna release you now. But if you try anything funny, I’ll freeze you back up again and poof go your outsides. And I don’t know how well Xander here can control himself around so much fresh meat. Got it, buster?”

Novak couldn’t answer of course, but he made
another sound that could have been interpreted as an affirmative. Xander reminded himself to never, ever cross Willow.

Willow said another couple of words and then evidently Novak could move again, because he twitched and scuttled onto his knees, holding his injured hand against his chest.

“Stand up!” Giles said impatiently.

Novak put his shaky left arm up and placed his hand on top of his desk, using it to haul himself up on unsteady legs.

“Who are you?” he asked hoarsely.

“Spike’s friends,” said Willow, and Xander suppressed an urge to kiss her.

Giles picked up the phone and held it out toward the man. “Call.”

Novak managed to make his voice reasonably
steady as he ordered someone to bring the prisoners and the rock to his office right away. The person on the other end must have questioned the order, but Novak glanced at Willow and Xander and said, “Do it! Now!”

While they waited, Xander wandered over to the other fallen men who were still motionless on the carpet. He kicked gently at the assistant and then less so at one of the other men, who he recognized by scent as being the guy who’d manhandled Spike the day before. None of the men looked angry, just terrified, which made his spine shiver and his skin twitch.

“You won’t get away with this,” Novak said. “Do you have any idea who you’re up against?”

Xander stalked over to him, satisfied when Novak shrank back slightly. “Do you? We beat bigger bads than you before we were out of high school. And that was before you hurt my boyfriend.” On the last word he leaned way into Novak’s personal space and sniffed noisily. “You smell like piss and fear,
Then he ambled away to stand near the door. Giles and Willow were watching him, both looking slightly shocked. It might take a while for them to get used to the werewolf formerly known as doughnut boy.

A single sharp knock sounded on one of the double doors. Willow made a sign and the locks unlatched and the door swung open. Lindsey was standing there, barefoot, his clothing torn and dirty. One eye was bruised shut and dried blood was flaking under his swollen nose. His hands were behind his back and someone pushed him forward hard enough he nearly stumbled. Two men followed him inside, one of them big like the other goons, the other whip-thin and tall. The tall one was carrying a lumpy thing the size of a softball and the color of a ripe plum.

The men froze in astonishment as soon as they took in the scene before them, but before they had a chance to do anything, Willow slammed and locked the door behind them and made them collapse, too. The stone fell from the tall man’s slack hand and
rolled a little across the floor before Willow snatched it up and stuffed it in her purse.

“Xander!” Lindsey said. “What the fuck?” Xander could see now that his wrists were tightly cuffed. They were bloody as well, as if he’d been struggling.

“Where’s Spike?” demanded Xander.

“I dunno. They dragged him off somewhere. I think I heard—“ He stopped abruptly and looked away.

“What?!”

“I think I heard him screaming, man,” Lindsey almost whispered. “Just a little while ago.”

Xander growled and barely heard Giles call his name as he dashed for the door. But before he got there, there was another knock. Xander snarled and skidded to a halt with his hand nearly on the knob.

Again Willow did her magic and the door swung open. There were three men this time. Two of them
were dragging Spike between them. The vampire was naked and battered and, seemingly, unconscious. They stood and gaped, but the third man, a blocky-looking guy in khakis and a polo shirt, was still in the open doorway, and he shouted and started to run away.

There was a lot of noise and confusion then, shouting and swearing and loud thumps. But Xander didn’t really track most of it, because he’d taken off after the running man, who was heading for a door in the corner marked “Stairs.”

The guy was fast, but Xander was faster, and he caught up with him halfway across the room. The man backed against the wall and reached into his jacket pocket. Xander saw the flash of metal and, distantly, heard a small explosion, as he flung himself at his prey.

The man was a good shot. Had Xander been his old self, the bullet that tore through his chest, wreaking bloody havoc on his lung, would almost certainly have killed him. It surely would have slowed him
down. Now, though, it only made him more furious and he allowed his hard-won control to slip away. He roared with pain and rage as his body reshaped itself, much faster than ever before, and, as the man struggled beneath him, Xander’s powerful jaws closed on the man’s throat.

He wasn’t totally consumed by bloodlust. In fact, he was fully aware that later, he was going to feel guiltier about this than he had over any rabbit or deer. But he was willing to live with the guilt, he really was, because it felt so good to feel the man’s flesh give, to taste the hot blood spurting into his mouth, to hear the crunch as he punctured the man’s trachea, and then the desperate wheezing as the dying man fought for breath. Then Xander shook his head, hard, and the man’s neck snapped, and suddenly the man was very, very still.

Xander dropped the dead man from his mouth, turned, and ran back into the office.

He swiveled his head quickly, looking around the room. Two more men were collapsed on the floor.
The human who reeked of urine was pressed into a corner, his hands raised defensively before him. Another human—no, it was the not-quite-human, Lindsey—was crouched awkwardly behind the desk, his hands still bound. There were two more humans there, and Xander almost growled at them, but...ah, they were pack, weren’t they? They were gaping at him, wide-eyed, as they knelt next to....

Oh, no. His alpha.

In a single leap, Xander cleared half the room to land beside Spike’s prone body. Willow and Giles shrank back a little, but he ignored them to sniff and paw at Spike. Spike smelled of his own blood and his pale skin was livid with bruises and welts and cuts. But Xander couldn’t see Spike’s face, which was pressed to the floor, and Xander sank to his belly and whined and snuffled and licked at the back of Spike’s neck.

“Xan,” said a soft voice. “Let us help, okay?”

He whined again, but didn’t otherwise react as
Willow and Giles slowly and carefully turned Spike onto his back. But when he saw the devastation to his alpha’s face and torso and groin, Xander threw back his head and howled. Spike’s face was so bloody and swollen as to be unrecognizable, and his chest and belly and genitals were mottled with burns and deep gouges.

On the other side of Spike, Giles hissed at him. “Enough! You’ll have every person in this blasted place charging up here now!”

Xander managed to stop howling, then, and instead licked at Spike’s face, hoping for some kind of response. Instead, though, Willow gasped and touched his side and said, “Goddess! You’re hurt!”

Xander shot her a quick look of impatience. What difference did it make if he was shot? His alpha was…. With some difficulty, he smothered another howl.

“We ought to leave. Now,” Giles said urgently.
Willow frowned. “But Spike. How—“

“I can carry him, if you take these things off me.” Lindsey had come out from behind the desk and was standing near them. Giles and Willow looked at him doubtfully, but Xander knew Lindsey was strong enough, and he didn’t sense any deception at the moment. He rose to his feet and trotted the few steps to Lindsey who, to his credit, held his ground. He swallowed loudly, though. But Xander only nosed at his manacles.

That must have been enough for Willow, because she stood, too, and came up next to Lindsey. She touched the metal around his wrists and murmured something. Xander sneezed from the scent of magic so close, but the cuffs opened and fell to the floor. Lindsey groaned as he brought his arms forward and then stood, twisting his shoulders and gingerly massaging his biceps.

“You’re not gonna bite me when I pick him up now, will you?”
Xander narrowed his eyes and huffed out a sort of bark. Lindsey shrugged then, but he walked to Spike and, as Xander watched closely, scooped the vampire gently into his arms. Giles shrugged off his suit jacket and draped it over Spike’s damaged figure.

A moment later, Giles pushed Novak toward the door. Giles had a gun in one hand, undoubtedly taken from one of the paralyzed goons, and he kept it pointed at the center of the lawyer’s back. Willow must have put the cuffs on Novak, and the man looked deeply unhappy. “Your buddies here will be able to move again in a couple of hours.” Willow said. “You’re going to walk nicely with us and tell everyone to keep away.” She was doing pretty well, considering this was probably the first time she’d taken a hostage.

Novak and Giles led the odd parade out of the office and into the reception area. Xander paddled alongside Lindsey, keeping an anxious eye on Spike. Everybody swung their heads to look at Xander when they saw what was left of the man he’d killed.
The shredded remains of Xander’s fancy clothing lay beside the corpse. But they all kept on walking, and then waited for the elevator.

They stood silently as the elevator descended. A muzak version of “Iron Man” was playing. Willow had curled her fingers in the fur between Xander’s shoulders, and it was surprisingly comforting to him, although not as much as Spike’s touch, of course.

On the fifth floor, the elevator stopped and the doors slid open. A woman and a man, both in suits, were deep in conversation, and they started to step inside. But when they caught sight of the car’s occupants, their mouths fell open and the elevator closed again in their faces.

It didn’t surprise Xander to discover a phalanx of security guards waiting for them on the ground floor, weapons drawn. He snarled at them. Giles prodded Novak sharply as they exited the elevator and, in a low voice, said, “Tell them to drop their guns and stay back.”
In a slightly wavering voice, Novak called out, “Get back! Place your guns on the floor!”

The guards looked at each other uncertainly and then, slowly, placed the weapons down. As Xander’s party walked slowly toward the door, the guards kept many paces away from them. Around the lobby, a scattering of other people stood and gaped. Xander saw the girl at the reception desk, frozen with her hand on the telephone and her mouth in a wide, crimson “O.”

Nobody tried to stop them as they proceeded across the wide, shining floor and then through the door that led to the parking garage. And there was their rented SUV, because Willow, as wise as ever, had foreseen that they’d need something roomy. Willow climbed into the driver’s seat and Giles pushed Novak into the seat beside her. Giles himself sat in the next row, right behind their hostage, so he could nestle the handgun against the back of the man’s skull.
Meanwhile, with a little difficulty Lindsey slid in beside Giles, still cradling Spike in his lap. Giles yanked a blanket out of the pocket behind Novak’s seat and completely covered Spike with it. Xander had shoved it there before they left, mindful of the need to protect Spike from the sun if their rescue was successful. Xander wished he could hold Spike, but he had no lap right now, so instead he hopped into the back of the vehicle and hung his head over Lindsey’s shoulder. “You’re droolin’ on me, dude,” Lindsey grumbled as Willow piloted them out of the garage.

Spike showed no signs of life, but at least he wasn’t dust.

As Willow drove around, turning here and there seemingly at random, Novak was panting quietly. Finally, he said, “What are you going to do to me?”

“Perhaps we shall let Xander have you,” Giles said coldly. Xander remembered a story or two he’d heard about Giles in his younger days, and suddenly found the idea of Ripper quite believable. But he
growled his agreement and saw Novak shiver.

Still, Novak wasn’t a complete coward. “Whatever you do, the firm will find you. You’re going to regret this day very much.”

It was Lindsey who answered him. “You, too. If they let you live, the senior partners are gonna be really pissed at you. I know what they do to employees who tick them off, man. You’re better off getting eaten by a werewolf.”

Just then, the car hit a bump and Xander yelped. Suddenly, his gunshot wound was hurting, and he realized he was short of breath, too.

“Sorry!” Willow called from the front. “Are you okay, Xan?”

He yipped a small reply.

Xander was ready to start pacing in the small confines of the back of the SUV when Willow finally pulled it to a stop. They were on a residential street
in some bland suburb, where a kid’s pink bike lay on its side on a neat lawn, and, next door, a beige house was flying a large US flag. Willow turned to Novak.

“We’re not gonna feed you to Xan ‘cause you’d probably give him indigestion. *Poostoy razeem.*” She waved her hand and made a sign with her fingers, and Novak slumped in his seat. Then she took off her seatbelt, leaned across him, and opened his door. She nodded at Giles, who pushed him out. Xander heard the small thunk as Novak hit the blacktop. Then Willow slammed the door shut, rebuckled, and drove away.

With a look of distaste, Giles removed the shells from the gun and shoved the weapon under his seat.

“What’d you do to him?” Lindsey asked.

“Just a little spell. I’ve wiped his memories completely clean—he won’t remember even his own name.” She sounded very satisfied with
herself, Xander thought.

Lindsey whistled. “You can do that? Who are you people?”

“I think that explanations can wait,” Giles said.

“Where we goin’?”

“Back to your hotel.”

“But that’s right near Wolfram and Hart! They’ll find us—”

“No they won’t,” Willow said firmly. “Wards. They’re handy, you know.”

“Okay, but the firm has magic of its own, and they’re gonna regroup pretty quickly, and—”

“We’re as anxious to get out of here as you are,” Giles interrupted. “Right now we have a vampire and a werewolf to get indoors and tended to.”
From his perch in the back, Xander huffed his agreement.

Part Eight

In the short time they’d been together, Xander had had a dismaying amount of practice in patching Spike up. He’d become really good at it, so good that he was fully aware that Spike sometimes exaggerated the extent of his injuries, just so Xander would fuss over him. But he surely wasn’t exaggerating now, and Xander had never had to doctor Spike while exhausted from shifting, and with a nasty hole perforating his chest and right lung. Or with Willow hovering next to him, asking him every three seconds if he was all right.

Even getting to their room had been a challenge. The hotel was pet-friendly, and maybe the clerk wouldn’t notice that the large, shaggy beast wasn’t quite a dog. But she’d surely notice that his chest was matted with blood. And she’d also notice that Lindsey was looking fairly banged up, and that he
was carrying Spike, who was looking pretty much like a brutalized corpse. A naked, brutalized corpse. To top it all off, she might also be aware that Giles and Willow weren’t guests at the hotel.

Willow had tried to do a small glamour to cover up their odd situation. But apparently all the magics she’d already worked that day had drained her, and she couldn’t quite manage. That meant she wouldn’t be able to destroy the Stone right away, either. She and Giles had a quick conference in the car, aware that Xander was growing increasingly frantic over not being able to help Spike, and they formulated a plan.

First, Willow and Giles entered the hotel, pretending to be in the middle of a big argument. When a few minutes had passed, Lindsey followed them in, still carrying the blanket-draped Spike, Xander beside him. Inside, Willow stood in front of the desk, crying loudly and theatrically about a wedding dress in a lost suitcase, while Giles stood next to her, shouting British curses into his cell phone at a nonexistent airline employee. The clerk
and concierge huddled desperately behind the counter, alternately looking at a computer screen and trying to console their upset customers. Xander used Lindsey’s legs to shield the humans’ view of him a little, as he and Lindsey slunk to the elevator as quickly as they could without drawing attention to themselves.

Apparently, their ploy had worked. Nobody had called after them and no hotel employees or police appeared at their door. Giles and Willow had even managed to get the suite next to theirs.

Xander had crept off to the bathroom to change back to human. He was grateful that Willow had some experience with weres, because she didn’t try to intrude as he went through the painful process. As soon as he could stand again he threw on some jeans and went back out to tend to Spike. But Willow had cried out when she saw the gunshot wound, and Xander had had to endure several moments of inspection from Willow and Giles before they bandaged him up and let him, at long last, go to Spike.
Spike had been laid out on the bed. Somebody had even pulled back the comforter so he was on the clean, white sheets. The parts of him that weren’t red or purple were almost as pale as the bedding.

With practiced hands, Xander gave Spike a quick towel bath so he could remove the crusted blood and grime and get a truer idea of the extent of Spike’s injuries. This wasn’t the worst he had ever seen his lover hurt—at least he wasn’t treated this time to peeks at Spike’s unvital organs—but it was still pretty bad. So Xander reached into his handy-dandy first aid kit, which Giles had fetched while Xander was changing, and took out the knife Danny Vega gave him. He was about to cut his wrist when Willow caught his wrist.

“What do you think you’re doing, mister?” she demanded.

“Feeding Spike.”

“Uh-uh. You’ve already lost plenty of blood.”
“He needs human, Will.” Xander sighed. “Look, I have the name of a place where we can get some. Maybe you or Giles could go. But in the meantime, I’m not going to let him just lie there like that.”

“Give him some of mine.” Everybody swung their heads to look at Lindsey in surprise. He was seated at the little table, looking tired and worn. “I guess I’m still edible,” he said.

Willow took the knife from Xander and brought it over to Lindsey, grabbing a glass tumbler off the minifridge as she went. “I’ll go pick up more, okay?” she said, as Lindsey sliced the soft skin of his wrist and then held his dripping forearm over the cup.

Xander caught himself licking his lips. “Uh, could you maybe stop at a grocery store too, Will? And get me a couple pounds of beef? I’m kind of...hungry.”

To his surprise, she didn’t look grossed out. She simply smiled at him. “Sure, Xan. Anything else?”
“Beer, please. Maybe a lot.”

“Christ, yeah,” Lindsey said, and Xander might have been annoyed, but it was hard to be really angry at a guy when he was bleeding into a glass for your boyfriend.

Xander gave her the name of the demon bar and she looked up the address on her phone before heading out. By then, the cup was full of Lindsey’s blood and Xander carefully tipped the thick liquid into Spike’s mouth. Spike didn’t really wake up, but he did swallow the stuff, so that was good.

Xander was considering putting his wrist to Spike’s mouth anyway when Giles tapped lightly on his shoulder. Xander turned to see Giles holding out another full cup of blood. A bandage was tied clumsily around his other hand.

“Giles!” Xander exclaimed.

Giles smiled wryly at him. “Yes, well, I never
expected I’d be donating to Spike either. But I know how important he is to you, and….” His voice died off and he looked away.

Xander swallowed the lump in his throat, telling himself his eye was only watering because he was tired. “Thanks,” he said gruffly, taking the glass. This time, Spike’s eyelids fluttered a little as he drank, and Xander crooned softly at him, not caring that Giles and Lindsey were there to hear. “Hey, Big Bad, you’re safe. Everything’s fine now. I’m here and the cavalry’s arrived and it’s all cool. Wait’ll I tell you who you’re eating now!”

Spike didn’t wake up, but Xander thought his body looked more relaxed, more at peace. He thought some of the swelling on Spike’s face was going down, too. He dropped a tiny kiss on Spike’s forehead and tucked the sheets around him. No point bandaging him up. Some of his wounds were deep, but none were very big, and he wasn’t bleeding any more. With a good feed and some rest, Xander knew he’d heal pretty quickly.
Giles was still standing behind him. “Xander,” he said quietly. “You should sleep as well.”

But Xander shook his head. “Not until Willow’s back. I want to get more blood in him, and I have to eat, too.” Giles frowned but didn’t argue. “Look, G-Man. You’ve gotta be pretty wiped. Go catch some winks, okay?”

Giles glanced quickly in Lindsey’s direction. “You’ll be all right?”

“Yeah. Go.”

Giles nodded briefly, gave Lindsey a slight glare, and left.

A moment later, Lindsey stood. “Hey, I’m gonna go clean up, okay? Maybe take a crack at your first aid kit?”

Xander looked at him and actually felt a little guilty. Lindsey wasn’t in such great shape, either, and he’d carried Spike and bled for him, and nobody had
bothered to fix him up at all. “Help yourself,” Xander said.

Then Xander was alone in the room with his vampire, and he stroked the messy curls out of Spike’s face and concentrated on not collapsing beside him.

By the time Lindsey was out of the bathroom, clean and in slightly better condition, Willow was knocking at the door. Xander hauled himself to his feet to let her in, and she entered with her arms full of paper bags.

“I’ve got a couple gallons of blood here. That’ll be enough, right? You should’ve seen this bar, Xan—demon cowboy wannabes! And there’s some steaks and a 12-pack of beer—Heineken’s okay, right? You used to drink Heineken—and a couple other things ‘cause I figured Lindsey probably wants to eat, too, and I figured he’s mostly a regular food kind of guy.”

Xander smiled at Willow. He missed listening to her.
“Thanks, Will.”

She frowned, though. “Do you need to cook the meat somehow? Or are you just gonna eat it raw? ‘Cause no offense, but eww.”

“Yeah, even Spike thinks the whole raw meat thing’s kind of yuck. Why don’t you go get some sleep, and then you won’t have to watch me eat it.”

She looked doubtful.

“I’ll be fine, Will. And you need to recharge your battery so you can break that goddamn rock, right? Angel’s still…. It’s not pretty, what that thing does.”

“It really ain’t,” Lindsey chimed in. He was eyeing the bags hungrily. Wolfram and Hart probably hadn’t had his beating catered.

Eventually, Xander managed to shoo her out the door. He tore into the groceries then, and, as Lindsey munched on a sandwich and watched him, looking impressed, Xander downed four or five
really good Porterhouses. Well, they were in Texas now, weren’t they? When the meat was gone he licked his fingers clean and washed it all down with a beer he emptied in one giant swig. Nobody ever said werewolves had good manners, he thought.

His raging hunger was satisfied but his body ached and he longed to touch Spike. So he poured a couple pints of blood into his vampire, shucked his own pants, and crawled into bed beside him. Lindsey yawned loudly and collapsed on the couch without bothering to pull out the bed. Xander gently spooned himself against Spike. His last thought before he fell asleep was a fervent hope that Willow’s wards held.

“Pet?” A cold, sharp finger poked at his shoulder. “Pet? Wha’?”

Xander pried his eye opened to find a pair of bleary blue ones inches away, blinking at him.
“Morning,” Xander said, smiling.

“What happened?”

Xander leaned his head forward until he was almost touching Spike’s. “Pulled your carcass out of trouble. Again.” He inhaled deeply, loving the scent of Spike.

Spike’s gaze sharpened a little and he stirred under the sheet. “You’re hurt? Smell your blood.”

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Xander chuckled.

“You’re a white knight, not a black one, love. What’s hurt?” Spike tried to struggle upright but failed, only falling back against the pillows with a groan of frustration.

“It’s no big deal. I’ll get you some blood and when you’re feeling better you can kiss it better, okay?”

“Mmm,” Spike said, looking skeptical.
Just then, a gravelly voice across the room complained, “Don’t you two ever give it a rest?”

Spike looked slightly startled. “You rescued that wanker, too?”

“Yeah. I mean, he’s more or less on our side at the moment. You don’t leave your own behind, you know?”

“Not even when they’re evil gits?”

“Not even then.”

Lindsey laughed softly.

But then a shadow passed across Spike’s face. “Ah, the Stone—“

“Got that too,” Xander said smugly.

“Got that—Pet, how’d you manage?”

“I brought in some backup.” To Spike’s puzzled look,
he said, “Willow and Giles. They’re in the next room.”

Spike’s split and puffy lips lifted in a small smile.

~*~*~*~*~

When Willow and Giles came in, both looking slightly rumpled in the clothing they’d teleported in, Xander had showered and dressed and fed Spike and himself. Lindsey was dressed, too, and, despite the pre-noon hour, holding a cold bottle of beer against his blackened eye.

There were a few minutes of slightly awkward greetings, and then everyone spent some time filling in the others on what had happened. When Willow let it slip that Xander had been shot, Spike looked at him furiously. “Thought you said it was nothing!”

“It is. Forget it. It’ll heal.” They might have had a fight then, but Willow derailed it by going on with
the tale of the rescue. Nobody mentioned the man Xander had killed. He could deal with that little detail later, when they didn’t have an audience.

Spike and Lindsey’s story was a short one. They’d been taken up to Novak’s office and Novak had immediately had his goons tackle Lindsey and chain him up. Spike had broken his bonds and tried to escape, but Novak’s men had been ready for him with a dart gun that conked him right out. They’d both been beaten and dragged into holding cells in the basement. And then apparently the torturer—Morris, Xander remembered—they’d called in for Spike had arrived early. He’d wanted to know about Angel, about what his weaknesses were and how the firm could get at him. Spike hadn’t told him a thing. “Stood up to better than those tossers,” Spike muttered. “Stood up to a bloody god and the First Evil. Can handle a few bloody solicitors.”

Xander kissed Spike’s cheek then, because he was upset Spike had been tortured, and because he wanted to acknowledge Spike’s bravery. And because he liked to kiss him. Spike’s glare softened
a little.

Xander explained to Lindsey who Willow and Giles were, and Willow blushed when Xander said she was his oldest friend and an uberpowerful witch. Xander stumbled a little when he tried to explain what Giles was to him. Not his Watcher. Surely not just his former high school librarian. Finally, Xander said, “G-Man here is...closer to a father to me than Tony Harris ever was.”

Giles took off his glasses and wiped them furiously, but Xander caught the pleased grin that played across his face.

Spike resettled himself against the pile of pillows Xander had propped him on. With the additional blood he was looking improved already, and he could sit comfortably on the bed with Xander’s arm around his shoulder.

“Story-time’s been nice and all, but the pouf’s still hexed. You up for sorting that now, Red?”
Willow nodded eagerly and pulled the Stone from her purse. Xander didn’t like the look of it—it somehow managed to appear almost alive. It smelled of magic, too, and, unlike Willow, not in a good way.

“Pet,” Spike said softly, lightly bumping heads with him, and Xander realized with some chagrin that he was growling, low and deep, and everyone was staring at him.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Okay,” Willow said with slightly false brightness. “It’s pretty easy to break, actually, but, um, it could be a little dangerous for anyone with magics in them.”

“That’s everyone here but the Watcher,” Spike said.

“Which is why I shall take it next door and dispose of it,” Giles said. “If you please, Willow.” Willow handed it over and Giles left. The rest of them waited silently, looking at one another nervously.
Even Lindsey was uneasy.

A muffled *boom* came from the adjoining room, and everyone but Spike leapt to their feet. They stood there a moment uncertainly until someone rapped at their door. Xander opened it and was immensely relieved to discover Giles standing there. His clothes and face were scorched, his hair was standing on end, and his glasses were cracked and askew, but he appeared unharmed.

He came into the room and collapsed heavily on the sofa. “Well, that’s taken care of,” he said.

“Xan,” Spike said. “Would you ring LA? Don’t quite have the energy myself.” Xander knew Spike must be really gone to admit that. He’d call and then shoo everyone out so Spike could rest. He could crash, too. His chest hurt.

His phone was on the nightstand next to him, and he picked it up and had it dial the Hyperion. The person that answered was female, and, from the sound of it, furious.
“What the bloody hell are you up to? Why haven’t you rung?”

“Sorry, Kyna. We’ve had...a few adventures. How’s Angel?”

“Had a bloody fit, didn’t he? And now he’s back to himself but won’t wake.”

Xander smiled widely, and saw Spike sag in relief. “He’ll be his usual bastard self soon, I promise.”

“Good.” The tone was still a little petulant, but Xander thought she sounded reassured, too. “He’s too heavy to keep carrying about.”

Xander snorted out a laugh, and so did Spike, whose keen hearing had picked up the comment. “Okay, so I think we’re gonna get the hell out of here as soon as we’re up to a drive.” He stretched experimentally, feeling the sharp twinge of torn muscle. But he knew he’d be better pretty soon, and he really didn’t want to stay in Dallas a minute
longer than necessary. “Maybe by tomorrow night, okay?”

There was a brief pause on the other end. “If Angel’s going to be mended....”

“You want to head back as soon as he’s on his feet again. Got it. That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Another pause, this time slightly longer. “Erm, perhaps I should stay until you arrive. Just to make sure.”

Spike cocked an eyebrow at Xander, who shrugged. He’d have thought she’d be thrilled to fly home right away. But Xander had long since given up trying to understand women in general, and slayers in particular. “Um, okay, sure. We’ll call you from the road, then, give you an ETA.”

“Excellent.” Her voice was sharp and brisk again. “Good-bye.”

Willow and Giles looked pleased when Xander told
them of Angel’s recovery. But Lindsey was frowning. “Look, guys,” he said. “You’re pretty impressive. But you can’t just scoot back to LA and think Wolfram and Hart’s gonna forget about you. After this stunt those fuckers are gonna be really pissed off at you, and they ain’t gonna leave you alone just because you’re in California.”

They all looked at each other, but it was Xander who said it. “I know.”

“What are you gonna do? You can’t hide, you know. They’ll find you. They’ll—“

“Not going to sodding hide.” Spike’s voice was thin and raspy, but resolute.

Lindsey looked puzzled. “So then?”

Even though Spike had his human face on, his smile was fully demonic and feral. “We’ll fight.”

~*~*~*~*~
Xander never got sick anymore, but his injury made his skin feel a little hot and feverish. So it was wonderful when everybody else left the room—even Lindsey, who’d struck up a conversation with Giles about something or other—and Xander was able to strip again and cuddle up again next to his nice, cool vampire. They gingerly wrapped their arms around each other and Spike murmured sleepily into Xander’s neck, “Berk.”

“Yeah? Why am I berkish now?”

“Could have got yourself killed, pet.”

“As if that’s ever stopped me before. Anyway, what was I supposed to do? Leave you there?”

“They’d have dusted me soon enough. Then you’d have been free of me.”

“Free of you? Yeah, sure. I’m just counting the days until I’m rid of you so I can take up a torrid affair with the real love of my life.”
“Who’s that, love?” Spike sounded half asleep.

“Why, Angel, of course!”

Spike poked him, hard, fortunately on the uninjured side of his ribs. “Hey! Wounded hero here!”

“Pfft. I’d slap your arse if I could reach it.”

“Save that thought for when we’re less full of holes, okay?”

Spike suckled at Xander’s neck after that, and Xander thought he’d fallen asleep. But then he stopped and, in a quiet, serious tone, said, “You could, you know.”

“Could what?”

“Be free of me. If you wanted. You don’t have to....”

Suddenly Xander couldn’t breathe right, not even through his unpunctured lung. “Spike? Do you want
me to...to go?”

Spike levered himself up on his elbow so he could look into Xander’s face, an effort that probably hurt. His eyes were bright in the dark room. “No! Christ, no. It’s only...you got stuck with me, didn’t you? You were only then finding yourself. Didn’t really have a go at....”

“At what? Sowing my wild oats? I’ve sowed all the oats I want, Spike. More than. I’m a big boy now and I know what I want, and getting stuck with an emotionally volatile vamp is the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Yeah?” Spike’s face still showed the insecurity he tried so hard to hide from the world. But he couldn’t fool Xander, not anymore.

“Yeah.”

Spike collapsed against Xander, practically burrowing into his body. “Me too,” he whispered into Xander’s skin.
It took two days, actually, but then Spike was up and walking, only a little wobbly, and the fiery pain in Xander’s chest had receded to a dull ache. Willow and Giles packed up the things they’d managed to accumulate in Dallas and then caught an actual airplane bound for Atlanta, with a connection there to Heathrow. Apparently teleporting was reserved for unlife-threatening emergencies. Of course, before they left there were hugs and admonitions—“Do be careful, Xander”—and promises to help figure out what to do about Wolfram and Hart.

Angel called and actually almost thanked them for destroying the Stone, which was a surprise for them both. He seemed anxious for them to get back, too, a feeling shared by Spike and Xander and even Lindsey.

As soon as it was dark they chucked their stuff into bags and checked out of the hotel. Spike kept his
arm slung around Xander’s waist as they walked to the van. A bystander would probably have assumed it was just out of affection, rather than the need for support.

Xander helped make Spike comfortable in the back and then climbed into the driver’s seat to take the first shift. Lindsey sat in the passenger seat and helped steer them out of the city, and then leaned his head against the window and watched the freeway roll by. Xander thought his passengers were both asleep, and drove in silence until he stopped somewhere outside Abilene to refill the tank. He bought himself an enormous cup of bad coffee, too, then got back in the van and continued heading west.

A few miles later, Lindsey startled him slightly by speaking in a voice barely more than a whisper. “You folks watch out for each other.”

“Yeah, I guess we do.”

No sound for a while except the hiss of the tires and
the thrum of the engine.

And then, in a tiny voice that reminded Xander absurdly of his cousin Derek when Derek was five or six, Lindsey said, “Why?”

Xander shrugged. “’Cause we love each other, I guess.”

Lindsey snorted dismissively, but Xander caught his reflection in the window glass, and he looked a little wistful.

“Wouldn’t you and Lamont—“

“Risk our lives for each other? Nah. I mean, he’s the only one in my family I could half-stand, but he wouldn’t put his neck on the line for me.”

Xander had no real response to that. “Too bad, man.”

“Ahh, my family’s all a bunch of bastards anyway.”
“You think that gives you an excuse for being an even bigger asshole? I mean, Tony and Jessica Harris were no prizes either, believe me, but you don’t see me hanging out with evil demon lawyer guys.”

“I didn’t know...at first, I didn’t know what they were. I thought I was just gettin’ a lucky break.”

“Nuh-uh. You’re a smart guy. You knew.” Xander wasn’t even sure why he was pursuing this conversation. He didn’t want to hear any of the man’s excuses. Well, it passed the time, anyway. They had a lot of miles still ahead of them. “Besides, what about the part where you tried to get Spike dusted, and got him hexed instead? And the torture part, with Angel and Spike both? Can’t blame Wolfram and Hart for that.”

“The son of a bitch had me shot! Didn’t even bother to do it himself.” Lindsey was louder now. Xander hoped he didn’t wake Spike up.

“Yeah, well, newsflash: Angel’s a dick. Still no
excuse. And I know how you played Spike, long before he did you any harm.” Just thinking about it now made him angry, and he was too keyed up still to maintain his usual control over the wolf. So he clicked on the radio to a station playing bad country music and started singing along.

Eventually Lindsey really did fall asleep, or did a pretty convincing imitation of it, anyhow, complete with light snoring. Xander drove for mile after empty mile, thinking of nothing but how badly he wanted to get home—and the Hyperion really did feel like home, now—and get himself and his vampire all better so they could exhaust each other in pleasant ways. He considered some of those pleasant ways, some old favorites, some new ones he’d like to give a shot, until that coffee was doing nothing to keep him awake but plenty to stretch his bladder. They were nudging up to the Mexican borders then—both New and old—and dawn had begun to paint the sky a watery orange.

He pulled into a Shell station and Lindsey startled awake when he cut the engine. From the back of
the van, Spike chimed in, too. “Pet?”

“Just a pit stop. Lindsey, you ready for a turn?”

Lindsey yawned and stretched. “Sure. Just let me take a leak and grab somethin’ to eat.”

It didn’t take long to get back on the road, this time with Lindsey behind the wheel. Xander crawled under the blankets with Spike, who wrapped himself around Xander with a contented sigh. “How you holding up?” Xander asked.

“Right as rain. Should be all mended in a few days. You?”

“Tired is all.”

“Your chest?”

“Kinda sore. No big deal.”

When Spike spoke next, his voice was uncharacteristically hesitant. “Xan?”
“Hmm?” Xander considered chucking off his shirt and jeans but decided it was too much effort.

“Erm, Red and I had a bit of a chat.”

“When?”

“Yesterday. When you were in the shower.”

“About what?” Xander was pretty sure he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“She told me you killed a bloke.” Oh. That. Xander pressed his eyes closed and said nothing.

“Your first, innit?”

“First human, yeah.”

“How do you feel about that, love?”

“What are you now, a demon shrink?”
Spike tweaked Xander’s earlobe. “Have to look out for you, don’t I? You’re still a white hat, and I want to make sure—”

“I’m fine, Spike. Really. The fuckers hurt you. They—” And then, much to his surprise and complete mortification, Xander began to cry.

Spike held him tight and combed fingers through Xander’s unruly hair and made small soothing noises. “’S all right, pet. You did what you had to.”

“I don’t give a damn about that shithead,” Xander sobbed. “I hope he’s twisting in hell. Gods, they hurt you, Spike! They hurt you and they just about dusted you and if Willow and Giles hadn’t—”

“Shh, pet. Old Spike’s been through a lot worse than that. Hell, that wanker Angelus could outdo that job on a day when he was in a good mood. ‘M fine now, yeah? Shh.”

Xander bawled a while longer and Spike comforted him, not even caring that Xander was getting tears
and snot all over his shirt. When the blubbering finally died out Spike took his shirt off and used it to wipe Xander’s face clean, and then peppered his nose and cheeks and lips with tiny kisses. Xander sniffled and buried his face in the crook of Spike’s neck.

Before he fell asleep, though, Spike had another question for him. “Xan? Which one did you snuff?”

“Um....” Xander thought for a moment. “He was kind of a big guy, in a green polo shirt, and—”

“Did it feel good when you bit him?”

“Yeah. It...it felt really good, Spike.”

“Good,” Spike said in a satisfied tone. “The bloke in green was Morris, the one who did most of the work on me.”

In the dark, snuggled against his vampire, Xander smiled.
Part Nine

“What the hell happened?”

Angel looked fine, looming big as usual, his hair gelled upright again, his handsome, heavy brow set in a frown. And looking fine was more than you could say for the group just back from Dallas. Spike had been able to limp into the Hyperion on his own steam, but now he slumped, looking frail and worn out. Xander wasn’t much better. His gunshot wound had started to itch maddeningly somewhere around Phoenix. He knew that was a good sign—it meant he was healing—but it drove him crazy, and he couldn’t stand the feel of his shirt on his skin. So he stood in the lobby bare-chested and bandaged, with his face stubbly and his eye dry and bloodshot. Even Lindsey looked rough. The swelling had gone down on his nose, but he still sported a pretty spectacular shiner.

“We ran into a little trouble,” Xander said.
“Why am I not surprised?”

Xander could have pointed out that they’d been there saving Angel’s ass, and that the whole stupid thing had been Angel’s idea to begin with, but he didn’t have the energy. Even Spike didn’t take the bait, but instead sagged against Xander.

Kyna, though, whacked Angel on the side of the head. Hard, judging by the way he flinched. “Can’t you see they’re done in? Let them have a rest.”

And to Xander’s surprise, Angel only nodded a little sheepishly. “Fine. But we’ll talk later,” the big vampire said. He walked over, then, and grabbed Lindsey’s arm. “C’mon.” Lindsey didn’t resist at all, but just trudged wearily toward the basement door.

“Wait!” Xander said, struck with a pang of guilt. He remembered what Lindsey’s living conditions had been like for the past year. “Let him keep his clothing and his voice, okay? He was...he was okay on the trip. Let him at least talk to his brother for a while.”
Angel scowled but didn’t argue with him. He led Lindsey away.

Xander turned his head and kissed the side of Spike’s head. “Gonna be able to make it up the stairs all right? ‘Cause I’m not sure if I can carry you this time.”

“I can,” Kyna said. She smiled at Spike. “You’re a wee thing compared to your grandsire.”

Spike looked slightly indignant for a moment, and then he chuckled. “Nah, I can manage, Slayer. Why don’t you see if Captain Fat Arse needs help with the McDonalds?”

By the final flight of stairs, Xander practically was carrying Spike, but they managed to make it at last to their own room. It looked wonderful. Xander helped Spike to the bed, and then pulled off Spike’s boots and jeans, and lifted his vampire’s t-shirt over his head, so that Spike was left bare and beautiful, despite the fading marks on his body. Then Xander
stripped off his own shoes and socks and pants and boxers. He looked longingly at the bathroom for a moment—a bath or shower would feel really wonderful—but decided he was too beat. So he climbed into bed beside Spike.

Spike immediately scooted toward him and sleepily suckled on Xander’s neck. Xander fell asleep like that, thinking how good it felt to be home.

~*~*~*~*~

The hotel made a lot of noises. It groaned and creaked like an old man. There were rustlings in the walls where mice crept, and in the attic where pigeons roosted. Pipes clattered. Sometimes, somewhere downstairs a door slammed.

Xander liked the noises. They were comforting, familiar. As was the feel of the vampire against him, limp and not breathing, still deeply asleep. Sometimes, Spike had dreams that made him flail and cry out, and Xander’d never quite had the
courage to ask what they were about. Now, in any case, Spike was silent and still. Sleeping like the dead.

Soon enough, Xander knew he’d have to get up. His bladder was starting to get insistent and his arm was asleep under Spike’s weight. But just now it was nice to spend a few minutes imagining them in a safe, warm cocoon where evil lawyers would never find them, where nothing bad would ever happen to them again.

He drifted pleasantly like that a little while, and was just deciding he really did need to get up and take a leak, when he felt Spike’s chest start moving against him, and little puffs of air eddied across his skin.

“Xan,” said Spike.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Hungry?”

“Starved. But I need a shower first.”
“How about a bath? For two?” Spike yawned.

Xander kissed his head. “Even better. If you’d just move your dead weight off of me, oh light of my life, I’ll go get it ready.”

“’Kay” Spike said lazily, then slowly rolled off of him.

Xander winced a little and stretched, feeling the circulation return to his extremity. He meandered into the bathroom, used the toilet, and started the water in the tub. Then he pulled and tugged the bandages off, and was pleased to see only a small, puffy scar about two inches under his right nipple. He turned and looked over his shoulder. There was a slightly larger red mark halfway down his back. He wondered what would have happened if it had hit his spine—could werewolves regenerate nerve cells?—and then shivered slightly and decided he was better off not thinking about it.

Spike had dozed off again, so Xander woke him with a light kiss on the bridge of his nose, and then
another on his pointy chin. “Thy bath awaits, master,” he said with a bow.

Spike sat up and yawned hugely. “Could get used to you calling me that.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re already alpha. It’s not fair. I should get to be master.”

Spike used Xander’s outstretched hand to lever himself to his feet. “Not proper for a vampire to call a human master now, is it?”

“Oh, but I’m not really human, now, am I?” Spike’s injuries didn’t look any worse than Xander’s own now, not with all the rest he’d had and all the blood Xander had poured down his throat. But still, Xander slipped his arm around Spike’s waist and they walked slowly together toward the bathroom. He felt languid, like he was under water already. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

He lowered himself into the tubful of steaming water, then Spike climbed in too, settling himself
between Xander’s legs with his back against Xander’s chest. Xander leaned his head back against the cool edge of the tub and closed his eye. He clasped his hands around Spike’s belly and Spike rested his own arms atop Xander’s. They were quiet a while.

“I would, you know,” Spike finally said.

“Would what?”

“Call you master.”

“Hmm. Would you be naked except for my collar when you did?”

“Whatever pleases my master.”

Xander raised his head so he could nuzzle against the side of Spike’s neck, just under his ear. Gods, he loved to bury his nose in Spike’s hair, against his soft skin. Spike’s scent was like a drug to him.

Spike needed it just as much, because he made a
throaty sort of mewling sound that went straight to Xander’s groin, making his cock harden and his balls throb. “You up for this, sweetheart?” he asked, and, when his wandering hands discovered that Spike was just as aroused, he laughed. “Yeah, you’re up, all right.”

Spike did an interesting little wiggle against him and Xander gasped. Then Xander wrapped his palm around Spike’s cock, a little gingerly, remembering how bruised and swollen it had been a few days ago.

“Not made of sodding china, pet.” Spike thrust up into his hand. “Don’t have to be so careful.”

“You’re not sore anymore?”

Spike rumbled and arched up again. The taut globes of his ass dragged very nicely along Xander’s trapped erection. “Not sore. More, love!”

Xander obediently tightened his grip and was rewarded with another loud groan. While his right
hand stroked firmly, he spider-walked his left up Spike’s stomach and to his chest, then rubbed the hardened nub of a nipple with his thumb. “Your hands feel so good,” Spike panted. “Big. Hot. Rough.” Xander’s hands were calloused from his carpentry, while Spike’s were perpetually as smooth as they were when he died. Poet’s hands, Xander sometimes teased him lightly. Right now those long, strong digits were kneading at Xander’s thigh, like an enormous cat.

“Want to take this to the bed, Spike? You could—“

“Don’t stop! I need...need this now. Get the feel of them off me. Please.”

Xander was suddenly furious again at the reminder of someone else touching his lover. He growled, a low, warning sound.

Spike twisted his head around to look at Xander. “You’re angry with me, pet?”

“No! Oh gods, no!” Xander kissed Spike’s damp
shoulder. “It’s those fuckers. They touched what’s m—” He stopped. Maybe Spike didn’t want to hear this. Maybe it was too much.

“Say it, Xan,” Spike said hoarsely. “Please.”

“Mine. You’re mine.”

Spike closed his eyes tightly and shuddered against him. “Again,” he rasped.

“Mine!” Xander nearly shouted, and it felt good, felt really damn good, as a matter of fact, and then he bit hard into Spike’s corded neck. Spike howled and bowed his back. Xander felt Spike’s cock pulse and twitch in his grip and then the familiar scent of Spike’s come filtered through the water to his sensitive nose. A moment later, Spike collapsed bonelessly back against Xander’s chest.

When Spike caught his breath, and Xander had lapped up the small trickles of blood from his white skin, turned his head and smiled broadly. “Bloody brilliant, love.”
“I meant it, you know.”

Spike nodded. “Good.”

Xander groaned and pushed a little at Spike’s shoulder as he tried to sit upright. “C’mon. Let’s hop in the shower and get really clean, okay?”

“But you didn’t—”

“You can owe me one for later. I’m starving!”

Spike poked at Xander’s stomach, which was as flat and toned as it was back in high school, when he was on the swim team. More, even. “Good thing you have the wolf metabolism or you’d be big as a house,” Spike said. Then he rose out of the tub and dripped his way over to the shower, where he turned the faucet on. Xander heaved himself out, too, and followed.

It was a no-nonsense type of shower, with a minimum of naughty touching. Still, after the water
was off, just before they reached for their towels, Spike grabbed Xander’s shoulders and leaned their foreheads together. “Wish I could have seen you tear that tosser apart, love. I’ll wager it was bloody beautiful.”

“Not really. I was so furious, Spike, I just…I just ripped into him. Didn’t even think about it.”

“’Course you were furious. Wanker’d just shot you.”

“I barely even felt it. I was angry over what they’d done to you, sweetheart.”

“Because I’m yours,” Spike said, his voice full of wonder.

“Because your mine. And me….?”

“Mine, pet.”

And they kissed until they were shivering from mingled cold and heat.
Xander rubbed at his full stomach and eyed the scene before him.

Lindsey and Lamont were locked in the cell. Lamont was sitting on the mattress, pale and shocky looking, but Lindsey looked calm and well-rested. He was standing at the front of the cage, one hand wrapped loosely around a bar, the other stuck in his front pocket. Angel was a few feet away, chewing his lip thoughtfully, and Kyna was standing beside him. Very close beside him, actually, and Xander and Spike exchanged a glance.

“ Took you long enough,” Angel grumbled as they made their way down the stairs. “ Thought you were gonna sleep all day.”

“ Who said we were sleeping, Peaches?” Spike leered. Angel made his pained face.
Spike hopped down the last few steps and pulled over a box to sit on. Xander stood behind him and rested his hands on Spike’s shoulders. “So,” Spike said. “What were you lot nattering about?”

“I was just tellin’ about the good time we had in Dallas,” Lindsey explained.

Angel whirled and glared at Xander and Spike. “You both almost got yourselves killed!”

Xander saw the genuine fear in Angel’s eyes, so he slapped Spike’s shoulder lightly before he could retort. “It’s not the first time for either of us. It turned out okay, though.”

Angel opened his mouth as if he was going to yell again, then shut it. His posture softened and Xander was surprised to see an almost-smile on his face. “Thanks,” Angel murmured. “To, uh, both of you.”

Even from where he stood, Xander could tell that Spike was surprised, too. Angel didn’t thank him often. Or, well, ever, actually.
“Ain’t gonna thank me, too, big guy? I put myself on the line, too.”

Angel looked at the man sourly, but it was Spike who spoke next. “He did. When those twats came to drag us away, he fought them. And when they took us downstairs, and they were...not treating me very nicely...I heard him, telling them to let me go. Said it wasn’t me they were after.”

Xander hadn’t known that. He shot Lindsey a grateful glance that the man acknowledged with a quirk of his lips.

But Angel wasn’t convinced. “I don’t care. He’s a scheming bastard and can’t be trusted. He’d sell his own mother if he thought it’d profit him.”

“Ma wasn’t worth much anyway,” Lindsey said and, over on the mattress, Lamont nodded his agreement.

“You haven’t been all that aboveboard with him
either,” Spike pointed out. “You two have this stupid nancy feud, like it’s a contest to see who’s the biggest prick.”

“At least I’m trying to do some good, William, while he’s—“

“Ya all are a bunch of feckin’ plonkers!” Kyna said, and then dissolved into even more incomprehensible Irish-accented gibberish. Judging by the look on Angel’s face, whatever she was saying wasn’t very kind.

When she’d paused, maybe just to take a breath, Spike said, “Uh, princess? Need a translation here for the Paddy-impaired.”

The glare she gave him was about two steps short of a flying stake, but then she spoke using less vernacular, slowly, like she was explaining things to learning disabled first graders.

“If this man is telling the truth, you have a powerful group of enemies after your arses. Right?”
They all made general noises of assent.

“And instead of doing something about it, you’re standing around, arguing amongst yourselves. Where’s that going to get you?”

Angel held up a hand, “But—“

“Ah!” she said, and he shut right up. Xander heard Spike stifle a snort, and Xander had to fight to keep a straight face, too. “Stop acting like children. You!” She pointed at Lindsey, who flinched back a little. Xander didn’t blame him. “What do you want with this Wolfram and Hart?”

“I want to be rid of ‘em. I want those motherfuckers wiped off the planet.”

“And you?” she asked Angel.

Grudgingly, he said, “Same.”

“You two?” This time she’d turned her eyes on
Spike and Xander.

“I want to make sure they never hurt Spike again.”

Spike squeezed Xander’s hand, which was still on his shoulder. “Want them gone,” he said.

“If you all have the same goals, can’t you work together instead of squabbling?”

“She’s right,” Spike said, standing. “It’s the only chance we have to beat them.” Off Angel’s skeptical look, he added, “You don’t have to marry the sod, you great pillock. Just cooperate for a bit. After Wolfram and Hart are gone you can go back to playing your games with each other, yeah?”

Angel and Lindsey stared at each other, looking like overgrown rebuked schoolboys. But then they nodded at each other. “Guess if I can work with Spike....” Angel muttered. Kyna hit him again.

Xander was really beginning to like this Slayer.
The five of them were in Spike’s and Xander’s suite. Angel was in the Punishment Seat, of course, while Lindsey sat backwards on one of the chairs from their kitchenette. Spike and Xander sprawled across the loveseat with their legs tangled together. Kyna paced back and forth, slowly traversing and retraversing the room.

“Will he really stay away?” Xander asked Lindsey.

“Yeah. I think he’s seen enough of my old bosses. Besides, Lamont was always more a runner than a fighter.” Angel had given Lamont a thick stack of bills—not without complaining about it, of course—and a newly minted set of false ID. By all accounts, the younger McDonald was heading for Alaska and a job on a fishing boat. He’d cried a little when he and his brother hugged before parting, but he also didn’t dawdle at putting plenty of distance between himself and the Hyperion. It was a good thing for
them all, really. Xander could sense, the vampires could sense, probably even Lindsey could sense that the man was weak. Much more of a liability than a benefit.

Which left the five of them.

Xander had faced worse odds.

“All right,” Kyna said. “What are our assets?” She was perfectly understandable when she was calm like this. And she was calm, and forceful, like a general strategizing with her troops.

She seemed to fall naturally into taking charge, a trait that Xander remembered all too well another Slayer having. But that was fine now. Neither Spike nor Xander particularly wanted to be chief, and none of them would have let Lindsey assume the leadership mantle. Xander might have expected Angel to chafe over it a little—he was a bossy old thing—but he didn’t complain at all. Instead, Xander kept catching the vampire staring at the Slayer in open-mouthed awe. Spike had whispered in
Xander’s ear something about the pouf and his thing for domineering blondes, and Xander had to hide his smirk guiltily behind a hand.

“All five of us know how to fight,” Angel pointed out now. “We’re all good at it.” Xander felt a swell of pride at being included in that assessment.

“Two vampires, a werewolf, a Slayer, and...whatever he is,” Kyna said, waving in Lindsey’s direction. “Good for starters. What else?”

“Weapons. I have a bunch here. I know where I can get more.”

“What kind?”

Angel shrugged. “Swords, spears, clubs, knives, cross-bows....”

Spike tsked. “Anything manufactured after the Middle Ages, Liam?”

“I don’t trust guns. Explosives are too
temperamental."

“I gotta say, I’m with the Champion on this,” Lindsey said. “Conventional weapons of any kind aren’t gonna do us much good.”

“They have dragons,” Spike added, and shivered.

Kyna paused in her walking. “So we need unconventional weapons, then. And that would be?”

Lindsey said, “Magic.”


But that gave Xander an idea. “Willow’s a really powerful witch. She’d help us, you know she would. And she’s got a whole coven, doesn’t she? Maybe they’d help, too.”

“Excellent,” Kyna nodded. “Any other magical assistance we can round up?”
Xander looked at Spike and raised his eyebrows. Spike looked pained, but then he nodded. “I know a wizard in Chicago. I could ask him.”

“The one who cursed Spike for me?” Lindsey asked.

Spike glared. “Yeah, that’s the one, cowboy.”

Kyna was walking back and forth again. “We need information as well. Lindsey, you can supply us with a great deal of it, yes?”

Lindsey nodded. “I’ll tell everything I know. But I only know bits and pieces, really. I never got high enough in the food chain to get the whole picture.”

“Who else could help?”

“Wes could have,” Angel said sadly.

Spike and Xander looked at each other again. “Rupert,” Spike said.
“Very good. And now...we need more personnel, I think.” She sighed then and looked unhappy. “Such as an army of Slayers.”

Xander hadn’t thought of that. But with a smaller group of Slayers than Buffy had now, they’d defeated the First Evil. Of course, Spike had had to burn for that to happen, and Xander was so not letting that occur again.

Kyna was still frowning. “Buffy and I don’t...always get on.”

Xander could see that. It’s probably why Buffy had chosen this girl to send to LA to begin with. “I can talk to her,” he offered. “We go way back, you know.”

“She has histories with several of you, I believe.” Kyna was looking at Angel as she said this, and Angel appeared extremely uncomfortable.

“Um, yeah. But that history, it’s...history. I mean, there was the soul thing, and later Cordy, and Buff
was still cookie dough, and now...now she’s baked. I guess,” Angel added lamely.

Kyna was staring at him in confusion.

“What the old sod means is Buffy has long since moved on to greener pastures, leaving Himself high and dry and happy for company.”

If Angel could have blushed, he would have, Xander was sure. Instead, he just looked down at the floor and mumbled a half-hearted curse at Spike, who simply smirked back. Kyna, though, looked considerably relieved, and for a second she might have almost smiled. Then she squared her shoulders and nodded. “Right, then. Some of us have some phone calls to make.”

**Part Ten**

Xander groaned and collapsed into bed. Every muscle in his body was complaining and he was so exhausted he thought he might never move again.
He flopped helplessly as Spike tugged his clothes off him and didn’t even flinch when a cold hand patted his ass.

“Get you sorted right away,” Spike said.

Xander wanted to say that he absolutely did not have the energy or strength for any sorting, but he couldn’t even make his mouth move. He heard Spike’s bare feet pad away on the carpet and water running in the bathroom. A few moments later, Spike returned. The mattress dipped and Spike knelt over him, straddling him. Spike’s soft cock brushed against the small of his back, and normally that would have been really nice, but not now, not when—

Oh. Warm liquid dripped between his shoulderblades and then hands—strong, warm hands—began to rub the oil into him. “Uuuuhn,” he managed to say.

Spike chuckled. “You like that, pet? Heated everything under the tap.”
Xander made another incoherent but happy sound. He couldn’t possibly talk. He was melting. Spike knew exactly where to dig in his fingertips or the heels of his palms to work Xander’s muscles loose, keeping him just barely on the good side of pain. Xander grunted when Spike hit a particularly hard knot near his spine.

“Almost finished, pet?”

Xander nodded into the pillow. He guessed things would be in pretty good shape when their guests arrived in two days. He’d spent the last week getting the old hotel ready for them, repairing walls and plumbing and furniture and wiring, making sure the kitchen and the water heaters and everything else were able to handle a crowd. He’d even got the elevators running. Spike and Lindsey and Kyna worked hard, too, but he was the one directing them and spending his day running up stairs and down long hallways, usually while carrying lumber and tools. Meanwhile, Angel had ordered truckloads of mattresses and linens, and, with
Kyna’s advice, had got the pantry and the walk-in fridge and freezer all stocked. He’d been gathering weapons, too, piling them in the training room and lobby and basement. And he’d also been scurrying around to magic shops and various demon businesses, gathering supplies from the lists Willow and Danny Vega had emailed him.

Despite his weariness, Xander was happy. He felt a sense of accomplishment, more than he had in years. He felt needed. And, although he knew that repaired dry-rot and patched holes in pipes in no way meant they were going to defeat Wolfram and Hart, somehow all this activity gave him hope that maybe they really would win.

Spike had worked his way down to Xander’s ass by know, and he was busily kneading the big muscles, humming softly to himself as he worked. Xander reminded himself to ask Spike later where he’d learned to be such a talented masseur.

“I like to watch you work,” Spike said, moving to Xander’s thighs. “All those pretty muscles,
stretching and straining. And when you concentrate, the tip of your tongue sticks out, just a bit. Ought to give you construction projects more often.”

“Build you a castle,” Xander mumbled. “Gothic. When this is over.”


“Mmm. Moat. Dungeon.”

“And we can hoist up the drawbridge when we want the world to leave us be. Okay, love. Over.”

Xander didn’t resist as Spike flipped him like a pancake and dug his thumbs into the soles of Xander’s feet. Xander moaned loudly. That felt too good to be legal.

“Pet?”

“Hmm?”
“You’re doing plenty for the cause now, you know. Always have. You could sit this one out.”

Xander’s eyelid flipped open. “What?”

Spike stared firmly at Xander’s feet. “You could have a holiday at the Slayers’ lair, or—“

“Spike. I’m not going anywhere.”

Now Spike did meet his gaze, and his face looked stricken. “It won’t turn out pretty, love. I saw, yeah? Saw what these wankers can do.”

“I’m not going to run away like a fucking coward!”

“You’re no coward, Xan. Never have been that, not ever. But I couldn’t…if you died…I…..”

Xander softened his voice. “I’m gonna die, Spike. Sooner or later. I’d prefer later, but,” he shrugged, “I’m not going to spend the time I do have trying to run away from death. I can’t do that.”
“Could turn you,” Spike whispered, and looked away.

Xander gently removed his feet from Spike’s grip, sat up, and scooted down the bed until he was very close to Spike. He cupped Spike’s cheek in one hand. “I don’t want to be a vamp, sweetheart.”

Spike shut his eyes. “Red could stick on your soul.”

“I’m sure she could. But...look. The souled undead thing—it works for you. But can you really picture me as a vampire?”

Without opening his eyes, Spike shook his head, just slightly.

“Besides, would it even work, with the whole werewolf thing I’ve got going on? Maybe you’d try, and I’d just end up really most sincerely dead.”

Spike swallowed, and Xander went on, “I came to grips with my mortality a long time ago, Spike. Had
to, growing up in Sunnyhell. It’s okay. Remember what Buffy said, that time after she died? I think—I really think there’s a better place we go to.”

“Me?”

“You especially. Heaven needs a few Big Bads. Somebody’s gotta teach the angels how to play ‘Anarchy in the UK’ on a harp.”

Spike smiled then. It was a small smile, and accompanied by a sigh, but a smile nonetheless. “All right,” he said, and pushed on Xander’s chest until Xander fell back again. “Not finished with you yet, am I?”

Xander lay back and enjoyed the rest of the massage, which was pretty close to heaven on earth. By the time every bit of him was thoroughly rubbed and his muscles felt loose as his Aunt Dorcas’s muumuus, he discovered that he did have a bit of energy left in reserve. Not a lot, but enough to hold his bent legs up and wide, and to gasp and wiggle a little as Spike teased his pucker with oiled
fingers, and to shiver when Spike blew lightly onto his balls and suddenly wide-awake cock.

He watched Spike as the vampire concentrated on his task. Spike’s brows were creased in a tiny frown, his long eyelashes lowered, his clever fingers busy. Xander liked to watch him work, too.

Spike took his time, stretching and oiling Xander until Xander was whimpering in need and maybe one step from begging. But Spike took pity on him this time, and smiled that sexy, tongue-curled-behind-the-teeth smile, then repositioned himself and, in one long, smooth motion, sank his cock deeply inside.

He was so beautiful. His arms and chest were corded in muscles, taut now from the way he was propping himself up over Xander. His pale skin gleamed in the room’s dim light as if he was some celestial body, a distant moon, perhaps. His eyes glimmered with ice-blue fire and one plump lower lip was caught between his even teeth. He had little crinkle lines at the corners of his eyes, and Xander
was suddenly pleased that he hadn’t been turned a little younger, that he’d had the chance to grow into the face he had now before it was frozen forever.

Xander’s cock throbbed against his belly, untouched and leaking precome. He didn’t care. Not when the movement of Spike’s hips was sending slow drags of fire throughout his insides. And then Spike’s face shifted, bones and skin shaping into something that once brought terror, but now only love and bright need. Spike tilted his head a little and quirked his lip, allowing a flash of fangs to show. “Pet?” he asked.

As an answer, Xander bent his neck. The pupils in Spike’s eyes widened so much the yellow was hardly visible and his breath hitched in his throat. Knowing he could cause that reaction in this gorgeous creature was almost enough to make Xander lose it, but then Spike lowered his head and bit, right in his favorite spot, and Xander did lose it, wrapping his legs around Spike and squeezing his ass, howling as he came, as he came apart, and then quieting as his parts flowed slowly back together.
Xander tried to brace himself for the attack, but it wasn’t enough, and one hundred pounds or so of flying Slayer nearly knocked him off his feet. He couldn’t breathe for a moment either, but then she released her hold on him, stepped back a little, and looked him over. “Shapeshifting agrees with you, Xan,” she said with a smile.

“And parenthood agrees with you.”

She looked down at her stomach, which looked as tiny as ever, and frowned. “Yeah, if I could just lose the last five pounds of baby weight.”

“C’mon, Buff, You look great.”

She smiled again and then turned to Spike, who was hovering a few feet away. There was a moment of awkwardness, and then they embraced, too. “My boy’s right,” Spike said when they pulled apart.
“Motherhood becomes you.”

“Are you taking good care of Xander, Spike?”

Spike grinned wickedly. “Took very good care of him only a few hours ago. We were—“

“Spike!” Xander felt his face go purple with embarrassment.

But Buffy laughed and patted Spike’s arm before she walked a little farther to where Angel stood, nearly shrouded in a shadow. Kyna was there too, arms folded on her chest, glowering, and Xander had a moment to wonder if something unpleasant was going to happen. Buffy stood and took in the way Kyna had placed herself between Angel and Buffy, and the way Angel was making an especially tortured face, and the way his hand had snuck out—seemingly without him noticing—to almost touch Kyna’s shoulder. And Buffy’s face split into an enormous grin.

“Hi, Angel,” she said, not moving close enough to
Kyna nodded at her and Angel visibly relaxed. “Hi, Buff. Uh, how was the flight?”

“Long. Crowded. Bumpy.” She turned around then so that only Spike and Xander could see her, and she winked at them. Spike slung an arm around Xander and they chortled, causing Angel to wrinkle his forehead in puzzlement.

With all that drama past, Xander looked out across the lobby and saw a hundred pairs of eyes watching with surprise. “Ladies, this is Spike and Angel and Xander,” Buffy said loudly, pointing at each of them in turn. “My friends. I know you’re not exactly used to working on the same side as vampires and werewolves, but they’re heroes, all three of them. Got it?”

A hundred heads nodded, some grudgingly, maybe, but it was enough to satisfy Buffy. And then the crowd tensed as a figure in jeans and a blue and white t-shirt appeared on the mezzanine and
peered down at them.

Spike stepped forward a little. “That git up there is Lindsey McDonald. He’s on our side as well, more or less.” Lindsey tipped an imaginary hat at the collected Slayers.

Then Kyna gave Buffy a small, questioning look. Buffy said, “They’re all yours.”

“Right, then!” Kyna nearly shouted, turning to face the crowd. “The carton on the desk over there has bits of paper. Each of you take one. The number on it is the number of your room. There are clean sheets and towels in each room. Mind you, this may be a hotel, but there are no maids. You’re responsible for tidying after yourselves. We can meet down here in an hour and I shall give you a tour of the training room and kitchen. I shall need volunteers for cooking and washing up. A schedule shall be posted in the training room so you don’t all try to use it at once. If you have any questions, let one of us know. If anything breaks, tell Xander. He’s in room 423. Erm, knock first.” A wave of giggles
followed the last comment and Xander felt himself blush again.

“We’ll serve supper at six tonight in there.” She pointed at the door leading to the hotel’s dining room. It had sat empty and unused for decades, but now they’d cleaned it out and furnished it with enough tables and chairs to seat a crowd. “After supper we’ll have a debriefing so you can be clear about our situation.”

She really did make a good general, Xander thought. Angel was looking at her with a combination of awe and a little fear.

“Any questions?”

From the back of the room, a Spanish-accented voice piped up, “When do we get to go to Disneyland?”

There was more laughter until Angel moved closer to the crowd and glared at them. “This isn’t a vacation. Wolfram and Hart are no Mickey Mouse.”
This is real, and some of us, maybe all of us are gonna get killed.”

“Way to go with the pep talk,” Buffy muttered. More loudly, she said, “Angel’s right—we have to take this situation seriously. But I promise you, when we win this thing I’ll take you all to Disneyland, or Rodeo Drive, or Venice Beach, or whatever part of LA will make you feel like a tourist. But first we gotta beat the bastards. Got it?”

The Slayers cheered, then, and Xander and Spike watched as they grabbed room assignments and then dispersed, dragging their luggage upstairs, chatting and swapping rooms as they went.

“This’ll be a bloody endless hen night,” Spike mumbled.

~*~*~*~*~

Willow and Giles arrived the next afternoon, along with a dozen members of Willow’s coven. Lindsey
had seemed a little at loose ends, but when Giles arrived they found each other right away and wandered off together like old friends. Strange.

But there were more surprises after that. A group of about twenty fairly human-looking demons with sort of grayish skin showed up. Listers, Spike said. Apparently Angel had done them a good turn once and they were there to repay him. Extra help was appreciated, but if these guys knew something was brewing, that had to mean Wolfram and Hart did, too. Well, it’s not like they thought they could operate in secret for long anyway.

Later that same day there was another knock at the door. Xander happened to be nearest; he’d been filling a big chunk that had been taken out of a wall when one of the witches’ practice spells went off-course. When he opened the door, he was flabbergasted to find Oz grinning at him. An assortment of about half a dozen men and women stood with him, all looking pretty scruffy. Then Xander got a whiff of them. Ah. Oz’s pack.
“Hey,” Oz said. “Can we play?”

The place got so full that most people were sharing rooms. Xander was kept in constant motion, unplugging toilets and changing lightbulbs and removing hatchets from the woodwork. He didn’t mind that, not really. But the chaos, the everpresent activity, were wearing, as was the generally high level of youthful estrogen in the house. He’d found that disconcerting back in Sunnydale when it had only been a handful of girls. But now there were much more, and, of course, his interests were more in the testosterone direction nowadays anyway, so it was more than a bit much.

It was worse for Spike, though. Just one Slayer around might be interesting, exciting even. A hundred, though, clearly kept his nerves jangling and his teeth on edge.

As much as possible, Spike and Xander retreated to the relative sanctuary of their suite. Xander would turn off his phone and hang a hand-lettered sign on the door: If it’s not burning, flooding, or falling
down, it can wait. Go away. After a few snarls from Spike in gameface and Xander sporting extra hair and big teeth, their guests—well, their army, Xander supposed—usually listened.

Xander and Spike luxuriated in time together, then. There was sex, of course. But also sleep, with them wrapped around each other in their bed and Spike suckling at Xander’s neck. There was sitting on the loveseat and watching tv or bad movies, or playing Wii. And sometimes there was just plain old cuddling, with one’s head on the other’s lap, fingers carding through hair, a little friendly teasing passing back and forth.

“This is nice,” Xander said drowsily one evening. The tv was on—some sort of awful talent contest—but they weren’t watching it. They’d had a long, slow tumble in the bed, and then a hot shower, and they were both still naked. Spike was lazily playing with the dark line of hair beneath Xander’s navel, combing and tickling it with his fingers.

Spike chuckled. “Did you know Rupert and the
cowboy are sharing a room?”

Xander sat up, shocked. “They are not!”

“Aren’t they? At the end of the corridor on the second floor. Saw them ducking out of it this afternoon when I was bringing those books to Red. Had a bit of a look about—spare spectacles and a Longhorns belt buckle piled together on the chest of drawers. Two guitars up against the wall.”

Xander gaped. “But…but…Giles I kinda knew about, but Lindsey claimed to be straight.”

“So did you, once.”

“Good point. But I cannot picture those two together.”

Spike shrugged. “War makes for strange bedfellows, pet.”

“Yeah, but that’s really strange, Spike. And I’ve seen a lot of weird things in my life.”
Spike looked pensive. “Which of them tops, I wonder? Rupert, I expect, because—“

“Argh! No more! Bad mental image! Now my brain needs bleaching like your head.”

His vampire smirked. “I’ll have to find some image to replace it, then.” And, as Xander watched, Spike grasped his own cock and began leisurely stroking it.

~*~*~*~*~

“Okay, everyone. Listen up!” The chatting died down and everyone trained their gazes on Angel. He was in charge at the moment. Fair enough—this started as his fight.

“We have a lot of weapons and you’ve all been training, and we could probably win a battle. But that’s not enough. This time, we need to win the war.”
Spike rolled his eyes, but he was listening, Xander could tell, and Angel’s words were having the same effect on him as everyone else—making his muscles taut with tension, making his face set with resolve.

“Let me tell you some stuff about our enemy.”

Xander’s mind started to wander as Angel recited a lot of information that was already old news to Xander. The Slayers were listening carefully, though, and the witches and wolves and demons, and the rest of the circus. Angel paced a little in front of the reception desk as he spoke, with the old Sunnydale gang and Kyna flanking him. The rest of the army packed the lobby, with an overflow crowd looking down from the mezzanine. Lindsey was near the front, very close to Giles, actually. Danny Vega was nearby. He’d arrived on a red-eye that morning and had very wisely done no more than smile and wave at Xander from a distance. Spike sometimes still growled when he caught sight of him.

Xander was a little awed that they’d been able to
muster this much help. Even if they lost, well, they’d give Wolfram and Hart a hell of a fight.

Xander’s attention drifted back to Angel. “So even if we wipe their Dallas office, or New York, or Rome, they’ll just come back. Like cockroaches. So, um, Willow’s gonna tell you some more.”

Willow smiled and took Angel’s place. She looked only a tiny bit nervous. Xander remembered when she’d practically keel over if she had to talk to more than two people at once.

“Wolfram and Hart have existed here, I mean on earth here, for maybe thousands of years,” she said. “But this isn’t really their home. Their center, their core, is on another plane of existence, sort of a…a parallel universe. To destroy them for good, we have to get to them there.

“Now, all the really icky stuff they do here, the black magics and all, it’s powered back on that other plane. Think of that plane as a huge battery. They’re connected by a kind of mystical electrical cord. And
most of the time, that energy flows one way, from there to here.”

That made sense to Xander. Willow would have made a good teacher, he thought.

“What we need to do is send a really huge burst of energy back in the other direction, a big old power surge. That’ll burn out the battery and poof, no more evil demon lawyer guys. The coven, with Mr. Vega’s help, we can summon that much power, at least for a short time. The tricky part’s gonna be getting access to the cord.”

She paused, then, and looked at Angel, who nodded at her. “Okay. Here’s how we’re gonna do that. You guys are gonna fight them. You’re gonna really give ‘em all you got, make ‘em mad, scare ‘em even. Angel says they’ll probably respond at first with regular fighting...well, regular demony fighting, like claws and knives and things. But when that doesn’t work, we’re hoping they’ll get panicky and decide to zap you. They’ll sort of flip the switch on that cord, and that’ll be our chance, it’ll open the connection.
If we time it just right and we gather enough power and aim it and...uh...a lot of other things go just right, instead of them blasting us, we’ll be blasting them.”

The room was silent as everyone absorbed this for a few moments. Finally, a Slayer with curly brown hair and a Hello Kitty t-shirt asked, “What if it doesn’t work?”

It was Buffy who answered. “Then we die.”

More silence greeted that statement. Oz said then, not very loudly, but loudly enough, “Perhaps today is a good day to die.”

Xander’s lip twitched, then he sniggered, and then Spike was practically holding him upright as he laughed and almost everyone joined in. Everyone except Angel, who just looked bewildered.

Apparently he never watched Star Trek.
They actually weren’t planning to die that very day. Some scheme had been cooked up to lure Wolfram and Hart into a fight in two days. Xander hadn’t bothered to be part of the planning. There were plenty of wiser heads for that. He’d just point his fangs wherever he was told, thank you very much.

After the speech-making, people dispersed slowly. Xander had set up a giant tv in the dining room and some folks went to watch that, while another contingent wandered off to the kitchen, saying something about chocolate chip cookies. Others meandered upstairs, some in pairs. A couple of the weres left, heading for Griffith Park, he thought, or maybe up to the LA National Forest.

Soon all that remained in the lobby were Xander and Spike, Angel and Kyna, Buffy and Willow and Giles. Xander thought about asking Giles where Lindsey’d gone to but swallowed the urge. Besides,
Angel had that constipated look on his face that meant he had something to say and was having trouble getting it out.

“Um, Willow?” he finally managed.

“Yeah?”

“I was wondering if, uh, if you could maybe do me a favor.” He scratched nervously at the back of his neck.

“Sure. What can I do for you?”

Angel looked at Kyna, who looked sternly back at him, and then he shot a glance at Buffy out of the corner of his eye. “Could, um, could you attach my soul to me? Permanently?” He hunched a little as if expecting a blow.

“Permanently? You mean like without the curse so there’d be no happiness clause and—Oh.” Willow looked back and forth between Angel and Kyna. “No happiness clause. Right.”
Buffy had a great big cat ate the canary smile plastered on her face.

“Yeah, sure, I can do that,” Willow said. “Um, like now?”

Kyna twined Angel’s arm in hers. “If possible,” she said.

“Okay. I think...yeah, I’ve got what I need. But you know what? It’s better if we not do it here. It’s kinda strange magics, really, and it might get some of the natives a little restless.”

“I know a spot,” Spike said. “Big empty building, about two miles from here. Used to be a GM dealership, but now it’s all boarded up.”

“Perfect. Will you guys come along? I could use the help.”

It took Willow about half an hour to gather the things she needed. Somebody told Oz and Vega and
Lindsey where they were going. Then the seven of them piled into the van with Xander behind the wheel, and Spike directed them to the building.

It didn’t take all that long to do the deed. Everyone but Angel sat in a circle, and then Angel had to strip naked and sit in the middle. He looked distinctly uncomfortable over this, despite the fact that almost all of them had seen him in his birthday suit already. Besides, he really was gorgeous, which Xander pretended not to notice after Spike poked him in the side.

After that, Willow had them join her in some chanting, and they passed around a smelly bundle of herbs, and Willow sprinkled Angel’s head with something that looked like sesame seeds and smelled like dead fish. Finally, Willow waved a metal and glass rod that Xander supposed might be a magic wand. Angel screamed and went rigid, then his eyes rolled back in his head and he toppled over.

It reminded Xander a little too much of the Blight, and Spike looked uncomfortable, too, and Kyna was
downright distressed. But then Willow smiled and tapped Angel’s chest, and he blinked his eyes and sat up again. He looked groggy, maybe a little dizzy, but otherwise okay. “Did it work?” he mumbled.

“It’s Superglued on. You can be as happy as you want now.”

Celebratory hugs and handshakes followed, in the middle of which Angel remembered he was naked. He scrambled back into his clothes. “I have some twenty-one-year-old Bushmills back in my office,” Angel said. “Would you all join me for a drink?”

“Where’d you stash that one, Liam?” Spike asked. “Thought I’d found all your hidey-holes.”

Angel smiled smugly. “I’ll never tell.”

They climbed back in the van. During the short drive back, Giles and Spike argued good-naturedly about soccer—well, football—while Kyna and Buffy actually giggled together about Buffy’s boyfriend and Angel just looked a little dazed. Xander was
about to interject into Spike’s and Giles’s discussion a comment about the advantages of watching games in which someone occasionally actually scored, when the ground suddenly shook.

*Earthquake*, was Xander’s first thought.

And then he saw the flames shooting in the sky, their source maybe a half mile away. Right about where the Hyperion stood.

**Part Eleven**

It was amazing, really, how long a few seconds could be. Because that’s all it took for Xander to drive the last half mile home—maybe thirty seconds. The streets were pretty clear this time of night, which helped. But still, that thirty seconds lasted years. None of them spoke. They were too shocked, and besides, what was there to say?

When Xander finally pulled to a screeching halt in front of the Hyperion, his first thought was that it
seemed eerily familiar, like a horrible case of déjà vu. There was no mayor turned giant snake demon this time. But there were the hungry, orange flames, and the thick, black smoke pouring into the night sky. And there were the survivors, staggering away, bloody and shocked.

They rushed out of the van almost before it was fully stopped and ran forward, into the conflagration. A lot of voices were yelling, screaming. One of them might have been Xander’s.

The event was so stunning that it took Xander’s brain a moment to process the details. The damage wasn’t as bad as he’d feared. There was a an enormous hole on the west side of the building, as if a giant had taken a big bite out of it. That’s where the fire was. Every single window looked to have shattered. Overall, though, the structure looked mostly intact. Xander’s heart gave a small leap of hope. Maybe the casualties hadn’t been too terrible.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Willow standing
with some other women—part of the coven, he thought—holding hands in a circle and chanting rapidly. He caught a word or two as he ran by—ignipotens, aquator.

He followed the swirl of Spike’s duster in through the front door, and then he was very glad for his wolfish senses, because it was pitch black inside. His one eye immediately began to sting and water. A few people rushed by him toward the exit, coughing.

“Spike!” Xander called.

From the stairway, Spike yelled back, “Stay there, Xan! Smoke’s too thick.”

Xander wanted to argue, but the truth was he could barely breathe as it was. At least Spike could manage without oxygen. Xander looked quickly around the lobby and could just make out a small figure staggering blindly from the dining room. He ran over and grabbed her arm and started to drag her to the door. She was bleeding; he could smell it.
She collapsed after a few steps and he threw her over his shoulder and ran.

Outside, he saw Giles and Vega and a few others kneeling over a half dozen people. Two of the people were sitting up, but the others were flat on their backs, unmoving. Xander dumped the girl among them as gently as he could and then dashed back in.

The dining room was on the west side of the hotel and had sustained a lot of damage. He found three more people in there, one unconscious, the others dazed and unable to see well enough to find their way out. He carried the one and made sure the others followed him closely.

When he added these three to Giles’s growing collection of patients, he saw that the witches had been joined by several more of their group. They were still chanting, but the flames had died down considerably and, as he watched, they guttered out.

He started to head back inside, but Giles called him.
“Xander! We need to get some of these people to hospital. The car keys?”

“Still in the ignition. Good Samaritan’s closest. Just turn right on Wilshire.”

He didn’t wait for a response, but instead ran again for the door. Spike was just coming out. His eyes were red and his face was almost black with soot except for the parts that were tear-stained. He was carrying someone his arms, wrapped in a blanket. Xander pointed to where Giles was and Spike nodded.

Xander waited by the door for Spike to return. “Are you okay, Spike?” he asked. He suddenly remembered that flammability was an issue for his lover and felt a little weak-kneed, but Spike nodded impatiently. “Right as rain, pet. Looks like Red’s lot have put out the fire now. But part of the structure’s collapsed, and I think people might be trapped inside. Gonna go see.”

“Wait.” Xander put his hand on Spike’s shoulder.
“Why see when you can smell?” And then he dropped to the ground and began his change.

He’d changed very quickly in Dallas when he went after Morris. Now he might have been even faster. It hurt like hell and his clothes were goners again, but within moments he was furry and four-legged. His alpha laid his hand on the back of Xander’s neck and together they re-entered the building.

The smoke had dissipated considerably. Xander inhaled deeply and it made him cough only a little. He didn’t catch the scents of anyone else currently in the lobby. They trotted over to the dining room, but it was empty. The kitchen was, too, and the part of Xander’s brain that could still think about construction wondered whether anyone had thought to turn off the gas. He had no way to express that thought to Spike, though, so he just hoped for the best.

Satisfied that the ground floor was clear, they opened the door to the basement. Xander didn’t know what anyone would have been doing there to
begin with, but they had to check. They could see from the top of the stairs that there hadn’t been much damage down there. Mostly just some toppled piles of junk, likely from the force of the blast. “Oi!” Spike called. “Anybody there?”

There was no answer. Xander couldn’t smell anyone either, so he barked sharply and trotted for the stairs.

On the second floor they found a man, one of Oz’s wolves, out cold and trapped under a collapsed wall. Spike dug him out—it was impossible for Xander to help much with his paws—and they brought him outside. Most of the badly wounded were gone, and Giles and Vega and the witches were bandaging and tending to the rest. Angel and Buffy and Kyna were searching the grounds, it looked like, probably trying to make sure there was no additional danger. Buffy caught sight of Xander and gaped a little. She hadn’t seen him wolfish before. But then she gave a small wave and went back to searching near some bushes.
The second floor was clear. So was the third. Xander was feeling almost relieved. But then on the fourth floor he caught two scents. One of them was familiar. He ran down the hallway, Spike at his heels. They both resolutely ignored the devastation that used to be their suite.

Towards the end of the hallway, the fifth floor had collapsed onto the fourth. The corridor ended in an enormous pile of rubble—charred boards, chunks of plaster and drywall, the mangled remains of furniture, melted wiring, shards of glass. Xander climbed onto the edge of it, ignoring the way the sharp edges of things cut into the pads of his paws. As Spike waited anxiously, Xander nosed around. Finally, success. He yipped. Spike clambered up and began throwing debris out of the way.

And then he stopped.

Xander crawled carefully back up and looked down into the hole Spike had made. A young woman was there. One of the Slayers, Xander remembered. She had waist-length black hair and she was from
Guatemala. Xander had fixed the shower head in her room a few days earlier and they’d chatted a little. She had a tiny voice and an infectious smile. Now, though, Xander’s nose and ears confirmed what her twisted limbs and puddled blood suggested: it was too late to save her.

Tight-faced, Spike lifted her body. He started carrying her back down the hallway, but Xander barked and pointed his muzzle back at the destruction.

“More, then, pet?” Spike’s voice was raspy from the smoke.

Xander wagged his tail once and pawed at a spot a few feet from where the dead girl had been.

“Right,” Spike said. He set the Slayer down on the floor almost tenderly, and she lay there like a broken doll. Then Spike came over and again began removing the wreckage from the spot Xander had indicated.
It took longer this time, and Spike swore loudly when a section of piled fragments threatened to collapse. Xander hovered nearby, feeling helpless. You never really appreciated opposable thumbs until you didn’t have them. Then Spike looked into the gap he’d cleared and swore again, but quietly this time. Xander arched his neck and tried to see, but couldn’t quite make anything out.

“Get back, Xan. Need to move this bloody thing.” Xander backed up a few steps and watched as Spike heaved an enormous beam out of the pile, then, with a grunt, Spike tossed the blackened wood aside. Spike hopped down into the cavity he’d made. “Love? Can you come lend a, erm, a foot?”

So Xander scrambled over to him. He had a pretty good idea what he’d see this time. Sure enough, there was a man lying prone. Xander could see the burns across the man’s mangled legs from where the beam had landed, pinning him in place. The smell of charred flesh was thick in Xander’s nostrils; he could almost taste it. A bright pool of blood had spread beneath the man, soaking into the carpet.
The man’s arms were outstretched and his face was pressed into the floor, but Xander didn’t have to see it to recognize him. Aside from the man’s familiar odor, there was the fact that Xander had recently spent many hours staring at the back of that head as he sat in the cargo area of the van, big clumps of time as they drove to Dallas and back.

Lindsey was still breathing. Wheezing, weak breathing, but his lungs pushed air in and out and his heartbeat was slow but steady.

“Xan, I’m going to lift him up. Think you can grab his trousers in your teeth and help pull him out?”

Xander yipped an affirmative and crouched at the edge of the hole. As soon as Spike lifted Lindsey’s floppy body up, Xander locked his jaws into the waist of Lindsey’s jeans and slowly dragged him over the edge. Spike jumped nimbly out, scooped Lindsey into his arms, and slid and scooted his way back to the undamaged part of the corridor.

Xander followed Spike past the dead girl. “I’ll send
someone for her,” Spike said quietly.

Giles was picking slivers of glass out of the bare foot of a Slayer when Spike set Lindsey down beside him. When Giles saw the injured man he paled and his breath caught. “Good Lord,” he whispered.

“Cowboy’s still alive. Best get him to hospital fast, though.”

Giles nodded dumbly and then gingerly prodded at Lindsey, trying to assess the extent of his injuries. “Help me carry him, please,” he said to Spike. Whoever had taken the carload of casualties off to Good Samaritan had returned, and the van was pulled up to the curb again, engine still running. As Spike placed Lindsey in the back, Giles stood nearby, looking back and forth between Lindsey and the remaining injured people on the sidewalk, clearly torn.

Just then Buffy appeared, though, black with soot, her clothing torn and her hair a mess. “I’ll take him, Giles,” she said, setting a small hand on Giles’s
shoulder. “I’ll make sure they take good care of him.”

It was nearly an hour later when the police and fire trucks showed up. Xander was bipedal again, Spike’s duster wrapped around his nudity as if he were some sort of goth flasher. A couple of cops gave them a long explanation for their late arrival, something to do with a communications system that had mysteriously crashed. Xander supposed it was more of Wolfram and Hart’s bullshit, but it had actually worked out for the better. Vampires and werewolves and Slayers made a better rescue crew anyway, and it would have been hard to explain the astonishing healing powers and durability of the survivors. Not to mention the Listers’ decidedly not-human appearance.

The cops took reports and the firemen said the structure was uninhabitable, but probably salvageable. “Ya gotta really watch for gas leaks in these old heaps,” one of the firemen said to Angel,
and Angel nodded impatiently.

An hour or so before dawn they were clustered outside the taped-off remains, taking stock. Everybody said there’d been no warning, just a sudden explosion. But the witches had sensed magics, and Xander confirmed that he’d caught whiffs of the tickly scent as he was searching with Spike. “I’m so sorry, Angel,” Willow sniffed. “My wards weren’t strong enough.”

But Angel shook his head. “I had wards up, too. I think if it wasn’t for yours, there’d be nothing left but a big hole in the ground.”

“Sunnydale redux,” Xander muttered.

Willow sniffed again and looked slightly comforted as Buffy patted her shoulder.

It had been a devastating blow. Four people had died—three Slayers and a Lister demon. A half dozen others were seriously injured, including Lindsey, who Giles tersely informed them was
critical but stable. “No worries, Rupert. That tosser’s as hard to get rid of as I am,” Spike said, and Giles gave him a small smile. Most of the rest of them had at least minor damage, cuts and small burns and bruises and even a broken bone or two. But almost all of them would heal very quickly.

All in all, it was bad, but the disaster could have been much worse.

It was getting uncomfortably close to sunrise. Angel said he’d stay at the Hyperion to watch over their arsenal. Kyna insisted on staying with him. Giles and Angel and Spike made some phone calls and they were able to get blocks of rooms in a couple of hotels a few miles away. Xander volunteered to help ferry people over in his van—Oz had a van, too, but it was still going to take several trips—but Spike and Giles both vetoed that idea. “You’re knackered, pet,” Spike said. “And you’re due for a good feed as well. Come rest with me.”

It was awfully damn tempting, and when Vega stepped forward and said, “I’ll drive,” Xander tossed
him the keys. Spike managed to give Vega a small nod of thanks.

“I think… I shall go to the hospital,” Giles said. “If one of you would drop me there?”

Angel dug in his pocket and handed over the keys to the Viper. “Here. Drive yourself.”

“Thank you, Angel.”

Angel added, “You have a room at the Holiday Inn, okay? Make sure you get some sleep. I think you’re gonna need it.”

Giles nodded. But before he walked away, Vega put his hand up.

“Uh, before you go, I think you oughtta know something about Lindsey.”

They all tensed. Xander saw Angel’s jaw set and his hands clench into fists. Christ, had Lindsey double-crossed them?
Vega said, “When the explosion went off, Lindsey was in the lobby with me. We were talking about that demon spell he knows, the one that knocks ‘em out, wondering how many demons he could zap at once, if it came to it. When the blast hit, he ran right for the dining room and started helping folks toward the door. When most of them were out he ran upstairs. I was outside when I saw him coming out, carrying one of those girls over his shoulder. He sort of dropped her and then turned around and went right back in. I saw him bring at least four or five people out of that inferno, man.”

The rest of them were dumbstruck.

Vega went on, “That last time, I tried to tell him not to go back. You could see parts of the building crashing down. He just shook me off and charged back inside.”


“The cowboy was a sodding hero?” Spike said.
All Angel said was, “Huh.”

“This isn’t the Holiday Inn, Spike.”

“No shit, love.”

Spike pulled the GTO to a halt in front of the pink monstrosity. A young man in a uniform was waiting there and he immediately dashed forward. “Can I take your luggage, sirs?” he asked. He didn’t even bat an eye at Xander’s unusual outfit, or at the thick layer of ashes and dirt that blanketed Spike.

“No luggage.” Spike glanced up at the sky, which had lightened to a rich violet, then threw the keys to the kid.

Xander docilely followed Spike inside to the lobby. It was done in pink and green, with an enormous chandelier in the middle that looked like an upside down umbrella. A smiling black-haired woman in a
suit was waiting for them. “Mister Harris?” she said, her eyes flicking from one to the other.

“That’s us.”

“Everything’s all ready, sir. Would you like someone to show you the way?”

“Ta, love, but no. Know how to get there.”

She smiled some more and handed Spike a pair of key cards. “Enjoy your stay!” she said.

Spike walked briskly through the lobby, out a door, past a swimming pool, and down a leafy path. “What’d you do?” Xander asked.

“You told me once you fancied posh hotels. I reckoned we could do better than the bloody Holiday Inn, this time.” He brought them to a halt in front of a small, pink building and unlocked the door. Then he ushered Xander inside.

As Spike shut the door behind him, Xander slowly
spun, taking in the ornately furnished room. Then he caught scent of food, and focused on a small table off to one side. It was covered in a crisp white cloth, but little of the cloth was visible because the tabletop was covered in six or seven plates, each with a metal lid.

“How’d you know about this place, Spike?”

“Stayed here once with Dru, back in the thirty’s. Greta Garbo was here and John Barrymore. Johnny Weissmuller doing laps in the pool.”

Sometimes Xander forgot how old Spike was, how many things Xander had learned as history but Spike had seen first-hand. But he was too tired and hungry to muse on this too long today. He smiled at his vampire. “This is really nice, baby. Thank you.”

And Spike smiled back, the soft, almost-shy look he got when he knew he’d especially pleased Xander, and when he let all his masks fall away. Then his face sharpened up again, and he was the Big Bad once more. “Go fill that bottomless pit you call a
stomach before the food gets cold. This feast cost the pouf a pretty penny.”

“Food, too. You work fast. But no flowers this time?”

Spike mock-growled at him. “Eat!” he ordered.

So Xander shrugged off the duster and set it on a cream-colored armchair. He sat at the table, nude, and ate everything there: a steak, a burger and fries, some messy barbecued ribs, a half a roast chicken. Spike mostly watched, now and then stealing a bite of this or that. When all the food was gone and Xander felt deliciously full, he slowly sucked each of his own fingers clean, enjoying the slightly dazed look on Spike’s face when he was done.

Xander stood and stretched. “Shower?” he said and walked off to the bathroom, deliberately wiggling his hips as he did.

The bathroom was all pink marble and green
granite. When Spike stripped quickly and joined him, Xander couldn’t help but giggle. “Laughter isn’t the reaction I normally get, pet,” Spike said.

“Sorry. It’s just...you look kinda funny.”

“Oi!”

Spike reached over to slap at Xander’s ass, but Xander caught his hand and kissed it instead. His hand was charcoal-colored. Both of them were. So were his face and hair. It made an interesting contrast with the milk-white where his skin had been covered by clothing, and that’s what had amused Xander.

The shower was pretty crowded, actually, so they were quick about it, only a little extra groping, and then they toweled off and stumbled into bed. The sheets felt wonderful, Xander thought, settling his hand into the little hollow beside Spike’s hipbone. Ought to get some for the—oh. They wouldn’t be sleeping at the Hyperion any time soon.
He sighed.

“All right, pet?” Spike’s mouth was against Xander’s neck, his lips almost brushing Xander’s skin.

“Yeah. I was just thinking about the people who died today. And our home, Spike!”

“You’ll mend it, Xan. I’ll get to spend weeks and weeks watching you work with your shirt off. It’ll be lovely.”

“We almost lost it, though.”

Spike raised his head and looked into Xander’s eye. “Love, it wouldn’t matter. Hotel, crypt, the bloody Taj Mahal. As long as you’re there, it’s my home.”

~*~*~*~*~

They slept almost until sunset, curled into one another, dead to the world. When they finally woke they sucked each others’ cocks, slowly, lazily, until
Xander’s iPhone—which he’d remembered to save from the ruins of his clothes—began singing about werewolves. They groaned in unison but then disengaged, and Xander answered.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, Xan. Did I catch you at a bad time?” Buffy said with faux innocence.

“As a matter of fact, yes. We were right in the middle of a round of hot man-on-man—uh, vamp-on-were action.” He’d given up on trying to shock her with reports on his sex life. After all, she’d slept with Spike, too.

“Seriously? ‘Cause I know how you two are, but after last night....”

“Shifting makes me incredibly horny, if you must know. Probably something hormonal. It’s like being sixteen again, only now Spike’s here, and when he was there when I was sixteen I was not fully appreciative.”
“Bloody right,” Spike muttered.

“Whatever,” Buffy said. “Can you finish appreciating him? We’re meeting at the dealership in an hour.”

“Okay, fine.”

They said their goodbyes. Xander and Spike hurried things along, licking and sucking and groping and writhing, until each of them had spent down the other’s throat, and they were breathless and sticky with sweat.

Another quick shower, then, and Xander stood in the center of the bedroom, suddenly aware of a complication. “Uh, Spike? I’m kinda out of clothes here, and yours—“

“Look in the cupboard, pet.”

Xander did, and discovered two pairs of jeans, one blue and one black, and a dark green silky shirt. A pair of black tennis shoes in his size was there, too.
At Spike’s direction he also investigated the dresser and unearthed a white tee and a black one and a pair of socks. “We’re both going commando today?”

Spike sidled up behind him and caressed Xander’s flanks. “I like it when you go commando,” he purred.

For a moment, Xander seriously considered telling the rest of them to go to hell—literally, maybe—and just tumbling back into that wonderful bed. But then he thought of Lindsey, clinging to life in the hospital, and the face of the dead Slayer he and Spike had found, and the way his beloved vampire had looked after he’d spent one night with Wolfram and Hart. “C’mon, sweetheart. They’ll be waiting.”

Spike sighed, but he got dressed, too. There were a few pints of blood in the small fridge, and a couple of sandwiches, so they ate quickly and then headed out. Somebody fetched the car for them. They drove through the darkening evening, and Xander gazed with wonder at the pretty people they
passed. None of them worried about apocalypses. Theirs was an existence entirely separate from Xander’s and his friends’.

The crowd waiting at the dealership was a select one: Angel, Kyna, Buffy, Willow, Giles, Oz, Vega. They all looked keyed up, anxious. “Where’s everyone else?” Xander asked.

“Shopping, mostly,” Buffy answered. “Everyone’s clothing was pretty gross.” She herself was dressed in a pair of new jeans and a plain green t-shirt that still showed the seams from when it was packaged. Her hair was back in a ponytail that reminded him of nights spent on patrol.

A few minutes were spent milling around, everybody catching up on what had happened last night. Xander took the opportunity to draw Vega aside. “Go home,” Xander told him. “What you saw last night—that’s just the opening act.”

Vega smiled easily at him. “I wouldn’t want to miss the main event.”
Xander shook his head. "It’s gonna get really ugly. This isn’t remotely your fight and anything you think you still owe me and Spike...we’re even, okay?"

Vega started to put a hand on Xander’s shoulder but caught sight of Spike out of the corner of his eyes and obviously thought better of it. "Look, man. I know about Wolfram and Hart, and what they’re capable of. And this isn’t about any debts, okay? It’s just...I’m a guy with a little talent, and I run a bookstore. How often do I get a chance to be a genuine hero?"

"Being a hero’s not so great when you’re dead."

"It’s okay. Look, I have no family except for my Mom, and I’ve got insurance. She’ll be taken care of. I want to do this, Xander.” He was still smiling, but there was a stubborn set to his shoulders.

Xander sighed. "You’re amazing."

Vega grinned at him. "And you’ll never know just
how amazing I am.” He walked toward the middle of the room, then, where everyone else was gathering. Xander followed.

Xander laid a hand on Giles’ back for a moment. “How are the people in the hospital?”

“Mending,” said Giles. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week. “Most of them should be fine in time.”

Spike asked, “Lawyer?”

“Stable. He’s in a medically induced coma. He may have sustained some brain damage from anoxia. The doctors aren’t certain yet. And his legs are...quite badly injured. Between the burns and the fractures, he may lose them.” Giles’s voice was steady, almost clinical, as if he were talking about a car that needed repairs. But Xander recognized the little twitch near the one corner of his mouth and wasn’t surprised in the least when Giles took off his glasses and began to clean them. “Yes, well, shall we get down to business?”
Angel cleared his throat. “We can’t afford to sit around waiting for those bastards to strike again. We got lucky last night. If Willow’s wards hadn’t helped, or if more people had been in the parts of the building that were destroyed...well, we can’t count on good luck next time.”

“So what do you suggest?” Buffy asked.

“We need to find a way to lure them to us. To our turf, preferably, but in any case sometime and someplace where we’re ready for them.”

“How will we do that, Peaches? Hang out a sign: Evil lawyer gits welcome?”

Angel shot Spike a dirty look he’d been practicing giving him for one hundred and thirty years.

“We could go to their offices, in Dallas maybe, and start something there,” Xander offered.

Kyna shook her head. “Too cumbersome to move
our whole army.”

“And confronting them on their own ground’s not such a great idea, Xan,” added Willow. “They’ll be extra powerful there, and we don’t even know our way around the building.”

Spike said, quietly, “Don’t fancy another holiday there myself.” Xander shuddered.

They were all silent a moment, thinking. Finally, Vega said, “Could we stage something here? Some event that would be irresistible to them?”

Angel cocked his head. “Maybe...maybe an auction. You know, some of the magic crap—sorry, Willow—some of that magic stuff they like so much. Talismans, possessed furniture, things like that.”

Xander mouthed to Spike, “Possessed furniture?”

Spike shook his head. “Later, pet,” he whispered.

“But where will we find these items?” Kyna asked.
Angel shrugged. “I can dig up a few. We can lie about the rest. We don’t really need to have everything we advertise.”

Willow said, “But either they’d know it was us, in which case they’d stay away or just trick us back somehow, or they wouldn’t know it was us, in which case they probably wouldn’t bring the big guns. And without the big guns, I don’t know that their power portal will open enough for us to get to it.”

“Besides,” Xander added. “Wouldn’t there be a lot of noncombatants who showed up, too? We don’t really want them getting stuck in the middle.”

“All right. No auction.” Angel frowned.

Willow was tapping her finger against her chin. “Maybe we could try a summoning spell on a couple of their head guys, and probably the rest would follow. They probably haven’t bothered to protect themselves from that, because who wants to
summon those people? Most people want them to stay far away.”

Buffy had been pacing the dusty floor, but now she stopped. “How would that work, Will?”

“Well, we’d need something personal to each of the people we wanted to summon. Hair’s good, or blood or fingernails, or sometimes something they keep close to them all the time, like…oh! Like a cell phone.”

“And we’d get these how?” asked Buffy.

“We could send in a small team to steal them,” Vega suggested. “Just a few people who are skilled in that kind of thing.”

Giles shook his head. “The last time there was an attempt to remove an item from their possession it did not go well.”

“True, but what else are we gonna do, Giles?’ Buffy put her hands on her hips. “Angel’s right—we can’t
just sit around and wait for them to strike first.”

“No, we can’t, but I believe the level of risk for a covert operation like that is unacceptable, and—“

“Call them.”

Everyone turned and stared at Oz. He’d been standing at the edge of their group, characteristically silent.

Angel said, “What?”

“Call them. You have Lindsey’s old boss’s number, right?” He shrugged. “Set up a showdown.”

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**Part Twelve**

It didn’t feel like a showdown. It wasn’t high noon, for one thing. That wouldn’t have been good for the vamps at all. Nobody was wearing cowboy hats or carrying six-shooters, and there was no score by Ennio Morricone.
Actually, it was more like a rumble in a 50’s movie, the kind where the two gangs decide to meet at the schoolyard. Only not so much with the nifty music and chicks in poodle skirts. Instead, Slayers and vampires and Listers were carrying swords and other lethal-looking things. The witches had blades, too, but their magics would be far more dangerous than their knives. Xander and the other weres were unarmed, although that would change when they shifted and brandished pointy teeth and powerful claws.

Even though they were outside in a wide-open space—the derelict remains of a drive-in theater on the outskirts of a desert town—anxiety and tension and eagerness hung over them in an almost palpable layer.

Spike turned his head and grinned at Xander. He was still in his human face, but his expression was so feral, so viscerally sexy, that Xander’s balls tingled and his cock twitched. He wouldn’t have thought his dick would be capable of anything, not
after the workout it had had that afternoon.

After their discussion in the dealership the night before, Angel had called Lindsey’s old boss and thrown down the gauntlet. The guy had been a little surprised at such a direct approach, but he’d accepted eagerly, and a time and place had been arranged.

Angel and Kyna and Vega went back to the Hyperion, then, to assemble the weapons and supplies and arrange for renting some busses to drive them all to their rendezvous. Giles went to the hospital. Willow, Buffy, and Oz went back to their hotels. Willow promised to set up a webcam in her room so that anyone who wanted could have a face-to-face chat with absent loved ones. Buffy and Oz had smiled sadly, both undoubtedly thinking of their children whom they might never hold again.

All of Xander’s and Spike’s loved ones were joining them in battle. So the two of them had driven back to their hotel. When Spike opened the door to their little bungalow, though, Xander found himself
speechless—a rare condition, to be sure. The whole bedroom was filled with dozens and dozens of bouquets of flowers.

“Spike?” he finally choked out. Had the vampire had a relapse of the csípés spell?

Spike shrugged, a little embarrassed. “I reckon I’ll be dusted tonight anyway, so I might as well make a fool of myself today.”

Xander had laughed and then gathered Spike into his arms, and they’d kissed long and passionately. Their clothes were soon strewn about the room and they didn’t get any sleep at all. Not that they probably would have anyway. All too soon, though, the shadows outside their curtained windows had grown long. They ordered in some food, which Xander resolutely refused to think of as a last meal, and, as soon as it was safe for Spike, left in the GTO. They’d both smelled of rose petals.

It had still been hot when they arrived at the old theater, but the temperature had dropped quickly
and now Xander was shivering a little. Spike put his arm around Xander’s waist as if he had body warmth to share. The nearly-full moon was a spotlight over the rutted gravel where they stood, and the tattered shreds of the last remaining screen flapped slightly in a bit of a breeze.

Perhaps a mile away, cars were approaching. The weres heard them first and told the rest, who set their mouths in grim lines. Almost in unison, the weres shifted. Xander didn’t care that he ruined yet another outfit; he probably wouldn’t live long enough for it to matter. After the agonizing twist and stretch of bones, tendons, and skin was over, Xander rose to his feet. He cast a long look at the other wolves, who were standing in a loose group about twenty yards away. He hadn’t really spent time with other weres in this form.

“Can join them if you want,” Spike said quietly.

But Xander stubbornly sat. He was with his pack already. His alpha was at his side; Angel and his new mate were nearby, smelling strongly of one
another; and Buffy was next to them. Willow was not too far, either, among the people who made his nose tickle. Giles was with them, and even Danny Vega.

Buffy stared at him again, still amazed at his transformation. Then she smiled. “You make an awesome wolf, Xan.” He snuffled at her and Spike ruffled his fur in agreement. Spike scratched a little at that one spot on Xander’s back that Xander could never reach with paws or teeth. It felt really good.

A half dozen black sedans came into view, crunching slowly over the gravel drive, before halting in a neat line. Men in suits emerged, four to a car. But one of them was clearly their alpha. Xander could tell from the slightly deferential movements the others made near him and from the way they all kept glancing at him as if to check what he was doing. The leader looked younger than Xander had expected, although of course he might have truly been any age at all. He appeared maybe 35, with thick, sandy hair, clear blue eyes, and a movie star smile. He stepped forward confidently, the others trailing
slightly in his wake.

“Angel,” he said warmly, holding out his hand. “So nice to finally meet you.”

Angel did not shake, and so the man shrugged and let his arm drop to his side.

“I see you’ve gathered quite a crew,” the man said, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “Did you recruit at Forever 21?”

Angel remained silent.

“Well, maybe I ought to give these youngsters some fair warning, huh?” Raising his voice, he went on. “Ladies and, uh...whatever. Last time this vampire tried to fight us, he had a god on his side, and still, every one of his friends died. Except the other vampire, of course. Interesting how they managed to get away scot-free. This time, most of you will die. If you’re unlucky enough to survive, we’ll take you with us, and you can spend the rest of your miserable existence as slaves in a hell dimension.
Fun, huh? So now’s your chance. Just scamper back home, have a nice little slumber party even.”

Maybe he expected some response, but all he got was stony stares. Almost everyone there was a veteran of many fights; a little baiting wasn’t going to faze them very much.

The man waited a few moments, then shrugged, “No? Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He lowered his voice again and addressed Angel. “You can still save your friends. Join us. Hell, we’ll even let you have that one as a pet.” He pointed at Spike.

“Go to hell, Sloane,” Angel said calmly.

“Oh, I already have. You, too, I understand. Ready for your return engagement?”

“It seems to me, mate, that a bloke wasting this much time on banter is likely trying to delay his inevitable trouncing.” Spike smirked at the man.

“Just wanted to have a little fun,” Sloane said. “But
if you’re gonna be a party pooper....” He made a gesture with his hand and then, well, all hell broke loose.

The temperature plummeted a good twenty degrees and clouds suddenly obscured the moon and stars. Strange shapes appeared out of nowhere, twisted creatures with long claws and the smell of rotting carrion. Xander had a split second to see his alpha vamp out, and to notice that his own teeth itched with the yearning to sink into hot, living flesh. And then the enemy was upon them.

Xander had been in battles before, albeit as a human rather than a wolf, and he knew how they went. Your whole focus would narrow to the small space around you, to the things that could kill you or be killed by you, and you would dance with them, fiercely, almost calm as your brain focused solely on the basic components of survival. Sometimes you’d get a momentary flash of awareness of something else: a scream, a spray of blood, a falling body. But mostly your universe was only a few feet in diameter.
The demons tasted awful. But that was okay, because their tough skin gave nicely to his fangs and their thick bones cracked satisfyingly under his jaws. He tried to keep track of Spike, and sometimes his peripheral vision caught a swirl of black or a blaze of white, and he’d know his alpha was near. But with only one eye he had to concentrate on what was most important at the moment, and that was the demons.

He knew he’d been wounded. He had no idea how badly; nothing hurt very much yet, and he certainly didn’t have the time to self-assess. He was still moving pretty well, anyway, so it probably wasn’t anything life-threatening.

Just ahead of him, Angel was grappling with a demon, trying to bring it close enough to bite it, while another clawed at his back. Xander launched himself at the second one. His body weight was enough to knock it to the ground, and then Xander was standing atop its scaly chest, tearing out his throat. He’d have howled in triumph if he had time,
but more monsters were swarming everywhere.

A heavy blow hit his left flank and he nearly collapsed. There was sharp pain now, and he twisted around and saw a snarling demon thrusting a heavy spear into his side. He tried to get loose, but the demon only stuck the point farther into Xander’s body. Furious, Xander snapped his blood-flecked muzzle at the protruding wood. Then the demon’s head flew cleanly off its shoulders, a look of complete amazement on its face. Buffy waved her sword at another encroaching enemy, bisecting its body neatly, and then yanked the spear out of Xander’s body. He didn’t have time to thank her before she was whirling away, slashing and parrying, and then he was occupied himself with eviscerating a demon that had tripped over its compatriot’s head.

It seemed to Xander that the battle was slowing a bit and the ranks of the enemy had thinned. He hoped that things had gone according to plan, and the witches had been shielded from the worst of the carnage. If they had, they would be waiting for
Wolfram and Hart to react to their weakening state by trying to tap into their mystical power source.

Xander thought he saw Spike fall just over there, a few yards to the right. He ignored a set of claws that raked over his back and squirmed his way between human and inhuman fighters until he saw Spike supine on the ground. One demon straddled his neck while another poked something sharp into Spike’s stomach. Spike howled and thrashed but couldn’t get free.

Seeing his alpha treated like this made Xander lose what little control he still had. He was no longer a human, a young man who once fetched doughnuts and hid his insecurities with wisecracks. He was an animal, a beast with supernatural strength and speed, and he didn’t care about anything in the world except protecting his alpha, his mate.

Xander leapt at the demon that was holding Spike down, latching his teeth onto its throat and breaking its neck with one vicious shake. Its body hadn’t even hit the ground before he was standing
on his hind legs. He clawed at the other demon’s chest and delighted in the way it shrieked. Spike used Xander to pull himself upright but he was badly hurt. Xander stayed very close to him. He lost track of all the creatures he killed then; he was a blur of flashing fangs and snapping jaws. Sometimes he was injured too, but that didn’t slow him down.

And then, as if in slow motion, he saw a sharp-tipped wooden pole propelled toward them, aimed directly at Spike’s chest. He was at the wrong angle to push Spike out of the way, and the vampire didn’t see it coming, too caught up in trying to wrestle a nasty-looking dagger away from a demon. Xander didn’t have time to think. He jumped, putting his own body between the spear and his alpha. The chunk of wood slammed into him. It was like being hit by a brick wall and he fell backwards, and then discovered he couldn’t get up again. In fact, even breathing was proving to be too difficult, and he wished that he, like Spike, didn’t have to.

Spike’s face appeared over him. It was so covered in gore his skin was barely visible. “Xander!” Spike
yelled. “Oh, no, love, don’t—“

Xander whined a little and even managed to twitch his tail.

Spike screamed and pulled the spear out of Xander and tossed it aside. It didn’t hurt. Well, it did, but the pain was distant, unimportant, like a conversation he wasn’t a part of. He wanted to tell Spike that, but of course he couldn’t.

Spike’s face was twisted in anguish and tears rolled down his face. Don’t cry, Xander thought at him. It’s all right.

And it truly was all right, maybe, because just then there was a huge percussion of air, like happens after an explosion, and an odd humming noise, and the overwhelming, tingling scent of magic. Another boom followed, this one even bigger. And then there was nothing but blackness.

~~*~~*~~*~~*~~
“I know blood heals vamps, but what the hell works for werewolves?” Ah, Buffy. She sounded annoyed, like during their junior year of high school when Mr. Warnecke gave them trig homework nobody could possibly solve. Nobody except Willow, of course. She knew all the answers in school. Used to do his homework for him sometimes, when she could tell that his parents’ fighting had been too loud for him to concentrate the night before, or when Tony was being extra trigger-happy with his fists. Oh, but she was such a good friend. Almost all the time, except for when she went all evil and veiny, but she’d come out all right after that, too, because he loved her.

He loved Buffy, too. Not the crush kind of love, like back in high school when he thought the world revolved around her but knew she was way out of his league. And, uh, female, although he was a long way then from admitting that little issue. He loved her like a sister, the slightly annoying kind who occasionally pissed you off but you could always count on to back you up in the end, to try and save
you from demons, even.

And he loved...oh, gods, Spike, where was Spike?

Xander slowly peeled his eyelid open, noting dimly that he was seeing colors sharply again, so he must have reverted to human. A ceiling was above him. Ugly thing, all popcorn-textured and dingy, with a bug-specked light fixture smack in the middle. That wasn’t all that interesting to look at, so he tried to sit up. And immediately regretted it, as his entire torso felt like it was being attacked by a horde of miniature monsters with tiny cudgels and knives.

Okay, not so much with the sitting, then. Or with the moving at all.

He was groggily considering his other options when another voice said, “I’m afraid that all we can do is wait for his body to repair itself. It should eventually, so long as the weapon wasn’t silver.”

Not silver, he wanted to tell Giles. Wood. Instant dustville for vamps, but only acute agony for
carpenter-slash-werewolves.

“So, what? We just let him lie there?”

“Buffy, Willow’s magics are depleted, and—“

“I know, I know. It’s just...really frustrating.”

Ha. She was really frustrated? He couldn’t even move his goddamn head and he needed to know where the hell Spike was. Why didn’t Xander hear his voice, too? He was so aggravated that he made a sort of grunting sound.

That brought Buffy and Giles rushing over, and they peered down at him anxiously. “Xan? You’re awake?”

“Uuuh.” It even hurt when he talked. Buffy and Giles looked relieved, though.

“Xander, is there anything we can do for you? Painkillers don’t seem to work very well on shapeshifters, I’m afraid, and I don’t know—“

“We’re in some fleabag motel off Highway 18. El Rancho Cucaracha, I think. We didn’t think the hospital was the best choice for you, with the, the wolfiness.”

That wasn’t what he’d meant. He made another incoherent sound and tried again. “Spike?”

Buffy lightly patted his shoulder. “He’s right here, Xan. ‘Cause he’s also not so much with the hospital thing. He’s in the other bed.” She gestured to his left.

He made a huge effort and was able to roll his head on the thin pillow, ignoring the fresh stabs of pain. Spike was there on the other bed, maybe four feet away, his bare chest white as the sheets. A ratty green blanket was pulled up over his hips, but it didn’t hide the gaping wound in his belly or the deep furrows on his arms and chest or the gashes on his face. His eyes were shut, his lids seeming so
thin and tender, like paper that would tear if you touched it.

“He’ll be okay, Xan. We’ve given him some blood already.” She smiled thinly. “Slayer blood, actually. A few of us still have some to spare.” She held up her hand and he saw that a bandage was wrapped around her wrist. “We’ll give him more when he wakes up, okay?”

Xander expelled a huge, shuddering sigh. Spike wasn’t dust. He’d be all right.

“L-lawyers?”

Buffy’s smile was much broader this time. “Caput. Gone from this planet and zapped all the way back home.”

Shit. They’d done it. They’d destroyed Wolfram and Hart. He felt a little dizzy and he wasn’t sure if it was from his injuries or from the news. But...what had been the cost?
Xander licked his lips. They felt dry as the desert itself. Giles brought a plastic cup of water near Xander’s head. It had a coffee stirrer in it, the red plastic kind. It didn’t make a great straw, but it was better than nothing, and the tepid liquid was wonderful on his thick tongue and parched throat.

Giles allowed him only a few meager swallows before he set the cup on the scarred table that stood between the two beds. Xander licked his lips again, and then, not really wanting to, he asked, “How...how are the others?”

Buffy and Giles exchanged a quick look. In a soft voice, Buffy said, “Vega’s dead, Xan.”

Xander thought of the wizard’s flashing white smile and his stomach roiled. Danny Vega was the first man he’d ever kissed. The only man he’d ever kissed, except for Spike. He’d hexed Spike, but he’d also refused to dust him when Lindsey threatened him, and he’d given them gifts, the greatest of which had been a single day in the sun with Spike. And now he was dead, in a battle that wasn’t even
“We lost eleven people,” Giles said. “Mostly Slayers, but also two wolves and a Lister.”

“Oz?”

Giles said, “He’s fine. A bit banged up, as are we all. Several Slayers and three of the witches are in hospital.” He laughed a little. “The emergency room here was a bit overwhelmed with us.”

“And Willow?”

“Will’s fine, Xan. She’s sleeping. The magic burst took a lot out of her. And before you ask, Angel...Angel’s in about as bad a shape as you and Spike. But Kyna’s gonna make sure he’s okay. They’re right next door.”

Xander choked out a hoarse little laugh. “That’s what got her to begin with—taking care of him.”

Buffy’s grin was nearly as wicked as Spike’s could
be. “I know. That’s why I sent her.”

Xander was exhausted. The pain was washing over him in waves and he just wanted to sink into sleep for a while, to escape and maybe dream of nothing at all. His eyelid was as heavy as lead. But, gods, he wanted Spike. Needed him. He groaned helplessly.

“It’s okay, Xan. Rest.” Buffy’s small hand on his forehead was soothing. “He’ll be there when you wake up, you know. He’ll always be there for you.”

**Epilogue**

“This one’s for you, pet. Come look.”

“Sweetheart, I’m right in the middle of this. Would’ve been done already if someone had got off his pretty ass and helped.”

“Oi, ‘m the foreman. Your alpha! Don’t bloody have
to hoist lumber. Give it a break and come see. There’s a Heineken here with your name on it.”

Xander sighed and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He hadn’t fixed the AC yet. Maybe he’d get to it next week, after he finished hanging the drywall.

He set down his nailgun and sauntered over to where Spike was sitting at a wobbly card table they’d unearthed in the basement. They’d set it up where the front desk used to be, and there was still a hole there in the patterned tile floor. A laptop was open and Spike was chuckling at the screen. “Slideshow from Red,” he said. Xander bent down a little to look over Spike’s shoulder. Spike handed him the open bottle and he sipped at it.

The first several pictures were of Buffy and Em at the zoo and then at someplace dreary and damp-looking that Xander knew was the English approximation of a beach. Em had sharp green eyes and wavy blonde hair and a naughty smile. Still shy of her second birthday, she was capable of wearing
out a mother who was a Slayer. Buffy was really going to be in for it when the next one came along in a few months. Now, though, Buffy looked rounded and radiant.

The next set was of Willow herself, laughing as she dug in a garden. One shot showed her in a crowded, homey-looking kitchen, her hair up and a smudge of flour on one cheek, her hands coated in gluey dough. Some were of the grand opening of her new bookstore. She’d bought up most of Vega’s stock and had it shipped to England. By all accounts, Vega’s mother was going to be able to live quite comfortably on the proceeds. Willow was standing behind the counter in one picture. Her arm was wrapped around a tall, plain girl with glasses and a smile that was infectious, even from a photo taken five thousand miles away. Gemma, Xander presumed, Willow’s new squeeze. He liked the looks of her.

Some pictures of Dawn followed. She was sitting at a desk, surrounded by books, and then she was wrapped up in skiing gear, standing in the snow
alongside a tall blond guy with dimples.

Finally, there was one more photo. Giles and Lindsey were mounted on horses. It was a sunny day, and both held their hands up to shield their faces. They were smiling. Behind them Xander could see Giles’ house. It wasn’t quite the ranch Lindsey had hoped for, but it was close enough, it seemed. Xander wondered how the physical therapy was going. Last he’d heard, Lindsey could walk a short distance with leg braces and a walker. Clearly, he could manage riding just fine.

When Spike clicked to close the email, Xander set the bottle on the table. He stood up straight again and stretched, groaning a little as his sore muscles complained.

“That’s enough for today,” Spike said, twisting around in his seat. “Come pound something besides nails.” He ran a cool finger just above the waistband of Xander’s jeans.

“I need to shower, Spike. I’m all grungy.”
Spike stood and stepped forward until he was very close to Xander. Then he bent his head and licked a bead of sweat off Xander’s chest before sucking and nibbling lightly on one hardened nipple. Moving his mouth away, he said, “Taste delicious to me, love. Salty and warm.”

“Spike, I want to finish here. I’m tired of that little room, and—“

“You’re almost done here and then you can work on our new flat. Meantime, our little room has a bed, and that’s all that we need right now. In fact,” he rubbed a flat palm over the scars on Xander’s chest, “don’t really need a bed. I could just stand up against that wall—the one with the lovely new boards, yeah?—and put my hands up, and—“

“Lube!” Xander blurted in self-defense. “We don’t have any lube down here.”

Spike smirked at him. “Already taken care of.”
Xander gulped.

He gave it one final try, though. “Angel and Kyna could come walking through any—“

“The pouf and the missus are off in Brentwood this evening, dealing with a nest of Kertosch. Won’t be home for hours and hours, I expect.”

Okay, that was it. Clearly, no more construction was going to be accomplished tonight. Smiling in triumph, Spike unhooked Xander’s toolbelt and let it fall to the floor with a clatter. Then he started in on Xander’s jeans, and soon they were hanging around his knees.

Spike lifted his scarred eyebrow. “Commando, pet?”

It was Xander’s turn to smirk. “You’re not the only one who came prepared. Though I gotta tell you—sweaty jeans? Major chafing issue.”

“I’ll soothe you,” Spike said, and he did, running his cold hand between Xander’s legs, high up on the

“Much.”

Spike stepped back slightly and peeled his shirt off, revealing his usual unmarred perfection. No sign at all of the crater he’d had in his belly, or any of the other marks he’d had. Xander, of course, would carry his souvenirs of Wolfram and Hart’s grand finale for his lifetime, but he was okay with that.

Spike kicked off his jeans, sending them flying across the lobby. They landed on that stupid round chair which had, miraculously, survived the explosion and fire. He was already erect and he stood hipshot, displaying himself for Xander.

When Xander paused, enjoying the scenery, Spike said, “C’mon, love. Kit off.” Then he turned and sauntered to the edge of the room, allowing Xander a glimpse of the end of the red butt plug he’d inserted in himself. Xander gulped. Spike arranged
himself against the wall like someone about to get frisked. Which he was, if Xander could get his goddamn boots off. Stupid things had about a thousand lace grommets. Finally he kicked them off and then shimmied the rest of the way out of his pants. Spike leered at him over his shoulder and wiggled his ass a little.

Xander crossed the room very quickly. He spent several moments just looking at Spike, admiring the smooth skin and taut muscles. After all these months, he could still barely believe this was his, that he had been given such a gift. Hesitantly, as if he were touching a precious work of art, Xander stroked his hand over Spike’s spine all the way down to the rounded swell of his buttocks. He dropped to his knees, then, and mouthed and licked at one luscious cheek. When he grasped the base of the toy and rocked it slightly in and out, Spike gasped quietly and inched his legs farther apart.

Still gently moving the plug, Xander nibbled at the silky skin in front of him, working his way slowly over the curve while Spike arched his back and
panted. It was awfully tempting to bite harder into the treat before him. Spike probably wouldn’t mind. But then marking such perfection even briefly seemed like desecration, and so Xander instead pulled the slick piece of silicone completely out and set it down beside him.

Spike whimpered a small complaint but stopped when Xander grabbed a handful of muscle in each hand, spread Spike’s cheeks apart, and tickled the tip of his tongue around the edge of the hungry little hole. He stopped in surprise, though. “Strawberry, baby?”

“Strawberry-kiwi, actually.”

Apparently Spike had been doing some shopping lately.

Xander took a while to savor the taste and feel, but what was really making his own cock throb insistently were the throaty little noises Spike was making, moans and purrs and half-growls. He teased as long as he could stand it, then clambered
clumsily to his feet, grabbed his cock, and slid it into Spike’s ready entry.

“Oh, god, yes,” Spike hissed.

Xander grunted his agreement with the sentiment. He grasped Spike’s hips—Christ, he loved those hips, and the hard belly that lay between them—and slowly rocked back and forth.

Spike lowered one of his hands from the wall. Xander couldn’t quite see what he did with it, but from the motion of Spike’s arm he knew that his lover was fisting his own cock. He considered changing their position, maybe getting down on the dusty floor so they could be face to face, so he could watch Spike’s hand and enjoy the way Spike’s eyes would roll back in his head when Xander rubbed against his prostate. But then he’d have to pull out, and he really didn’t want to pull out because he felt too goddamn good right now, and besides, he could close his eye and imagine what Spike was doing, and that would be just fine.
Oh, that was a good plan. With his eye shut he could concentrate better on the cool tightness that gripped him so well, and on the string of filthy language that was pouring from the vampire’s beautiful mouth. “Yeah, yeah, fuck me like that, love, hard, god, deeper, love you filling me, fuck, so good, Xan.”

Xander was close. So was Spike—his words had devolved to little more than moans and gasps. Their pace had quickened and now Xander really was pounding into Spike, and Spike was thrusting back at him so as to take every bit of it. Their rhythm was starting to falter, though, as their brains temporarily lost the ability to keep proper tempo.

Xander moved his hands to Spike’s shoulders and pulled him fully upright. Then, with a roar, he buried his teeth deeply in Spike’s delicate, pale neck. “Fuck!” screamed Spike one more time, and his muscles clenched and spasmed around Xander’s cock as his come spurted onto the nice new wallboard. Xander juddered helplessly against him, his sweat sticking their bodies together as he
emptied himself inside Spike.

They slowed and tried to catch their breaths. Xander slumped against Spike’s back. He licked and nibbled a little at one shoulder and Spike let his head fall back so that his hair tickled Xander’s cheek.

Eventually, though, they had to separate. Spike spun around then and they kissed, their soft, wet cocks pressed together nicely. “Bath, pet?” Spike asked. “I’ll shampoo you if you like.” The shower in their current room wasn’t big enough for two, but a bath sounded good, and Xander loved it when those strong fingers massaged his scalp. But there was still so much work to be done.

“Let me just finish this section, okay?”

Spike sighed. “Fine. But then you have to shampoo me first.”

“It’s a deal.”
While Spike dressed, Xander pulled on his own jeans and boots. He didn’t mind working shirtless for Spike’s benefit, but naked construction was not a good idea, and he had no particular desire to end up with a nail imbedded in his foot.

He was just buckling on his toolbelt when the front door crashed open and Angel came rushing in. He opened his mouth to speak, but then stopped. He took in their tousled hair, Xander’s flushed face, the prominent mark on Spike’s neck, the scent of strawberry-kiwi sex, and the butt plug still discarded on the floor.

“Can’t you two keep it in your own room?”

Spike sneered. “As if we didn’t hear the missus making you perfectly happy in the training room yesterday afternoon.”

Xander smothered a laugh with his hand. He tried not to encourage Spike in his Angel-baiting, he really did.
But Angel only glowered for a moment, his face clearly conveying his opinions about certain vampires and werewolves of his acquaintance. “I need your help,” he said.

Spike crossed his arms. “My boy’s still putting your bloody hotel back together, and we were just going to nip upstairs for a nice bath. Probably shag after. So sod off.”

“Your fun can wait. There were more Kertosch than we’d thought, and some of them have already started to pupate, so c’mon. We can take your van, Xander. Kyna’s waiting outside.”

Spike grumbled, but he snatched his duster off the chair while he did it, and he tossed Xander’s t-shirt to him, too. He shoved his feet into his Docs, and they trailed Angel across the lobby and toward the door.

“Stupid bloody demons. Why can’t someone else sort them for a change?”
Angel turned and looked at him. “We’re Champions, Spike. It’s what we do.”

Side by side, Xander and Spike followed Angel’s broad back out into the night. The full moon rode high, bright and promising. Spike stopped griping long enough to smile at Xander, and in those blue eyes Xander saw a reflection of his own joy. Xander grabbed Spike’s hand and grinned back before throwing his head back for a long, satisfying howl.

“Right. Carnage now, shagging later,” Spike said.

Xander howled again and broke into a lope. It was a hell of a plan.

Fin

Holidays Bite

She placed the shamash in the center of the menorah, squishing the wax slightly into the little
metal cup so that the candle would remain upright. The flames burned cheerfully, flickering slightly in a little breeze. But she didn’t feel very cheerful at all, and she cupped her chin in her hand and watched the candles burn.

She shouldn’t feel so gloomy. It wasn’t as if she was observant in her parents’ faith, or that she really expected any of her friends to remember the holiday and celebrate it with her. They never had before, and this year, what with Buffy busy with the baby and Dawn with school, and Giles nursing Lindsey, and Xander fighting demons with Spike in LA, well, she certainly hadn’t thought anyone was going to come eat latkes with her or anything. Still.

She was happy when the phone rang, derailing an entirely too-depressing train of thought. “Hello?” she said, maybe a little too hopefully.

“Red.” The deep English voice on the other end didn’t sound happy at all. In fact, he sounded downright distressed, and immediately all her internal alarms began to ring, because Spike didn’t
usually dial her up for a chat. “Need you here, love. It’s Xan.”

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Spike handed her a cup of steaming Earl Grey and watched as she patted her hair and clothing more or less back into place. Teleporting would probably be easier on her if she wore something a bit more practical than the wispy skirts and blouses she was prone to, he thought, but he didn’t say so out loud. She had a small sip of tea, took a deep breath, and set her face. “What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

Xander stopped pacing and sat next to Spike’s legs. Spike stroked the huge, furry head, knowing how much Xan fancied it when he was rubbed right behind the ears. Xan whined a bit, so quietly that the humans in the room likely didn’t hear. But Spike did, and it made his stomach lurch. Angel did, too. He frowned and crossed his arms over his chest.

“We were fighting this nasty thing—“

Spike shot her an impatient look and continued. “Yeah, it was an Ochus. Bloody hard to kill, they are. But the four of us were making good headway when Xan managed to get his paw stuck in one of its mouths. It bit him.”

The corners of Willow’s mouth turned down and she looked at Xander’s foot. Most of the swelling had gone down, but it was obviously still sore; Xan had been favoring it as he walked and was now not resting much of his weight on it. She looked as if she badly wanted to give him a hug and Xan likely would have allowed it if his alpha hadn’t been stroking the soft fur on the side of his muzzle.

She drank some more tea. “And now?” she asked.

Spike sighed. “Now he’s stuck furry. Can’t change back to human no matter how he tries.” He could tell a good bit of his own misery had crept into his
voice, but he couldn’t help it. He fancied his boy as a boy—well, man, really—with clever hands and a mouth that could babble for hours. The wolf was fine enough when they were fighting something, or when they felt up for a bit of a hunt, or even when they both wanted a long, fast run. But back at home he wanted the human.

“How long has it been?” she asked.

It was Angel who answered. “Four days. And, uh, he’s been getting more…animal-like.”

Spike sighed again. Earlier in the day, when Angel and Spike had been arguing over what to do about the problem, Xander had snarled at Angel and then lifted a leg and deliberately pissed on Angel’s Berluti loafers. Angel had not been pleased.

The witch had gone pale. “So you think this bite has, has poisoned him?”

Spike nodded unhappily.
Her jaw set, and Spike was relieved to see the look of determination on her face. She was a stubborn bint, and that was just what they needed.

“Do you have a computer? Electronics don’t teleport well, so I couldn’t bring my laptop.”

“Yeah. Slayer here has one set up in the office.”

“Good. I need to do some research, okay?” She stood and walked closer, her free hand out as if she were approaching a strange dog. Xander sniffed at it and then licked it once before leaning his heavy head into Spike’s thigh. She bent at the knees and looked in his good eye. “I’ll find a way to fix it, Xan. Promise.”

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Spike would have liked to go find something to beat up, some way to work out the frustration and tension that knotted his limbs and clenched his innards. But it was still daylight out, and even if he
wouldn’t incinerate, the locals were bound to notice that the beast at his side was not exactly a sodding poodle. So instead Spike and Xander marched back and forth through the lobby until Angel threatened to decapitate them both. Xander ran down to the basement then, and came back up with a length of rope in his mouth. He shoved the end of it into Spike’s palm, and for half an hour or so they had a rousing game of tug. They were about equally matched for strength. Xander had the advantage of three good limbs on the ground, plus a lower center of gravity, but his paws tended to skid on the tile, while Spike’s Docs had better traction. So they alternated dragging each other about until they were both tired, and then collapsed against one another in a comforting heap against the round sofa.

Angel glowered. “I never thought I’d say this, but he’s actually less annoying when he’s human.”

Spike and Xander growled in unison, but without much heat.
Just then, Willow and Kyna came bursting out of the office. Kyna strode over to Angel and pulled him in for a quick snog, while Willow smiled at Spike and Xander. “We found some info,” she announced.

Spike and Xander disentangled themselves and stood. Xander perked his ears forward and Spike said, “Yeah? Spit it out.”

“Ochus demons have this venom. It freezes things in their supernatural form. If it had bitten you or Angel instead, you would’ve been stuck all bumpy and fangy.”

“What if it bit Kyna?” Angel demanded.

Willow made a face. “It wouldn’t have been pretty. I mean, Kyna, you’re pretty now and everything, but with the venom, that Slayer demony part of you would have shown.”

Angel looked grim and his bird chucked him under the chin.
Spike didn’t care about any of that. “So what do I have to do to sort him?” he asked.

The witch shook her head. “You can’t, Spike. Sorry. But I can. There’s a spell.” She bit at her lip. “Some of the ingredients are really hard to find. But if we don’t get them in time….”

“What? What happens if we don’t get them in time?”

“He’ll be a wolf forever. A real wolf, I think, without...without the Xander inside.”

Xander whined again, but Spike just wanted to howl.

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It took nearly ninety minutes worth of emails and international phone calls to establish that their best bet was a shop in Santa Monica called Simply Charming. The owner was a friend of one of the
members of Willow’s coven in England, and she said she had the elements that were needed for the enchantment. By then it was dusk, so Angel and Kyna drove Willow over there, while Spike found some blood for himself and a big raw chunk of meat for Xander. The two of them ate their supper quickly and efficiently in their room, while Spike tried not to think about how much he missed snagging French fries from Xander’s plate, or having a nice, spicy snog after the boy had been eating Thai food.

When Spike’s mug was rinsed clean and Xander had licked the gore from his muzzle with his long, pink tongue, Spike slumped on the loveseat, while Xander curled up under his feet. Spike kicked off his boots so he could feel the heat and the soft, slightly prickly pelt against his soles. Xander licked at his sore paw for a moment and then rested his chin on his good one, while Spike channel surfed, purposely lingering on the sci-fi shite his boy so fancied.

They both heard the front door when it slammed open, and they went loping down to the lobby.
Angel and the girls had their arms full of pink plastic bags, but they looked grim.

“What is it?” Spike asked. “I thought she had what you needed.”

“She did. But only enough for one dosage, Spike. The anti-Ochus spell has to be done once a day for two weeks.”

“So get more!”

“There isn’t any more, Spike,” Angel said. “Not in LA, not Orange County or San Diego—not anywhere from here to Mexico.”

Spike swore, loudly and in every language he could think of, until Willow put a small hand on his arm. “Sweetie, shh. Judith found some more griffin oil up in Modesto. The shop up there has plenty.”

Spike took a breath and tried to calm himself. “Right. Then you can just pop up there and—“
“Can’t. It’s not easy to translocate 5500 miles, you know. I’m sort of out of commission for a while, especially if I’m gonna have enough magics left to work the spell. Besides, the oil is pretty tricky stuff. It needs to be transported carefully.”

“Fine. Then we can get in Xan’s van and—“

“No. The spell’s tricky, too. I’m going to do the first dose tonight, before it’s too la—well, tonight. And moving him around right after isn’t a great idea.”

Angel put his bags down on the floor. “I’ll drive up there and get it. I can get there before sunrise and then come back again at sunset tomorrow. It’s only about 300 miles.”

Spike thought for a moment. “No. You drive like a little old lady, Peaches. I’ll go.”

There was some more discussion after that, but none of it really mattered. In the end, Spike got down on his knees and scratched under Xander’s
chin, and Xander licked his face and whined. “I’ll be back before you know it, yeah? Try not to bite the pouf,” Spike whispered into his ear. Then he stood and patted Xander’s head one more time. “Take care with him,” he said to Willow.

“I will. I love him too, you know.”

He nodded at her, and then at Kyna and Angel. Angel made a pained face and then tossed him the keys to the Viper. Spike would have taken the car anyhow, but it was nice not to have to nick it. He patted his duster pocket to make sure he had the directions Willow had printed out for him, and then he left.

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Lucky’s Magic Store was located in a slightly seedy stripmall, in between a sandwich shop and a shop that sold mobile phones. Someone had rung ahead and, despite the fact that it was past two in the morning as Spike pulled into the car park, Lucky was
waiting to unlock the door and let him in. Lucky himself didn’t look anything like the usual proprietors of these establishments—nothing like the crystal and incense crowd that Spike had once snacked on. Lucky was well over six feet tall and likely over three hundred pounds of muscle and fat. He had a red bandana on his head and a grizzled beard on his chin. He was wearing faded blue jeans, a sleeveless Metallica t-shirt that showed off the many tattoos on his arms, and a black leather vest. He looked like he should have been leading a motorcycle gang, not selling charms and dried herbs.

Lucky gave Spike a long look, grunted, and let him inside the store. “Didn’t take you long to get here,” he said, moving behind the counter.

“’M in a hurry,” Spike responded.

“Well, you’re a lucky guy.” He held up a small plastic bottle full of blue-gray liquid. “Nobody else on the West Coast has more than a drop or two of this stuff. There’s a gal up in Tumwater who’ll try and
sell it to you, but I wouldn’t buy it if I was you. It’s shit—cut with Christ knows what. More likely to blow you up than work the spell right.”

“I won’t need her, will I? Got yours.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’ve got it. I know a guy in Boise who’s got some, but not near enough. You’d probably have to go to Kansas City, maybe even Chicago.”

Spike had had enough of Chicago. Hell, he’d had enough of Modesto. He just wanted to get home and get his boy cured. “How much?” he asked.

“Ten grand.” Spike choked and looked at the man incredulously. Lucky looked back, unabashed. “Hey, man, it’s all about supply and demand. ‘Course, if you wanna head to Chicago instead....”

Spike gave him his most evil glare, but then he fished his American Express card—well, Angel’s American Express card—out of his pocket and tossed it onto the counter. He really, really wished
he could just eat the pillock.

Stomping back out to the car, the precious bottle stowed in his duster, Spike realized that he couldn’t possibly make it back to the Hyperion that morning. True, the Viper itself was necrotinted, but he’d have to stop for petrol on the way, and then he’d end up a small pile of ashes on the tarmac of a Shell station in Bakersfield or somewhere. He growled at himself and pulled out his phone.

“He’s fine,” Angel said as soon as he answered. “Willow did her thing and now he’s resting. I can wake him up if you want to talk to him, but—”

“Nah,” Spike sighed. “Just wanted to make sure the mojo didn’t turn him into a frog or something.”

“No, it just made him really hungry. Man, I thought he ate a lot when he was a teenager.”

Spike sighed with relief. He couldn’t be too bad off if he was eating well. “Right, then. I’m going to drive until the sun comes up, then find a place to lie low
until tonight. Be good to him, yeah?” He’d hoped to sound threatening but ended up closer to pleading.

“Yeah, William. We’ll take good care of him.”

The highway was straight and flat and nearly empty, save for scattered lorries. Spike didn’t bother to drive fast this time—there was no point in risking a run-in with the police now—and he turned the radio up very loud and sang along with it.

He was slightly north of Bakersfield when the sky began to lighten a bit. He spied an old motor court, the Satellite Motor Hotel, and pulled the Viper to a stop there. He could have afforded better, of course, but this place was convenient to the highway and, in his experience, the staff in these kinds of establishments tended to ask very few questions.

In this case, the staff turned out to be a fat woman of indeterminate age, with stringy no-color hair and tiny, bright eyes. She’d been watching the telly, but when he entered the office she heaved herself
upright with an aggrieved sigh and stared at him balefully. “Yeah?” she demanded.

“Need a room, love.”

The endearment only made her glower. “Check out time’s eleven.”

“I need the room until five.”

She scowled even deeper. “I’ll have to charge you for two nights.”

“Fine.”

“Ninety bucks.”

She watched as he peeled out a fifty and two twenties from the small wad of bills he kept in one of his duster pockets. He set them on the grimy Formica counter and then she snatched them away, as if he might change his mind. Then she thrust a bedraggled book in front of him. “Name and address,” she grunted.
He smiled and wrote *Randy Giles* on the first blank line, then Buffy’s old Sunnydale address. She looked at it suspiciously, but then handed over a key with a green plastic tag attached. The number five was scrawled on it in black ink. “Ta,” he said, but she’d already turned back to her home shopping program.

The room was as depressing as he’d expected. Orange carpeting, badly stained. Slightly warped wood paneling on the walls, and a painting of a landscape that looked like it had been made by a colorblind kindergartener. Lumpy bed with a green and brown bedspread on it. The bathroom was tiny. The drains were moldy and the sink was pulled out slightly from the wall. Still, he’d stayed in worse places before, and the single window was covered in heavy green draperies that would keep out the sun.

He’d brought a small cooler with him with a packet of blood in it. He sat on the bed and drank the stuff cold, then shoved the bedspread onto the floor and
curled up on the scratchy sheets, boots, duster, clothing and all. He fell asleep almost immediately and dreamed of his Xander.

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He was awakened suddenly when the door crashed open. Before he could manage to do more than sit up, three men came bursting in, all of them brandishing handguns. One of them shot him and he screamed as his knee shattered. He lurched upward nonetheless, but then another blast hit him in the other leg and he crashed to the ground, unable to stand. A third bullet tore through his belly. The pain from that one was beyond excruciating and he couldn’t do much more than writhe and howl.

The men stood over for him a moment, watching. Then two of them held him to the floor—he was in too much pain to put up much of a struggle—while the other patted him down. “Here they are!” he crowed triumphantly, holding the keys to the Viper
up high.

“Great. But Crystal says he’s got cash, too,” another of the men said.

So the first bloke pawed at him some more until he found Spike’s money.

“I can’t believe the fucker’s still alive,” said one of them. “Shoot him in the head.”

Spike instantly went very still. He didn’t know exactly what a bullet to the brain would do to a vampire, but he didn’t much fancy finding out. He stopped breathing and tried to look as convincingly dead as he could. It wasn’t all that hard, really, and in fact he felt unconsciousness tugging at him.

“Let’s just get him the fuck out of here before the cops show up,” somebody said.

They lifted him and he had to nearly bite through his tongue to keep from crying out as his wounds were jostled. They carried him outside, and the
exposed bits of his skin instantly began to sizzle in the morning sun. He was trying to muster enough strength to kick himself free when he was tossed into the boot of a car. It smelled of fast food and dirt. Then the top was slammed shut and he was at least in the safety of darkness once again. The engine roared to life and he felt the car moving. The car hit a bump—a curb, perhaps—and the impact sent a jolt of agony through his battered body that caused blackness to finally come rushing over him.

He awoke an indefinite time later, to find himself in a nightmare. He was buried with dirt in his eyes and ears and mouth, dirt pinning him in place, no oxygen to fill his lungs. It was 1880 again and he was a fledge newly awakened in a coffin, and he was consumed with panic. He flailed frantically, choking and kicking, and only when he broke through to the surface and his face was seared by a ray of light did he begin to think rationally. He immediately covered himself again with soil and then lay there, panting shallowly, trying to become more lucid.
It was not the nineteenth century, he was not lying in some pauper’s cemetery in London, and he was not a newborn demon. It was well into the twenty-first century. The quick glimpse he’d had before reburying himself was of snow-covered evergreens. And he was a souled vampire whose lover was waiting for him. But his knees were only partially mended and his stomach wasn’t in much better shape, and he couldn’t go anywhere until the sun set.

As he lay there, growling and swearing quietly, he was able to move his arm enough to pat cautiously at his pockets. He heaved an enormous sigh of relief when his hand closed around the small bottle of griffin oil. It was unbroken and he could still feel the contents sloshing around inside. But more exploration brought more swearing as he realized his mobile phone was gone. He couldn’t even be certain how long he’d been unconscious, although the hunger he was feeling suggested it had been longer than just a few hours.

It was a very long afternoon.
As soon as the sun dropped low enough on the horizon to no longer pose a threat, Spike emerged from the makeshift grave. He was in the middle of a forest, it appeared. A fresh layer of snow, three or four inches deep, lay over the sloping ground. His sensitive ears could pick up no sounds other than those of the woods at dusk—birds settling in for the night, small creatures rustling in the brush, dollops of wet snow plopping down from branches.

He tried to stand, but only fell to the cold ground, moaning with pain. Xander, oh Christ, Xander. How was Spike going to help him now?

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Six nights.

He counted them, each one driving him deeper into despair. During the days he covered himself with dirt again, and six nights is how long it took for Spike to catch enough squirrels and mice to get
enough blood to enable his body to mend. They tasted disgusting. He thought he’d had his last rodent after that horrible time in Chicago’s sewers, but he’d been wrong. But they were his only option, at least until he was strong enough that one day he managed to kill a deer instead. That deer was old and wouldn’t have made it through the winter, but it gave him what he needed to finally find the road he knew had to be nearby. It was just two deep gouges in the soil, likely a logging or fire service access road, but he followed it down the hill to a gravel road, and then followed that to one that was paved.

He had to jog several miles in the dark until he found a small cluster of houses. They appeared to be weekend cabins and most of them looked cold and empty, but one of them had a white Suburban parked in front of it. Spike would have liked to try to ring the Hyperion, but of course he couldn’t enter any of these homes without an invitation, and he doubted the owners of the SUV would be enthusiastic about letting him in. Aside from the fact that it was the middle of the night, he knew he
must look like something from a horror movie, covered in blood and filth.

Right, then. It only took him a few moments and several twinges from his sodding conscience to get the truck running. It was harder to hotwire cars now than it had been in the old days, but he was still good at it. He slipped into the driver’s seat and eased the vehicle out of the driveway, not wanting to wake up the people inside. He didn’t turn on the headlights and speed up until he was a way down the road.

Of course, he had no bloody idea where he was, but he reckoned civilization—LA’s version of it, anyhow—must be to the West, so that was the direction he drove. The road dipped and turned and twisted through the trees like a demented snake, and he went for miles and miles before he came to more houses. There was a small sign there—Three Rivers, it said—but that didn’t help much. He’d never heard of it. So he continued onward, and the signs of human habitation became more frequent. He followed the road around a lake, through
another few tiny settlements, and finally saw a sign that informed him that Visalia was fifteen miles ahead. That, at least, was helpful, and he heaved a huge sigh, studiously ignoring the voice in his head that told him he was already far, far too late.

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It was nearly two hundred miles from Visalia to LA. Spike made it in barely over two hours, pulling up in front of the Hyperion just as the sky was beginning to turn orange. He was smoking when he lurched in through the front door.

The lobby was empty. But Spike could smell Xander, and so he ran towards the stairs and then up, desperate for the sight of him. He knew that due to his carelessness, Xander would now be trapped forever in his wolf form, and it broke Spike’s heart. But he still loved his Xan, still wanted to bury his face in Xander’s fur and feel that strong heartbeat against his own dead chest.
Spike burst in through the door of his and Xander’s suite. Several things happened then, very fast.

Willow—who was on the bed—screamed and then yelled something that froze him in his tracks and sent him crashing to the carpet.

A very large, one-eyed wolf leapt up from its resting place on the floor, snarled, and landed on top of Spike’s body.

And in the hallway, two pairs of footsteps came thundering up the stairs and then down the hall in his direction.

Spike looked up at them all, helpless blinking the only movement he could make.

“Oh, goddess!” Willow said.

Xander didn’t move from Spike’s chest, but stopped growling and instead began licking vigorously at Spike’s filthy face and snuffling at the places where the gunshots had been.
Angel was stark naked. He swore and grabbed a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around himself. Kyna was wearing a frilly green nighty that likely would have got Spike leering, if he didn’t have a face full of upset werewolf, and if he wasn’t fairly certain the Slayer would dust him even without her evident lack of a stake.

“What the fuck happened to you?!?” Angel shouted.

Spike made a muffled sound—he couldn’t move his mouth at all—and then Willow blushed and said something in Latin and his paralysis was gone. Spike gently pushed Xander off of himself enough so that he could sit up, but Xander still sprawled over his lap.

“I’m sorry,” Spike cried, ignoring the pouf and resting his forehead against his beloved’s. “I’m so bloody sorry, Xan. I tried to—Christ, it doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter. Still love you, don’t care if you’re furry. We can still hunt together, and...I’m still your alpha, yeah? Will you forgive me?”
Xander licked Spike’s face.

“What happened?” Willow asked, more softly than Angel. She knelt beside Spike and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Spike wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his arm. “I got the oil and I was on my way back. But I was stupid, and these blokes—just humans, thieves—shot me and buried me and it took me all this time to get home. Still have the bloody oil.” He laughed bitterly and removed the bottle from his pocket, then pressed it into Willow’s hand. “There you go. All you need, now that it’s too late.”

She looked at the bottle for a moment and then stood and set it on a table. “That’s great, Spike,” she said. “There’s plenty there for the last six doses.”

He shook his head to clear it. “Six? But—you said fourteen, and—”

“It is fourteen,” Angel interrupted. “He’s already
had eight.”

“But...how? Did you find more after all?” Spike frowned in confusion and Xander licked his cheek again.

Willow shook her head. “No. That was it. We were looking for you, and the cops called two days ago when they found the Viper at a chop shop in Stockton, but there was no sign of you at all. Angel and Kyna have been back and forth between here and Modesto a few times, and—”

“Wait!” Spike held a hand up. They could go over the details of his disappearance later. Right now he needed to know what was going on with his Xander. “You said you only had enough oil for one day, but now you’re telling me you’ve done the spell eight times. How?”

Willow knelt beside him again. Her face was glowing with happiness. “It was a miracle!” Her voice was soft with awe. “I don’t know how—none of us do; Giles and I have been researching it but we’ve come
The last treatment—the fourteenth night—was also Christmas day. Hanukkah was over already, of course, but Judith had come over to help Willow finish up the spell, and then she and Willow had made latkes and Xander had eaten so many that he was now stretched across Spike’s lap, groaning theatrically.

“I’m never gonna eat again,” he moaned.

Spike snorted and tapped the tip of Xander’s nose. “Yes, you will, berk. I’ll wager an hour from now you’ll be into those jelly donuts Judith brought.”

From the other loveseat, the witches giggled their agreement. Judith had brought over some spellbooks and they were pretending to read them over together, when they were actually so busy
flirting with each other that even Kyna and Angel, huddled comfortably together on the floor under a huge wool blanket, were rolling their eyes.

“This sucks a lot less than holidays when I was a kid,” Xander said. “Not a single fistfight among us and no broken dishes. And Tony and Jessica sure as hell never gave me a such great presents.” He smiled happily, no doubt dreaming of the many hours he’d be spending watching *Dr. Who, Stargate*, and *Battlestar Galactica* on Blue-Ray.

Spike bent his head down low. “Got some more pressies for you, pet. To open when we’re alone,” he whispered.

Xander’s eyes went wide and his mouth split in a wolfish grin.

The End

All Right
There was a headstone. He hadn’t expected that.

He’d gone to the house first but it was gone, long-since razed and replaced with an office building. So then he’d gone to Highgate Cemetery, where his father had been buried when William was five, because Spike knew she’d always intended to be laid to rest there. And there, beside the stone for Robert H. Pratt, was a matching one for Anne Chambers Pratt. Her brother Thomas must have had it made.

Spike knew the ground below the stone was empty of coffin and corpse. But still he knelt there, and he raised one hand to tentatively stroke the weathered granite. “’T’s all right, Mum,” he said. “Turned out all right in the end.”

He wished he’d thought to bring flowers.

Then he stood and brushed off his trousers and walked away. Xander was waiting silently for him several yards away, looking at Karl Marx’s tomb. As Spike approached, they put their arms around each
others’ waists and began to amble toward the cemetery’s exit.

“You okay, Spike?” Xander asked.

Spike nodded. He was. He truly was.

Xander squeezed him. “Maybe next year I’ll visit Jessica’s grave.”

Spike squashed him back. “If you do, I’ll be there with you.” And then he looked up at the sky, where clouds scudded across a nearly full moon. He grinned. “I’ll wager we could find something to hunt here, pet. Fancy a run?”

Xander stopped, shifted quickly to his other form, and let loose a long, happy howl.

The End
Summary: Xander begins to have some disturbing dreams about a less successful life.

Part One

It was a total rip-off. At times like this, you were supposed to see your life flashing before your eyes, but all Xander saw was the past day. And it hadn’t even been an interesting one.

He got to work hungover and eight minutes late, and his dick of a boss—who liked to hover around the time clock—warned him that if he was late once more he was fired. Then Xander had spent the next bunch of hours trying to skulk as inconspicuously as possible in the most obscure corners of the store. When he heard a customer coming his way, he’d scurry into the next aisle. Inevitably, however, he’d be caught, and then some middle-aged guy with a mullet and three whiny kids would need help finding a toggle switch, WD-40, an air compressor, and something to kill the snails that were munching on his vegetables. By the time Xander was finished with him, he’d have a whole line of people waiting,
looking for strange items, wanting advice on recaulking sinks or repairing fences, needing him to cut lengths of wood.

When it was finally time to hang up his orange vest, his feet ached and his temper was lost. He trudged across the parking lot to El Pollo Loco and ate an Ultimate Burrito. Then he trudged back again—narrowly avoiding getting flattened by a lady in a minivan who was talking on her cell and eating a Big Mac as she flew across the lot—and found his Cavalier. Someone had ripped off the radio months ago, which wasn’t a mean feat in auto burglary because the passenger side window was actually duct-taped plastic sheeting. So Xander sang instead, old country tunes of the girlfriend-cheated-on-me-and-stole-my-pickup-truck variety.

He’d intended to drive to his shitty apartment and maybe put his feet up in front of an SG-1 marathon. But he got stopped at a red light in front of JT’s and realized it was dollar beer night.

He spent a fair number of dollars.
He got back in his car and drove toward home. It was only a couple miles. He was being careful. And then the road zigged and he zagged, or maybe it was the other way around. He pulled hard on the steering wheel and overcorrected, and then he was skidding sideways and an impressive-looking light pole was heading his way, and all he could do was think about how shitty his life was.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander woke up with a corpse half-draped over him. He shifted a little under the weight and the corpse clutched at him and mumbled a sleepy complaint. Xander patted the corpse’s firm and very shapely ass. “Lemme up. Gotta piss.” Grumbling, the corpse shifted over enough that Xander could get up.

After Xander emptied his bladder, he washed his hands and headed back into the bedroom of his suite at the Hyperion. But now Spike was reclining
on his side, looking up at Xander expectantly. “’S early, pet. Come back to bed.”

Xander glanced at the bedside clock. One p.m. Well, that was early for this household, which kept vampire hours. But that dream had unsettled him, and he didn’t feel sleepy. “I’m gonna get up. I’m hungry.”

Spike looked at him incredulously. “You ate half a bloody cow less than eight hours ago. You can’t possibly be hungry again.”

“One, it was just a steak. A really big steak, but still just a steak.” He remembered the taste of the raw meat, the feel of the flesh ripping under his teeth, and he licked his lips. “And two, it’s a full moon. I get...peckish.”

Spike smiled lewdly at him. “Come over here and I’ll give you some lovely meat to put in your mouth, boy.”

“I thought you were tired.”
“I have my priorities.”

Xander spent a moment thinking about his options. He really was kind of hungry, and he was pretty sure there was some leftover pizza in the fridge. But eventually the gorgeous vampire with the already-hardening cock won out, and Xander leapt back onto the mattress.

Xander wasn’t sure what was responsible for his libido, which had exceeded the previous records set during his teenaged years. Maybe it was part of the werewolf package. He did always feel extra frisky when it was his time of the month. Or maybe it was because he got to spend his days and nights with the world’s sexiest vampire, a vampire who could make an erotic show out of washing dishes. Maybe it was the dangerous life they led. Whenever they returned mostly in one piece from the latest almost-getting-chomped-by-a-demon episode, their continuing existence on the planet was cause for celebration. Maybe there was something in the air—Angel and Kyna seemed to spend a lot of time
getting groiny, too, although in Angel’s case he was probably making up for a century of celibacy. Xander guessed the cause of his increased sex drive wasn’t really important, because really, what on earth was there to complain about in having mind-blowing sex once or twice or three times every day?

There was certainly no complaining now, as Xander and Spike lay face to thigh on the bed, each of them stroking the other’s cock. Xander buried his nose in his alpha’s soft pubic hair, drawing the unique scent of him deeply into his lungs as if that might make Spike more a part of Xander than he was already. Xander licked along the crease where Spike’s upper leg joined his torso, and when Spike responded by bending that knee, further exposing himself, Xander licked again and then nibbled slightly on the skin of Spike’s inner thigh. Spike responded by taking one of Xander’s balls into his mouth and sucking gently on it.

Xander moistened his index finger with the shining liquid that was beading on Spike’s cock. He placed the finger atop the soft, wrinkled flesh of Spike’s
sphincter and traced around the edge of it, wondering slightly at how something so small could give them both so much pleasure. But Xander didn’t really have the cognitive ability to ponder things too deeply at the moment, not when Spike was wiggling his ass in an appreciative manner and, almost simultaneously, swallowing Xander’s cock to the root.

“Oh god,” Xander groaned into the hollow of Spike’s hip. Spike wiggled again. So Xander once more used Spike’s precome to dampen his fingertip and then he inserted that finger into Spike’s tight, clenching hole. At the same time—because, hey! he could multitask—he took the head of Spike’s cock in his mouth and allowed his teeth to press very gently against the sensitive bit just between the retracted foreskin and the crown. Spike sucked on Xander and moved his hands around so each palm was cupping one of Xander’s ass-cheeks, kneading the muscles, drawing him impossibly deeper down Spike’s throat.

Xander wasn’t going to last long like this, not when
he was at the mercy of Spike’s talented throat. So he pushed his finger a bit further inside and found the little nub of tissue. Spike’s hips jerked, the muscles of his thighs quivered, and he made a choked howling sound as he spilled himself into Xander’s mouth. A moment later, bright lights sparkled behind Xander’s closed eyelid and he, too, was climaxing.

The two of them spent several minutes floating on their happy post-orgasmic clouds, trying to catch their breaths and, in Xander’s case, get his heart rate down into its more normal range. Eventually, Xander kissed the shaft of Spike’s flaccid cock. He liked Spike’s cock when it was soft and sweet like that, but of course if he started playing with it, it never stayed that way for long. He rolled off the bed and stretched. “I’m gonna go slap some paint in 219,” he announced.

Spike groaned. “Come back to bed, love. The painting can wait.”

“Yeah, but I want to finish it while there’s still
daylight. Get your beauty sleep. I’ll come get you when I’m finished and maybe we can head up to the park tonight.”

“Fancy a hunt, pet?”

“Maybe. We haven’t sunk our teeth into anything good for a while. Except each other.”

Spike yawned. “Fine. Wake me when you’re ready.”

“Will do, Mr. Unlife of Leisure.”

Spike pulled the blankets over himself and rolled onto his belly. Xander couldn’t resist the urge to kiss him, just once, right at the crook of his neck. Then Xander threw on his most paint-friendly clothing—including his orange Spongebob shirt, which Spike had “accidentally” used to wipe up some wayward caulk—and he left the suite, shutting the door gently behind him.

He walked down the steps quietly. The elevators hadn’t worked right since Wolfram & Hart had tried
to blow up the hotel, and repairing them properly was a little beyond Xander’s skill-set. They’d been talking about hiring someone, but there was really no hurry. Two vampires, a Slayer, and a werewolf could manage just fine with stairs.

Xander had been converting several of the smallish rooms on the second floor into larger suites. It kept him busy, he enjoyed it, and it made sense, because they seemed to have a fairly constant stream of visitors. Willow and Gemma had stayed for over a week the previous month. They’d been in the States to pick up some spell ingredients that were hard to find in England, but also because Gemma had never been to the U.S. and Willow wanted to play tour guide. Xander had liked Gem very much, and Spike had warmed up to her quickly as well. She had a clever, slightly naughty sense of humor and she knew the lyrics to everything The Clash had ever sung. She and Will looked really happy together. Not long after the witches left, Kyna’s parents arrived. They knew she was a Slayer and didn’t seem to mind that, but they were more than ready to disapprove of her vampire boyfriend. Spike had
been endlessly amused by the major case of nerves Angel was suffering when they arrived. But Angel somehow managed to pull out his rusty brogue and his antique Old Country manners, and they’d been won over, especially when he started telling them tales of life in Galway, circa 1750. They’d figured out that Angel was some sort of distant cousin on Kyna’s mother’s side, and that sealed the deal.

Room 219 was just as he’d left it: walls freshly drywalled and taped and sanded, all ready for the pale green paint. It wasn’t his color choice, but rather Kyna’s. They each got to decorate a suite. Kyna’s was going to be sort of Laura Ashley-esque. Ugh, but that’s what the lady wanted. Angel was going for a spare, 1950s modern vibe. Spike’s choices were slightly goth, with a lot of black and red, but not too overdone. Xander was thinking he’d decorate his suite in Mission style, which would give him the chance to try his hand at furniture making.

As Xander rolled the paint onto the walls, he thought about the dream he’d had that morning. It
had been unsettlingly vivid. He could taste that Ultimate Burrito and the beer chasers, feel the wheels of the car sliding underneath him. What the hell was his subconscious trying to tell him? Not to drink and drive? He’d figured that one out when he was about six, holding on to the upholstery in their Pontiac for dear life as Tony careened around corners and swerved all over the road. Maybe that was it—the dream was some sort of Oedipal thing. But Xander didn’t think he had unresolved conflicts concerning his parents. He hardly ever thought of them at all, and when he did, he was emotionally blank. He’d long since figured out who his real family was.

He had the room almost three-quarters done when he heard Spike approach. The vampire stood silently in the doorway, just watching. “Thought you were going to sleep in,” Xander said without turning around.

“Did for a time. Decided I didn’t want to miss the chance to watch you work.”
“You could pick up a brush and help out. The sun’s not shining into the room much now.”

Spike snorted. “‘M a vampire, love, not a handyman.”

“Demons can’t do home improvement work?”

“No. It’s in our contract.”

Xander scratched at his cheek, probably leaving a stripe of green. “Man, us werewolves have gotta get us a better union.”

Part Two

He woke up in the hospital. The waking up part was a nice surprise, even if the hospital part, not so much.

“You’re a very fortunate man, Mr. Harris.”
He struggled to focus on the woman standing at his bedside. He didn’t feel very fortunate. Someone was playing *Seventy-Six Trombones* inside his skull, his body felt like it belonged to a cartoon character who’d been flattened by a steamroller, and his vision wasn’t right. He reached up to brush away whatever was blocking his eye, but the woman caught at his hand.

“Don’t disturb the bandages.”

That sharpened his thoughts a little. “Bandages? What...?”

“You were in a car accident. A bad one. Do you remember?”

He concentrated for a moment. The screech of skidding tires, the sick crunch of metal. Yeah. He nodded slightly, but stopped when that made nausea roil in his stomach.

“You were pretty badly hurt. You’re at Memorial Hospital now, and I’m Dr. Abrams.”
He swallowed. His throat felt thick and his mouth tasted bitter, like medicine. “Badly hurt?”

“You fractured your skull, Mr. Harris. We’ve had you in a medically-induced coma for several days while the swelling in your brain subsided. Luckily, it doesn’t appear that your brain was permanently damaged.”

“So…I’ll be fine?”

Dr. Abrams shrugged. “Probably. Except for your eye, of course.”

His hand flew to his face again. Thick bandages covered his left eye. “My eye?”

“It was irreparably hurt. We had to remove it.”

He stared at her, waiting for her to smile and tell him this was all some sort of enormous joke. Ha ha—you’ve been punk’d. But she looked perfectly serious, her dark eyebrows drawn together in a
slight frown. Her hair was escaping from a ponytail, as if she’d had an especially long and trying day.

“Mr. Harris, considering how hard you hit that light pole and the amount of alcohol you had in your blood, you’re very lucky not to be at the morgue right now. And you’re also lucky you didn’t hurt anyone else. The police have decided not to charge you, since you have a clean record and you’re injured. Like I said, you’re a fortunate man.”

Xander just closed his eyes—his eye—and felt ill.

The doctor’s voice softened just a little. “Is there someone we can contact for you? Family members, friends? The police haven’t been able to track anyone down, and—”

“No. There’s nobody.” He had some...buddies, he guessed. Guys from work who would sometimes have a drink with him after their shifts ended. But none of them were visiting-in-the-hospital kind of close. He thought of his apartment, where the rent would be due soon and the other bills must be
piling up. His car, which was probably totaled. The hospital charges. His boss, who wouldn’t know why Xander hadn’t shown up for work. Fuck. “How soon until I can go home?”

“Two or three days, probably. It depends how you do, but you seem to heal quickly. For now, get some rest. I’ll check back on you later for a fuller assessment.”

“Yeah, okay.” Sleep sounded good. At least it meant he could put off dealing with this mess a little longer.

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“Xander, stop it!”

Someone was on top of him, struggling with him, holding his wrists down beside his head. Xander fought a moment more before he awoke fully. When he stilled, he realized Spike was perched above him, his concerned face inches from Xander’s
own. Xander’s face hurt.

“Wha?” Xander said groggily.

“You were scratching at your missing eye, love. You’ll stop now?”

“Yeah, I uh....” He blinked his remaining eye a few times. “I was having a dream.”

Spike’s iron grip on his wrists loosened and Spike placed a soft kiss to the lid over the empty socket. “Back with that tosser Caleb again, were you? I’m sorry, pet. If I’d only been a bit faster—”

“Stop it, Spike. You know it’s not your fault. Anyway, I wasn’t dreaming about that.”

“Oh.” Spike stuck his tongue out and licked delicately at the scratches on Xander’s forehead and cheek, like a cat. Xander could feel Spike’s cock harden slightly against his own soft one as the vampire tasted his blood, and the tickly little licks made Xander’s skin shiver in a pleasant way. But he
was too wigged out by the nightmare to get aroused, and a moment later Spike kissed him again and then rolled off him.

“Fancy sharing?” Spike said, poking his elbow into the mattress beside Xander’s shoulder and propping his head on his fist.

“Yeah. It was... it was sort of a sequel to a dream I had the other night.” Spike listened intently while Xander told him about both dreams.

“Sounds very unpleasant,” Spike said when Xander was done.

“Well, yeah. But I’ve had worse nightmares. About Sunnydale, Africa, about losing you.” He shuddered. “But these were just so real. While I was dreaming, I was that guy, that really loser version of me.”

“You’re not a loser, Xan.”

“I know.” Xander reached over and patted Spike’s butt. “A loser wouldn’t have you as a boyfriend.”
“No, he wouldn’t,” Spike said smugly. “Or have helped to avert...how many apocalypses? And he wouldn’t have done such a lovely job fixing up this heap of a hotel, or collected the loyalty of good friends like the Scoobies.”

“You’re making my head swell.”

“I’d rather make something else swell,” Spike said and, when Xander winced at the way-too-obvious double entendre, Spike chuckled and slithered under the blankets.

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Kyna cooked dinner—unfortunately. Xander ate politely and wondered whether the inability to cook was something common to all Slayers. Maybe demon slayage took up the parts of the brain that might otherwise know how to make spaghetti without scorching the sauce and undercooking the noodles. He envied Spike and Angel, who had good
excuses to take only a few bites of the stuff and then wash the taste away with plenty of blood.

Xander was just choking down the last of the vile stuff when Angel said, “Giles called. When you two were...cleaning up.” The hotel had a huge supply of hot water, and Xander had built a shower enclosure in their suite plenty big enough for two. Consequently, shower time tended to be a pretty long process for them. Long and hard. He snickered and Angel glared.

Xander took a long swig of milk and leaned back in his chair. “Yeah? What’s G-Man want?”

“They’re coming here next Tuesday. Giles said he has some research to do. Something weird is up with the Council and he thinks maybe some of the books I took from Wolfram & Hart might be useful. I was just going to ship him the books, but I guess Lindsey’s going to see a specialist here anyway.”

Xander nodded. The last he’d heard, Lindsey was getting around with braces and a walker, which was
better than the doctors had expected. “Well, that’s cool. I’ll have Kyna’s suite done by then, if they want to stay there. Although maybe it’s a little girly for their tastes, I don’t know.”

“It is not girly,” Kyna said. “It’s classic. Elegant.”

Spike butted in. “More flowers than a bloody botanical garden, love. It’s girly.”

Xander did the washing up while Spike and Kyna argued over décor and Angel, wisely, kept his mouth shut. When the dishes were dried and put away, Xander rejoined the rest of the small group. They had these little meals together once or twice a week, alternating between Angel and Kyna’s kitchen and Xander and Spike’s. Spike often did the cooking when it was their turn; he was easily the best chef among them. It was strange, but when they sat together—bickering good-naturedly, talking about their days and their plans—it felt to Xander like a genuine family meal, the type he’d longed for but never really had when he was growing up.
Tonight, they spoke a little about Buffy’s second baby who, according to Willow, was due any day now. Xander thought he detected a little wistfulness from both Angel and Kyna. Then Angel said he’d heard of a new nest of vamps down the coast a little, over near San Clemente, and he thought maybe he and Kyna would check them out the following evening. “You two just want an excuse to snog on the beach,” Spike said.

Angel smiled. “A little mayhem, a little making out under the stars. Sounds like a good evening to me.”

It sounded like a good evening to Xander, too. And then he had a completely unrelated thought. “Hey, if Lindsey’s gonna visit, maybe we better get the elevators fixed. Unless one of you wants to carry him up and down the stairs, ‘cause I think he’s too heavy for Giles and me.”

“Yeah, okay,” Angel said, not looking very pleased. Despite Lindsey’s heroism, he was still not Angel’s favorite guy. Xander had pretty much forgiven the former lawyer for hexing Spike, though. And Giles
seemed happy with him, which was unexpected but nice.

“What are you two planning for tonight?” Kyna asked. “We’re off to the Bergman festival at the Majestic. *The Virgin Spring*. Fancy joining us?”

Spike and Xander looked at one another and both tried to avoid making horrible faces. “Uh, no thanks,” Xander said. “But you kids have a good time.”

“We’re going to Billy’s,” Spike added.

That was news to Xander, but he didn’t complain. He liked Billy’s.

They decided to dress up a bit that night. Spike squeezed into a pair of black leather pants that made him look so goddamn edible Xander nearly peeled him right back out of them. He wore a blue silk sweater, tight enough to show off his muscles, and he put just a little kohl under his eyes. His nails were freshly painted black. Xander’s outfit was
more subtle, just tight blue denims and a brick-red tee, but Spike seemed to like the look of him, judging by the sparkle in the vampire’s eyes.

Billy’s was crowded but the bouncer knew them and let them in. A few months ago Spike and Xander had taken on a small band of Htergo demons that had been harassing the customers and trying to shake down the management. The owner of the place—who wasn’t named Billy, but was a big woman with henna-dyed hair and an extensive collection of green and purple dresses—had been very grateful. So now Spike and Xander were waved right in whenever they visited, and drinks were on the house.

Xander and Spike squeezed their way through the busy floor and found a pair of open stools at the bar. They each ordered a drink—Jack for Spike, Full Sail for Xander—and then swiveled around to take in the scene. The clientele at Billy’s was mixed. Men, women, gay, straight, human, demon. The music was eclectic. It might be techno one night, heavy metal the next. Tonight the band was headed
by a small man with a deep, rich voice, and they were playing a little honky-tonk, a little blues. The crowd never seemed to care what the music was. They drank and danced no matter what.

Xander drained his bottle and stood. “Wanna dance?” He knew what the answer would be, but he had to ask anyway.

“Go ahead, pet.”

Spike didn’t like the faster songs. But he did like to watch. So Xander made his way to the dance floor. As inevitably happened, demons approached and asked him to dance. Xander said yes to the ones who were least likely to provoke jealousy on Spike’s part—a creature with purply, iridescent skin and indeterminate gender; a lovely girl with dark skin who could have passed for human if not for the third eye on her forehead; a scaly guy with four horns on his head. They danced together, but really, the show was for Spike’s benefit, and Xander would glance periodically towards the bar to see his vampire sipping at his glass and watching, one
thumb tucked into the waistband of his pants.

When the music shifted, becoming slow and languid, Spike stood, put down his drink, and prowled over to Xander in that predatory way he had. Xander was hard as a rock by the time Spike draped himself across Xander’s back and wrapped his arms tightly around Xander’s hips. “Fancy a go with me now, pet?” he purred into Xander’s ear.

“I fancy that very much,” Xander said and leaned back into his lover’s embrace. Xander relished the feel of Spike's strength behind him. Since that werewolf had bitten him, Xander had become a lot more confident in his own ability to protect himself. But still, he never felt safer than when Spike was holding him.

What Spike did with Xander was more like sex than dancing, but that was okay with Xander. He’d been a little embarrassed the first time, but it was easy to forget about inhibitions when Spike was grinding into him, or licking and nibbling at his neck, pressing their bodies so close together their molecules were
practically bonded. People watched them, but with envy playing across their faces. Spike would whisper that that was because everyone wished they had a treat as lovely as Xander, but Xander was pretty sure at least some of them were dreaming of getting into Spike’s form-fitting pants.

Spike and Xander clung and swayed together until the band took a break, then they both headed for the bar. Xander was parched, and he quickly downed another beer, then began a third. “Hey, sweetheart,” he said, tapping Spike’s knee. “Gotta go see a man about a horse.”

Spike made a face that showed his opinion of messy biological necessities and waved Xander away.

In Xander’s experience, bathrooms in bars with demon clientele could be awfully...interesting. This one was packed, and Xander tried very hard not to notice the varied ways the other customers emptied their bodies of beverage byproducts. For the most part, he really didn’t want to know. He also ignored the overly curious stares some of them
gave him when he finally shouldered his way to a urinal.

Xander pissed and then washed his hands and left the bathroom. As he started to make his way to the bar he caught Spike’s eye, but was suddenly overcome with such a wave of dizziness that he had to lean against the wall for support. The whole room seemed to shift under his feet, and the air shimmered like a heat mirage. And then he wasn’t in Billy’s anymore. Instead he was standing in his shitty apartment, emptying the fridge of food that had gone bad while he was in the hospital. Luckily, there hadn’t been much there to begin with—he lived mostly on takeout and stuff he could microwave—but the milk was gross and the leftover Chinese looked about ready to walk out of the fridge on its own. He gagged a little and dumped it all in a trashbag, then held the bag at arm’s length as he walked out of his apartment and threw the mess into the big dumpster at the edge of the parking lot.

Parking lot. A parking lot half-filled with cars, none
of which was his because his Cavalier had gone to the dealership in the sky. Although his boss had told him his job was still there, and Xander planned to return to work in a few days, buying a new car right now was out of the question. That meant the bus. Great.

When Xander came back inside he headed to the bathroom to wash his hands, and he caught a good look at himself in the mirror. His face looked like a cadaver’s, the area around the empty eye socket still bruised and misshapen. Dr. Abrams had told him he was going to need reconstructive surgery to fix the bone structure, but that was a little out of his price range for the foreseeable future. The rest of his face was pale, his remaining eye had a huge dark circle underneath it, and his scalp was only just now beginning to grow a little stubble. He’d been carrying an extra twenty pounds or so when the accident happened. He’d lost quite a bit of that in the hospital, but didn’t look any better for it. His skin seemed to hang on him like too-large clothes.

Xander glared at himself and marched out of the
bathroom. Maybe he’d walk to the 7-11 and pick up some beer. It wasn’t like he was going to be able to drink and drive again anytime soon. He looked around. Where had he left his shoes?

He was bending over to pick up a sneaker when he was hit by an attack of vertigo and he toppled backwards, landing solidly on his ass. God, was his brain injured after all, he wondered, and Spike said, “Xan? Xander? What’s wrong?” with panic threaded through every syllable.

Xander blinked up at his lover, at the crowd of humans and demons who were looking down at him, at the blinking colored lights that hung from the ceiling at Billy’s. With Spike’s help, he struggled to his feet. He clutched Spike’s arm hard, so hard he was sure Spike would have bruises. But Spike didn’t seem to notice. “Pet? Did someone hurt you?”

Xander slowly shook his head. “No. But I think we have a problem.”
While Spike gnawed anxiously at his bottom lip, hovering near his partner like a mother hen, Xander answered the zillionth question from Angel and Kyna. “No, it wasn’t a hallucination. It was…. When I have these…things. These visions. It’s like…I am that Xander. Or he’s me. I don’t know.” He groaned lightly and sank his head into his hands.

Spike set a cool palm on the back of Xander’s neck. “Leave him be,” Spike said. “Can’t you see my boy’s knackered? Go off and research or whatever it is you plan to do, but let him get some sleep.”

It was a measure of the potential seriousness of the situation that Angel didn’t argue. He made an unhappy sort of *hmpf* noise instead. “Fine. But if anything else happens—”

“You’ll be the first to know, Peaches.”

Angel and Kyna said good night and left. Spike was right—Xander felt as if he couldn’t possibly move a
muscle. But Spike gently undressed him and then almost carried him to the bed. After Spike removed his own clothes, he snuggled up close and sucked lightly on his favorite spot on Xander’s neck. It soothed them both.

“Sorry,” Xander said before he drifted off to sleep.

“For what?”

“I ruined our evening.”

Spike bopped him lightly on the flank. “Berk. ‘T’s not your fault.”

“What if it is? What if I tripped some hex trap or conjured a demon or something? I did before, remember? With the show tunes and the spontaneous combustion?”

Spike sighed. “Pet, everyone makes mistakes. Do you need a recital of a century’s worth of my bollocksed schemes? The Buffybot, for example.”
Xander couldn’t suppress a snort of laughter over that one.

Spike squirmed a little, settling the planes of his body more comfortably against Xander’s.
“Whatever it is, we’ll get it sorted. Get some sleep, love.”

~~*~~*~~*~~

Xander gritted his teeth through the tenth pirate joke of the day and tried to resist the urge to punch the customer in the mouth. He had a headache, the type that felt like tiny little men were scraping away at the inside of his skull, and his eye socket itched. The manager had noticed him dragging and had offered to let him go home early, but Xander was out of sick days and he badly needed the pay. So he plastered a smile on his face and imagined using a staple gun on this guy’s bulbous, red nose. “What kind of grout were you looking for, sir? Resin? Epoxy? Cement?”
“How the hell should I know, Cap’n Kidd? You’re the pro, right?”

No, not a staple gun. A nail gun. “What kind of project do you need it for?”

“A tiling project, genius.”

“What kind of tile and where?”

“In the bathroom. And, uh, I don’t know. It’s green and about this big.” He held his hands out to demonstrate.

Xander sighed. “Let’s go visit the tile aisle first, okay? Then I’ll help you with the grout.”

Half an hour later, the guy happily wheeled away a shopping cart full of grout and thinset and tile nippers and spacers and a float and a copy of *Tiling for Dummies*. Xander glanced at his watch. Great. Only another three hours to go. He turned to make his way to the lumber section where, if he was lucky, he could hide behind the plywood for a while.
But he almost bumped into a man who stood there, blocking his way.

“Good Lord! What happened to your face?” the man asked.

And that was enough. Xander couldn’t stand one more shocked look, one more “Ahoy, matey!” Without a word, without even looking at the guy’s no-doubt disgusted face, Xander pushed past the man and took off at a near-run for the employee break room. He was proud of himself. He made it all the way to a bathroom stall before he threw up.

~*~*~*~*~

“Xan? Are you there, Xan?”

Xander found himself again blinking up at Spike. This time, though, instead of on the floor of a nightclub, he was huddled on the thick rug beside his own bed. “Ngh,” he said.
Spike looked slightly relieved to have received a response. “Another one, then?”

“Yeah.” Xander tried to pull himself shakily to his feet, but Spike grabbed him and hauled him onto the mattress.

“Still sequential?”

“Yeah. It’s so real, Spike! When I’m there, it’s like…I don’t remember you or…or any of this.” He waved his hands around to indicate their suite, the hotel at large. “I have a whole separate set of memories, and while I’m in these dreams, they’re as clear as my real ones are now.”

Spike sat down beside him and put his arm around Xander’s shoulders. “And now?”

“Now I remember both. The ones from my dream—they’re kind of like this fuzzy overlay. They’re like—”

“Xan? Let’s go tell this tale in front of the others,
yeah? So you only have to say it once. Perhaps they’ve dug something useful out of all those books.”

Xander thought that was a pretty good idea. It was hard enough to explain even once, and he didn’t have the energy to do it twice. So he and Spike showered. They didn’t fool around—not even Spike was in the mood—but Spike did shampoo Xander’s hair for him, which was nice. After they’d dressed, Spike steered Xander to the table and insisted that he sit there while Spike made him a sandwich. Spike brought the sandwich to the table along with a glass of milk and a banana and a bag of potato chips. “Gonna cut the crust off, too?” Xander asked, grinning slightly.

Spike just rolled his eyes and heated himself some blood.

Kyna and Angel were downstairs in what had once been the hotel’s office. After the explosion, Xander had expanded that space considerably, turning it into a full-fledged library. Fortunately, most of the
books had been stored down in the basement and had escaped damage in the blast. Xander had built a lot of shelves, and then Angel had outfitted the space with a few large tables, two desks, and a bunch of chairs. Spike and Xander didn’t really spend much time in there, generally, but Angel and Kyna seemed to like it a lot. Now they were sitting at one of the tables, looking at a big volume, but they looked up as Spike and Xander entered.

“You find anything?” Spike asked.

“No,” said Angel. “It reminded me a little of Doyle. He had these visions, from the Powers That Be, until he, uh.... And then Cordy had them, but.... Well, anyway, I don’t think this is the same thing.”

Xander ignored the little twinge he felt at the mention of Cordelia and collapsed heavily into a padded armchair. “It’d be stupid to give visions to a one-eyed man,” he said, smiling slightly.

But Spike wasn’t smiling. “He had another one today, while he was asleep.”
Kyna said, “What happened this time, Xander?”


Spike perched on the arm of Xander’s chair and Xander leaned back into Spike’s arm. “Tell them about the memories, love,” Spike said.

So Xander tried his best to explain, and the other three listened closely. When he was finished, Kyna asked, “So now you can recall your dream self’s life?”

Xander nodded. “It’s kind of fuzzy, but yeah.”

“Is it similar to your own?”

Xander frowned, trying to concentrate. It was like when he had a word just on the tip of his tongue but couldn’t quite spit it out. “I think...the early stuff is pretty much the same. I remember—he remembers—Willow and Jesse. His Tony and Jessica
were as much a pair of asshats as mine. He didn’t pass seventh grade social studies either. But then...no Buffy. No Buffy, no vampires or demons, no...Hellmouthery.” It was kind of a shock, actually, to almost-recall a fairly normal life.

“What else, pet?” Spike asked softly.

“Jesse still died. Leukemia, sophomore year. Christ. And Willow and I—Willow and he—kind of grew apart. She went off to college, he had a bunch of minimum wage jobs and lived in his parents’ basement.”

“Just like you, Xan.”

“Yeah. Only he blew it when he got a break in construction, and there was no Anya.” He choked out an unamused laugh. “He got laid for the first time when he was nineteen. Some girl at a bar. He never knew her name. He drank...no, he drinks a lot. Like dear old Dad. Thus the general job suckage. He and Willow fell out of touch. He sort of moved around, looking for something better. He hasn’t
found it."

Xander had been staring at nothing, some vague point on the wall. Now he focused his eye and looked at the others in the room. "I could’ve ended up like that, I think. It feels like...like a direction I could’ve gone."

"The road not taken," Spike murmured.

"Yeah," Xander said, and snaked an arm around Spike’s waist. "What I’d be in a world without supernatural stuff. Without you, sweetheart."

"Maybe that’s it," Angel said. "It’s another world. An alternate dimension."

"Like the world without shrimp," said Xander. The others just looked at him quizzically, and he shrugged. "Okay, let’s say Angel’s right. Why am I suddenly tuned into the Alternate Dimension Channel? And for God’s sake, how can I tune out?"

But nobody had the answers to those questions.
They discussed some possibilities after that, but they were mostly just random speculations. After a while, Xander could feel Spike getting twitchy, and Xander himself couldn’t manage to just sit for much longer. So he didn’t—he stood and then tugged Spike to his feet as well. “Let’s go for a ride, Spike. Or a run. Something. Let’s get out of here.”

“What if you have another...spell?”

“You make me sound like some kind of Victorian maiden aunt. If I do have one, you’ll be right there, won’t you? With...what is it you give people having spells? Smelling salts. What the hell are smelling salts, anyway?”

“Xander, if you collapse again you could be hurt—”

“I could be hurt every time I get on the freeway. But I’m a big boy now—a big werewolf, actually—and I won’t die if I fall down. Besides, I trust you to keep me safe.”
Spike looked like he might be wavering.

“C’mon, sweetheart. I can’t stay cooped up in here forever. You can drive, okay?”

Spike sighed theatrically. “Right, then. But just for a bit, yeah?”

“Fine. We’ll be back before I turn into a pumpkin.”

Xander grabbed Spike’s hand and began to drag him toward the door. Angel had wandered over to the shelves and was perusing them, looking for a particular book maybe. They didn’t seem to be very well organized. Xander wondered what the Dewey Decimal number for alternate dimensions was. Just before Xander left, Kyna called out.

“Xander? Would you mind if I brought in some outside assistance?”

He stopped. “Outside assistance?”

“Yes. Someone who could research the problem as
well.”

“And that would be?” asked Spike, protective again.

“I was thinking perhaps Mr. Giles, as he means to visit us anyway.”

Xander thought about it for a moment. It never did hurt to have Giles lending his big brain. “Yeah, okay. Want me to call him?”

She smiled at him, which softened the harsh planes of her face into something almost beautiful. “No. You go have your romp. I’ll ring him myself.”

~*~*~*~*~

They took Spike’s GTO. Spike seemed to have a destination in mind, so Xander leaned back into his seat and watched as they flew down the road. “You know, if you’re so worried about my hide, maybe you could slow down to Mach 2.”
Spike snorted dismissively. “Vampire reflexes, love. ‘T’s perfectly safe.”

“You have vampire reflexes. The guy driving that semi over there most likely does not.”

Spike just stepped harder on the gas.

In what felt like no time at all, they’d flown south, all the way down the coast. Spike pulled the car to a stop alongside a state park. “Fancy a run?” he asked.

Xander nodded eagerly. He looked around—there was nobody near—and stripped out of his clothes as Spike pulled off his Docs. Then, ignoring Spike’s leer, he hopped out of the car and shifted. It hurt. It always did. But he’d become faster at it, so the pain was more like ripping off a scab than being flayed, and in any case the pain was always worth it, if for nothing else than the intoxicating mix of scents he inhaled through his long muzzle. Most times when he shifted, his first thought was how he tolerated his senses so dulled in human form: the absence of
acute hearing and smelling was like taking his one eye and squinting it nearly closed, then turning off all the lights.

Spike walked over and scratched the fur just behind Xander’s left ear, then that perpetually itchy spot between his shoulder blades. “Ready, pet?”

For an answer, Xander took off running.

A small path led down to the beach. It was twisty, and with the new moon there wasn’t much light to make out obstacles. But now Xander could see almost as well as Spike in the dark, and his balance was better due to a lower center of gravity. He flew down the path in a few heartbeats, then tore across the soft sand until he got to the spot where the high tide had packed the beach nicely. And then he really ran. He loved the way his paws flew over the ground, the claws kicking up little divots of silica. His tongue was lolling from his open mouth and he smelled salt and seaweed and the tiny things that lived under the waveline and something dead and deliciously rotting and smoke from distant
fireplaces and pine sap and...and about a million other things, too many to name.

Spike was just behind him, and it made Xander happy to know the vampire was struggling to keep up. Made him so happy, in fact, he put on a burst of speed, pulling many yards ahead, before he turned and looped back and ran in circles around Spike, barking and nipping at Spike’s feet like a puppy. And then he threw all his weight into the back of Spike’s knees and they were rolling together on the beach, growling and biting and panting, and Spike was laughing so hard he kept getting mouthfuls of sand.

After a while they both rested, splayed out against one another and breathing hard. Spike’s fingers combed through the fur on Xander’s flank, and it was so good, so right to be with his alpha like this, that Xander couldn’t contain his happiness any longer and he sprang to his feet.

“Frisky tonight, aren’t you?” Spike chuckled.

Xander took off towards the waves. The water was
cold, but his pelt was pretty decent insulation and, in fact, he needed a bit of cool-down after that run. He stood and let the water wash over his legs and then went pouncing off, splashing happily.

Spike was still fully dressed except for his bare feet. He stayed above the waves, watching Xander carefully. With a surge of devilry, Xander leapt out of the water and headed straight for the vampire. Spike tried to run, but he was too late: Xander shook himself mightily, instantly soaking his indignant alpha.

“Oi! Git!” Spike tried to catch him but Xander was too fast, and they had a wonderful chase up and down the beach until Xander’s muscles began to tire a little and even Spike was looking a little weary.

“Come on, Rover. We need to beat the sunrise home.”

Back up at the car, Xander shifted again. Shivering, he ducked quickly into the passenger seat and
pulled on his clothing while Spike started up the engine and cranked the heat all the way up.

“Feeling better?” Spike asked. “We could make a quick stop so you can track down a rabbit, if you like.”

“Nah. I’m good.”

“You smell like fish.”

“Hmm,” Xander said sleepily.

They drove in silence for a while until, in a soft voice, Spike said, “Xan?”

“Yeah?”

“In that...that other dimension....”

Xander opened his eye and looked over at Spike. “Yes?”

“If there’s nothing supernatural there, well, I was
never turned.”

Xander considered this for a moment. “I suppose that’s true.”

“So…I’ve been dead and gone for, what? Eighty years?”

Xander’s stomach lurched. “I guess so.”

“I wonder what became of William Pratt, without Dru.”

“Is that…. I don’t know if there’s any way for me to find out, Spike. I don’t even remember this me when I’m there.”

Spike shook his head slightly. “No, doesn’t matter. I was just thinking about what might have become of you, without me. Perhaps you’d have a normal life, with—”

“No! That Xander’s life sucks, remember?”
Spike shrugged. “His does. But you’re no loser. Without me you’d—”

“Without you, I’d be miserable.”

“You wouldn’t be a wolf.”

“Newsflash, baby: I like being a wolf. It’s cool. But, hell, I’d be a wereslug if it meant I could be with you. I thought we’d pretty much established already that you’re the light of my life. You complete me. You’re…. I’m gonna break into a cheesy love song here, Spike.”

Spike glanced over at him, emotions flickering rapidly across his face. “I don’t deserve you, you know,” Spike said.

“Well, drive a little faster then, sweetheart. When we get home, you can work on earning me.”

Part Four
Xander clicked through a cooking show, past something that involved repotting herbs, and skimmed over about fifteen channels of cartoons and Disney sitcoms. Then he was into the more adult realm. *South Park* was funny for about five minutes before he got bored. HBO was showing a chick flick, something with Renee Zellweger. Cinemax had soft-core porn, which might have diverted him except it had been so goddamn long since he got any that it was downright depressing. He flipped to the sports channels instead. Tennis. Great.

Over the past few weeks, his head had stopped hurting and the swelling had disappeared. The maddening itch in his empty socket was gone. His bone structure was still off on that side of his face, slightly skewed like something in a funhouse mirror, but Dr. Abrams said it wasn’t dangerous. No, he thought, just ugly. He was back to work full-time, even back to a few beers now and then at the end of the day. He had two hundred dollars saved up so far, which meant he’d be able to afford a new car, oh, sometime in the next century maybe. But that
was okay, he was managing. He was getting on with his life.

Only, something was wrong. At first he’d thought it was the accident itself, or having lost an eye. But that wasn’t it. Hell, sometimes now when he was home he could almost forget for a while that he was a Cyclops, until he went to toss a wrapper in the trash and missed because his depth perception sucked, or when he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror.

No, his problem was something else. He felt...off. Like he was missing something, or had forgotten something important. Sometimes he felt like his apartment wasn’t his own, like he was supposed to be someplace else. Sometimes he missed someone so deeply that he thought he might cry. He’d wake up expecting another body to be next to his, arms to be wrapped around him, the solid comfort of a loved one close within reach. But of course it was always just him, and it was stupid to feel that way. He’d never had a loved one. Never dated for longer than a couple weeks. Never had anyone.
Maybe he had damaged his brain after all.

Xander tossed the remote control across the room and didn’t even wince when it made a mark on the white paint, when the plastic fell apart and the battery rolled out onto the floor.

Beer. He was pretty sure he still had some in the fridge. He was just getting up to find out when someone knocked on his door.

His first thought was that the rent was overdue, but no, he’d managed to get that in on time. Jehovah’s Witnesses, maybe. He ignored the knock and went to the fridge, but just as he was reaching for the handle, there was another knock, louder, more insistent.

Crap, he thought. What if the cops had decided to charge him with DUI after all? He sighed resignedly and went to answer.

“Xander!” said the man who stood there.
Xander frowned at him in confusion. The guy was familiar. Tall, thin, a few years older than Xander. Glasses. Dark hair and dark stubble on his chin. A sort of desperate glint in his eyes. “Xander Harris,” he said with an English accent, and then Xander placed him. He was a customer, the guy who’d exclaimed over Xander’s face a couple weeks earlier. There weren’t a whole lot of Brits around here.

“Yeah?” Xander said, confused.

“I need to talk with you. It’s urgent.”

Xander wondered what kind of nut-job this guy was, and how he’d tracked Xander down. He could have got Xander’s name from his name tag, but how did he find the apartment? He must be some kind of deranged stalker.

“Thanks, but, um, I’m kind of busy right now,” Xander said and started to close the door.
The man blocked the door with a surprisingly strong hand. “Please. I’ve been searching for you for...for some time, and I really must speak with you. I need your help.”

“Look, mister, whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying. If you’re trying to get me to convert, well, I’m glad you’ve found Jesus. Tell him hi for me. If you’re looking for some kind of donation, I gave at the office.”

The man shook his head. “It’s none of those. Please, let me in and I can explain.”

“I don’t think so.” Xander repeated his attempt to shut the door, and again the man blocked him.

“My name is Wesley Wyndam-Pryce. I’m...well, this is rather difficult to explain. I’m not from here.”

“Yeah, the accent kinda gives that away, man.”

“No, no, I mean I’m not from this...this reality. I was brought here and—”
“Wait. Are you trying to tell me you’re from another planet? Like, ‘Take me to your leader,’ and all that? Or maybe more ‘To serve man.’”

Wyndam-Pryce rolled his eyes. “No, Xander, I’m very much from Earth. Just...another dimension, if you will.”

Xander barked out a laugh. “Well, I won’t. Look, buddy, I’d suggest heading home and asking your doctor to up your dosage of Thorazine, ‘cause what you’ve got ain’t doing the job for you.”

“I’m not a lunatic, Xander!”

“Of course not. Now just toddle on home before I call the cops, okay?”

“Xander, please—”

But Xander shoved hard and managed to dislodge the crazy guy enough to close the door. He quickly twisted the lock and then, for good measure,
slipped the chain lock into place as well.

Wyndam-Pryce pounded on the door, yelling Xander’s name, ignoring Xander’s orders to shut up and go away. Xander really was about to pick up the phone when he heard his neighbor’s door slam open. “What the fuck is your problem, dude?” shouted the neighbor. Xander didn’t know his name, but he’d seen him before and he was big and kind of scary-looking. “Shut the fuck up before I tear you a new one.”

To Xander’s relief, the knocking stopped. He heard footsteps going away, then the neighbor’s door shut so hard it shook the wall.

Xander went and fetched that beer, finally—there were two left—and collapsed onto the couch. “That was really fucking weird,” he said out loud. He appreciated the irony of talking to himself to complain about somebody else being nuts. But the really weird part was that, deep inside, he wished he’d listened to Wyndam-Pryce’s story.
This time, Xander found himself in the training room where, the last he remembered, he’d been sparring with Spike. Now he was propped up on a mat with, of course, his anxious vampire kneeling beside him, stroking his face. Xander sat up so suddenly he became dizzy, and Spike had to grab him before he toppled over. “Oi! Be careful!”

“I need to talk to Angel right now!”

Spike looked a little hurt. “He’s in the library, I expect.”

Xander pulled Spike in for a hug. “This one was especially strange, and I think maybe it has something to do with Angel.”

Spike’s face grew stormy as he helped Xander to his feet. “If that wanker has done something to you—”
“Relax. That’s not what I mean.”

Angel was, in fact, in the library, sitting at one of the tables. He had a glass of whiskey in one hand and a small book in the other. Kyna was cross-legged on the floor, peering and poking away at a laptop balanced on her knees.

“He had another one,” Spike announced, and Kyna and Angel looked at Xander with mild alarm.

“Angel, what happened to Wesley?” Xander asked.


“Only Wesley I know. He worked for you after he gave up the Watcher gig, right? But didn’t he die?”

Spike could hear Angel swallow. “Yes. Right before the battle. He was killed by a sorcerer.”

“Well, he was there, in Loserxanville. He showed up
at my—dammit! At the other Xander’s door, claiming he was from another dimension. The other Xan thinks he’s loco and sent him away.”

“Fuck,” said everyone else in the room.

“Pretty much.”

Kyna called Giles again. Giles was surprised but maybe, she said, not as surprised as she’d have expected. In any case, he said he’d change his and Lindsey’s tickets, and be there in two days instead of the following week.

Xander stayed firmly in his own dimension for that time. Spike wouldn’t let him out of his sight, but that wasn’t necessarily such a bad thing.

The night before Giles arrived, they took a bath together, Spike settling himself between Xander’s legs and up against Xander’s chest. He tipped his head back onto his lover’s shoulder and closed his eyes. “Heaven,” he said.
Xander couldn’t have agreed more. He settled one hand on Spike’s hip and placed the other on Spike’s chest, tweaking lightly at one nipple. “It was kind of weird to see Wesley again. I mean, in retrospect, again. ‘Cause at the time he was just raving lunatic guy.”

“He wasn’t a bad sort, for a Watcher.”

“I still can’t picture him all...heroic-like. Or kinda dark and twisty.” Angel never spoke of his son, but Spike had told Xander the bizarre tale. “When I knew him in Sunnyhell he was a bigger dork than I ever was.”

“He grew up.”

“Yeah. A few apocalypses’ll do that to a guy.”

“Or a vampire,” Spike said, and turned his head to nuzzle Xander’s neck.

“Hmm. And, speaking of growing up....” Xander dropped his hand down to Spike’s groin and began
to lazily stroke Spike’s cock. Spike hardened quickly under his touch, and Xander felt his own cock grow and fill. Obligingly, Spike shifted a little so Xander’s cock was nestled comfortably between them, the crown pressing slightly into the cleft of Spike’s ass.

“Why couldn’t life be like this all the time?” Xander asked. “I mean, with the baths and the cuddling and the sex and all the good stuff? Without interdimensional trances or poisonous demon bites or hexes. No hexes of any kind!”

“Without supernatural shite, you mean?”

“No, I want the good supernatural shit. Sexy souled vamp boyfriends.”

“Wouldn’t appreciate the good so much without the bad, pet. Yin and yang.”

Xander wasn’t convinced, but instead of arguing he nibbled on Spike’s pale shoulder. Despite the heat of the bathwater, they both shivered.
“Spike?” Xander said a few moments later.

“Hmm?”

“What do you suppose would have happened to you—well, *did* happen to you, in that other world?”

Spike was silent a while, thinking. “Dunno. Might’ve eventually married, I expect. Would have had to find a position of some sort—we were running short of dosh when I died. Perhaps I’d have become a teacher, perhaps even a lecturer at university. My uncle was a bureaucrat; he could have found me a position.” He sighed. “I wouldn’t have amounted to anything much.”

“You wouldn’t have saved the world. But would you have been happy?”

“Maybe. But not as happy as I am with you, love.”

That was enough to satisfy Xander, at least for the time being. He pushed Spike away, ignoring Spike’s indignant protests, and pulled the bathtub plug. He
tossed Spike a towel and used another to dry himself. Then they dropped the towels and embraced, kissing and gently biting and sucking on one another’s skin, and groping. Awkwardly, without breaking contact, they made their way out of the bathroom and across the bedroom. Xander fell back onto the mattress as it hit the back of his knees, and Spike toppled right on top of him.

After three years together, Xander still couldn’t believe how lucky he was, how good it felt to have a naked, male vampire squirming over his body, how he’d come to crave Spike the way a drunk craves the bottle.

When Spike dismounted and walked away, Xander nearly whined. But Spike only went as far as the bedside table, from which he produced a bottle of lube. He returned to Xander’s side and then put one foot up on the mattress.

Xander watched raptly as Spike poured a little of the liquid onto his long fingers and reached under himself to push the fingers inside. “Let me,” Xander
said, reaching for the bottle.

But Spike moved the bottle away and pushed him back down. “Uh-uh. You just watch now.” Xander did, biting at his lip to stop a moan from escaping as Spike languidly prepared himself. The moan did escape, though, when Spike poured a bit more lube on his palm, tossed the bottle aside, and slicked Xander’s cock with a few firm caresses.

With his tongue curled behind his teeth in the way that he knew always drove Xander wild, Spike climbed onto the bed with his knees straddling Xander’s hips and grasped Xander’s eager cock in his hand, and began to lower himself onto it.

And then he stopped. “You’re not going to go away while we’re shagging, are you?”

“Ew. I most sincerely hope not.”

Spike didn’t exactly look reassured, but he did sink down slowly, deliciously, engulfing Xander’s girth in his tight, silky channel.
“Christ,” Xander said. He moved his hand up, towards Spike’s tempting cock, but Spike batted his hand away.

“I’m doing all the work this time,” Spike said.

“Do I get to participate at all?”

“You get to lie there and watch and think about how fortunate you are to have me.” Spike punctuated his sentence with a slight wiggle that made Xander groan and lose all desire to argue.

And Xander did watch, sort of wishing for the first time in a long while that he had two eyes—all the better to see you with, my dear. Spike moved slowly up and down, flexing his powerful thighs, clenching all his muscles in the very best ways. At first, Spike’s cock bobbed damply against his belly as he moved, but then Spike wrapped one hand around it, using the other hand to help balance himself above Xander. Xander watched, mesmerized, as the red crown of Spike’s cock appeared and disappeared
within Spike’s fist, as Xander’s own cock appeared then disappeared into Spike’s welcoming body.

Xander couldn’t stand not touching at all. He placed his hands on Spike’s hips, and either that was okay with Spike, or the vampire was too far gone to notice. Spike bit his own lip so hard that a tiny trickle of blood started down his chin, but he stuck his tongue out and licked it away; a small motion, but one so erotic that Xander groaned and dug his fingertips into Spike’s tender skin. He wished there was some way he could mark Spike as his, just a tiny little scar somewhere, like the pinpricks that dotted Xander’s throat. Maybe Spike would agree to a tattoo, he thought.

Then he stopped thinking at all, as Spike sped his movements and threw his head back, as the bedsprings squeaked and one of the pillows fell to the floor, as Spike swore and cried out and came, his spend erupting over his fingers and his back arching. Moments later, sweet lightning sizzled up and down Xander’s spine and he climaxed as well.
Spike withdrew himself and flopped down at Xander’s side.

“See?” Xander said. “I stayed right here.”

~*~*~*~*~

It was not a comfortable gathering. Giles and Lindsey sat on the loveseat. Lindsey’s lower legs were encased in braces, and he had them propped up on the coffee table. His arm was flung around Giles’s shoulders and he looked very smug. Giles, on the other hand, appeared a little uncomfortable with the small PDA. His mouth was clenched tight and his body was stiff and he kept alternating between narrowing his eyes at Angel and looking unhappily at Xander. Angel, meanwhile, was perched in the Punishment Chair—the most uncomfortable chair in the room—glaring at Lindsey and periodically wincing when Kyna dug her fingers into his bicep.

“Sorry, the new suites aren’t quite ready,” Xander
said. “You can have ours if you want.”

“A simple room is quite fine, Xander,” Giles said. “I’ve no wish to evict you.”

“Your room has a king-sized bed, anyway. So you two can...um. And we got the elevators fixed. But, um, I guess you already knew that. So if you get hungry, there’s food here in our suite, or we can get you a fridge for yours, ‘cause we’ll be buying one anyway for the new suites. Or you can use the big kitchen downstairs. Or takeout, or, uh, there’s lots of restaurants ‘cause this is LA.” He knew he was babbling, but he didn’t seem to be able to stop.

Mercifully, Spike put his hand over Xander’s mouth. “Let’s skip the nattering, shall we? What’s happening to my boy, Watcher?”

Giles took off his glasses. He looked like he might want to polish them, but he didn’t have a hanky nearby. He put them back on. “Well, we’re not certain, actually.”
“But you have an idea,” Spike said.

“Yes. Some of the members of the Council were documenting the activities and demise of Wolfram & Hart. Lindsey and I were helping. Lindsey, of course, had a great deal of useful information about the firm.”

“Unfortunately,” Lindsey muttered.

Giles patted Lindsey’s leg in a gesture that Xander found very sweet. Giles said, “As we worked, we became aware of some odd…discrepancies. As some of you know”—he looked at Angel and Lindsey—“the firm had many of its employees sign contracts that bound them indefinitely to the firm. Bound them even past death.”

“But Wolfram & Hart is gone. That should have nullified the contracts,” Angel said.

Lindsey answered. “It did. So Lilah, Holland, they’re free, off to wherever naughty lawyers go.”
“What does this have to do with Xander?” Spike demanded impatiently. “He never signed a contract with those wankers. Nor did I, for that matter.”

Giles nodded. “Yes, I know. But Wesley did. And during our research we uncovered some indications that when he was murdered, the firm had him...his soul, I expect...stored somewhere. Somewhere out of the way, where he couldn’t interfere with their plans for Angel. They probably thought that they could bring him back here eventually in some capacity. But you can’t simply stuff a soul into a box of some sort—the person, or whatever was left of him, would go insane.”

Xander was beginning to understand. “So they stuck him in this other dimension and they figured he couldn’t come back until they went and got him.”

“Precisely. As I said, we just recently became aware of this possibility and we’ve been trying to locate him.”

Spike growled so quietly nobody but Xander and
Angel heard him. “What the bloody hell does this have to do with Xander?”

Giles frowned. “We attempted to open a communication portal of sorts, between our world and the one where we believe Wesley is. It’s quite a difficult task in the best of circumstances—make a mistake and you’ve created a new Hellmouth—and we were having particular problems in this case. Most likely because that world is without magic, although we didn’t know that at the time. We’d nearly given up. That’s why I was going to come here next week; I wanted to see whether the books you have might be helpful.”

Kyna had been sitting beside Angel, chewing on the end of her ponytail, but now she stood and pointed at Giles. “I see! When you went mucking about with alternate dimensions, you somehow pulled Xander into the mess.”

“I’m afraid so,” Giles said. Xander had to restrain Spike, who growled again and looked ready to leap for Giles’s throat.
“Let’s get some more info before we wreak mayhem on our source, okay sweetheart?” Xander said. Spike glowered but stopped resisting, and instead slumped back in his chair. “Okay, G-Man. So you’ve opened up a chatline with the other side, and it’s kinda sorta working, even though they don’t have magic over there. Got it. But why me? I barely even knew the guy. Haven’t seen him in years.”

“I was thinking about this during our flight,” said Giles.


Xander was very satisfied to see Giles do that semi-affectionate eye roll at someone other than him. “I believe there are several reasons why the enchantment affected you specifically, Xander,” he said. “It has settled on someone who knew Wesley, someone who the members of the Council knew of. But it wouldn’t work on anyone whose alter-ego is dead in the alternate dimension, so that eliminates
Angel and Spike.”

Xander squeezed Spike’s hand, because he still didn’t like to think of him gone. “Fine. But then what about Buffy or Willow? Or Faith—she was his Slayer, for Christ’s sake.”

“I’m not sure. Are you sure that they’re alive there?”

Xander thought. “No. That Xander never met Buffy or Faith, and he hasn’t talked to Will in years.”

Giles nodded. “Your location may also have played a part. Wesley signed his contract here, he died here, he left this plane of existence here. It makes sense that his ties to LA would be particularly strong.”

As Xander pondered this, Spike lurched to his feet, this time managing to avoid Xander’s grab. “Fine, then,” Spike said. “Now that you’ve sussed out what’s going on, disconnect the fucking line and let Xander free!”
Giles didn’t even flinch. He’d probably been the target of Spike’s tantrums too often. He looked Xander straight in the eye. “I believe we can break off communication, although it won’t be simple. But the connection between the worlds can only be made once. If we end it now, Wesley will be trapped there permanently.”

**Part Five**

The store was crowded. He hated shopping here at this time of day, when everyone else had just got off work too, and everyone was scrounging for dinner. And he wasn’t all that fond of Safeway to begin with. But it was on the bus route on his way home, so that’s where he went. He’d been eating less fast food lately in an attempt to save up more quickly for a car. As a result of that, plus the extra walking he’d been doing, he’d managed to keep off the weight he’d dropped in the hospital, which was satisfying. Not that he was going to attract anyone anyway, what with his horror-show face and his crappy life and less-than-sparkling personality, but
he felt healthier and that was good. He’d been drinking less as well: there weren’t any bars within walking distance of his apartment, and beer was heavy to carry home.

Tonight, Xander bought a roasted chicken and some potato salad and a loaf of bread and some tangerines, and he pretended not to notice the way the cashier avoided looking him straight in the face, or the way the sticky little boy hanging out at the gumball machine gaped at him. But his time in line had been long enough that he missed the next bus. He had to wait at the bus stop, clutching his bags, ignoring the way people stared at him as they drove past. It had been a long day and his feet hurt.

The bus finally lumbered up and wheezed to a halt in front of him. Xander climbed on board and fumbled awkwardly to pull out his pass; he flashed it at the driver, who started driving again while Xander was still making his way down the aisle. Xander lurched and almost fell. The bus was fairly full. Most people didn’t look up at him at all, those who did appeared surly. Nobody scooted over to
give him a seat. Xander finally stopped next to a thin man wearing a Raiders jacket. “Excuse me,” Xander said. The man scowled but moved over.

Six stops later, Xander got off. A light drizzle had started and he hunched his shoulders as he walked down the sidewalk. The rain dripped down his neck, under his collar, chilling him. By the time he made it the three blocks to his apartment, Xander wanted only to get inside, eat something, and crawl into a nice, warm bed. He trudged across the parking lot, up the stairs, and then around the corner.

The crazy guy was there, hunched against the wall next to Xander’s door. When he saw Xander, he got to his feet. “Xander, please,” he said.

Xander wanted to tell him to get lost; he was in no mood for lunacy right then. But maybe because the guy looked as exhausted, as beaten-down and defeated as Xander felt, or maybe just because Xander didn’t have the energy to argue, Xander held out his grocery bags. “Hold these,” he said.
The guy—what was his name? Wesley Something-Hyphenated—eagerly took the sacks. As Xander fumbled for his key, Wesley said, “Thank you. You’ve no idea how much this means to me. I’ve been trapped here, you see—”

“Tell you what. How about we get some food inside us and then you can rave at me all you want, okay?”

Wesley nodded and trailed after him. He hovered anxiously while Xander took out a couple of plates. How funny. It had been a long time since he’d needed more than one. He pulled out some silverware as well, and a couple of glasses. “Want some water? It’s all I got.” He very much wished he had something stronger.

“Water will be fine.”

Xander handed him a glassful. “Hang on. I’ll be right back,” Xander said. He went into the bedroom and kicked off his shoes. He pulled off his jacket and his damp shirt, and pulled on a sweatshirt instead. When he came back out, Wesley was sitting at the
table. He’d taken the food out of the bags and was waiting fairly patiently. Xander had a sudden image of the man kissing Coredelia Chase in the Sunnydale High School library, and how odd was that? Xander hadn’t thought of her in years. Besides, as far as Xander knew, she’d never stepped foot in the library. He rarely had either, for that matter. He wasn’t exactly the scholarly type, and anyway, Mrs. Rodrigues, the librarian, kind of creeped him out.

Maybe the crazy was contagious.

Xander sat down opposite Wesley and began to serve the chicken. Wesley watched him intently. Finally, in a soft voice, Wesley said, “What happened to your eye?” He sounded genuinely concerned and sympathetic, and instead of reacting angrily, Xander found himself blinking back tears.

“Car wreck.”

“I’m very sorry.”

Xander shrugged and wiped at his remaining eye.
“My own damn fault.”

“Still, I am—”

“Thanks. You might as well spit out your story now.” He took a big bite of chicken breast and waited.

Wesley nodded. “Yes. This is going to sound very improbable, I know, but....” He sighed. “It’s true.”

“Hit me.”

“I’m from an alternate universe. One quite similar to this one, actually, except in mine things exist that do not here. Magic.”

Xander blinked. “Magic? Like rabbits out of hats and sawing ladies in half?”

“Like witchcraft and supernatural beings. Demons. Vampire slayers.”

“Vampire slayers?”
“Yes. Young girls, one chosen in each generation to.... Well, that’s not really important right now. In any case, I got mixed up with some evil demon lawyers, and—”

“Evil demon lawyers?” This was more entertaining than he’d expected.

“Yes,” Wes replied with slight irritation. “They wanted to temporarily rid themselves of me, so they sent me here.”

“And you want to go home.”

“Of course.”

“Have you tried clicking your heels together three times?”

Wesley narrowed his eyes. “This may seem amusing to you, but I assure you—”

“Yeah, okay, I’m sorry.” Xander really was, a little. The guy was so earnest. “So you want to return to
Magicland, and you haven’t managed to catch a ride home on a flying unicorn. How the hell do you think I can help?” He shoved another forkful of food into his mouth.

“Because I know you. Well, not you, precisely. I know the Xander Harris in my world.”

“Yeah? Am I some kind of big-time wizard or something there?”

“No. Actually, the last time I saw you, you were in high school. Afterwards, I believe you had a job in construction. And then you...well, I know this sounds unlikely, but you and your friends helped avert an apocalypse. I’m not sure what happened to you after that; I was rather caught up in my own matters. I believe—”

“Wait. I saved the world?”

Wesley looked steadily at him. “Yes. You were instrumental in saving the world more than once, actually.”
Xander laughed harshly. “Well, obviously your Xander Harris is nothing like me. He’s some kind of superhero or something.”

“No. He’s quite ordinary. I believe that when he was faced with problems, he simply made the right choices.”

Xander snorted. The right choices. He’d never do that. He ate a spoonful of potato salad, followed by a big swallow of water. “Okay,” he said, putting down his glass. “So your Xander is Mr. Action Hero guy. I’m obviously not.”

“Xander, I believe that if my colleagues knew where I was, they might be able to bring me back. I’ve been trying to find a way to send them a message. I attempted to track down other people I’d known, but some of them are dead in this world, and some I couldn’t find, and others would have nothing to do with me. It’s been quite difficult. I don’t officially exist here, I have no papers at all, so getting a job, traveling, those things have been challenging for
me. I was running out of options. I hadn’t even thought of you, to be honest. We didn’t know each other well.” He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “And then, several months ago, I dreamt about you.”

“Oh?” Xander felt a little uncomfortable about that.

“Your other self, I expect. You were living in a hotel in Los Angeles where I once lived, along with my friends. You were wearing an eyepatch, actually. And as unlikely as it was, you were kissing someone else I’d known. Someone I never would have partnered you with, not even in the wildest fancies of my subconscious. I thought perhaps it wasn’t a dream after all, but a vision. So I began to look for you.”

“Who was I kissing?”

“Erm....” Wesley looked uncomfortable. “You were kissing a vampire.”

“A vampire? Like, the bride of Dracula? Or maybe
more like Catherine Deneuve, ‘cause she was pretty sexy, actually.”

“No. This vampire is male. His name is Spike.”

Xander’s reaction was very strange. He should have dismissed Wesley’s entire story as the rantings of a madman. He should have been creeped out by the guy’s suggestion that Xander would make out with a manpire. But when Wesley said the vampire’s name—Spike; what the hell kind of name was that, even for a monster?—Xander’s heart ached, like he’d been reminded of something important that he’d lost long ago. And suddenly, as surely as he knew that his middle name was Lavelle and that clowns gave him nightmares, Xander knew that Wesley’s tale was true.

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“We’ve made contact,” Xander mumbled.

“Stop doing that!” said Spike.
“Didn’t really do it on purpose, baby.” Xander groaned slightly as Spike helped him to his feet. This time he’d blacked out in the Laura Ashley suite, right in the middle of installing a towel bar in the floral-wallpapered bathroom. Luckily Spike had been there, watching out for just such an occurrence, or maybe just watching because he enjoyed it. He seemed to have moved Xander out of the bathroom, onto the softer surface of the carpeted main room.

“You nearly bashed your head open on the bathtub.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I got conked in the head, Spike.” He walked into the bathroom. The rack was hanging off the wall, half-installed. Xander bent and picked up his electric drill.

“Yeah, and it’s lucky the bloody thing is hard as a rock. Pet, tell the sodding Council to let you go.”

“C’mon. We both know I’m not gonna leave Wesley
stranded. Besides, now Wesley has convinced the other Xander that something’s going on, and the other Xander wants to help, too.”

Spike sighed. “Of course he does. He’s as big a berk as you are.”

Xander was quiet for a moment as he installed the screws to hold the rack in place. “There. That’s better. Hey, do you know if that faucet I was waiting for came?” Kyna had picked it out of the Insanely Expensive Bathroom Fixtures catalog, and, judging by the time it had taken for the package to arrive, the company was located in suburban Ulan Bator.

Spike ignored his question. “Percy’s a good enough sort, but you don’t owe him anything. Besides, is that world really so horrible?”

“No, it seems okay. But it’s not his home, Spike.” He set the screwdriver into his tool box and rested his hands on Spike’s shoulders. “You know why the other Xander’s playing along? Because when Wesley said your name, he recognized it—/
recognized it—and he...l...we—whatever!—went all gooey inside.”

Spike pulled Xander into an embrace and snuffled into the crook of Xander’s neck. “Couldn’t go on if I lost you, Xan.”

“You’re not gonna lose me.” Xander stuck his nose in Spike’s hair and inhaled deeply. “This is no big—”

“Don’t say it!”

“Sorry.” He smacked a loud kiss onto Spike’s cheek. “Come on. Let’s tell the crew what’s up.”

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Lindsey had spent the day in physical therapy, and didn’t look too happy about it. He was lying on his back on a small couch someone had dragged into the library, groaning theatrically.

“Could just chop ‘em off and save you the trouble,”
Spike grumbled as he and Xander entered the room. Spike collapsed into a chair and pulled Xander down into his lap.

“Weren’t you two supposed to be working somewhere?” Angel asked, not even bothering to look up from his book.

Xander was annoyed at the implication that he and his vampire were incapable of doing research, even though the truth was neither of them really liked sticking their noses in dusty old books, and Xander, at least, was less skilled than average at the task. But still, Angel didn’t have to be so snotty about it, especially since Xander was the one wavering between dimensions. “We were working,” he said, although the pronoun was pretty much a stretch, unless Xander-sitting counted as working. “Got the bathroom almost done. A few more things and Kyna can bring in the canopy bed or the stuffed bears or whatever it is she plans to furnish the room with.”

Now Kyna was giving him dirty looks and he felt a little bad about it. But not bad enough to apologize.
Spike squeezed Xander’s waist. “My boy’s feeling a bit out of sorts. He had another spell.”

Everyone looked at Xander, even Lindsey. “What happened?” Giles asked. So Xander told them, all the while thinking that he was getting tired of playing this interdimensional game of telephone.

When Xander was finished, Giles nodded. “This is good news, I think.”

Angel said, “Just because Xander’s agreeable on both sides doesn’t mean Wes is any closer to getting home. How are we going to pull him back?”

“I’m working on that right now.”

Xander stood. “Great, you work on it. Spike, let’s go kill something, okay?”

Spike stayed put. “What if we’re in the middle of a fight and you—”

“I won’t. Come on. Please. I’m feeling itchy and I
need to get my teeth into something.”

Spike waggled his eyebrows. “We don’t have to go anywhere for that, pet.”

“I wanna bite something living, Spike. Fight first, shag later.”

Part Six

Wesley was staying at a cheap motel, the kind where people cooked meth in the bathrooms and hookers went wobbling across the parking lot and knife-wielding drunks chased their girlfriends. But he had a car, an elderly Ford Focus with mismatched doors and a cracked windshield. So he and Xander negotiated a deal—Wesley could sleep on Xander’s couch, and in turn he’d chauffeur Xander to and from work. The arrangement worked out pretty well. Wes had a laptop, too, and he spent
his days on the internet, trying to find some way to get home. In the evening they talked, comparing the versions of their worlds. Wesley’s was a lot stranger than Xander’s, yet Xander found himself yearning for it. At least there he was someone, he had someone.

Xander had never had a roommate, and if he had, he probably wouldn’t have picked a crazy English guy. But he found himself enjoying the company, and even if Wesley’s stories were pretty wild, they were interesting to listen to.

“So if Spike was with you guys in LA and Xander was in Africa, how did they hook up?”

“I have no idea.” They were sitting on the couch, neither of them watching the basketball game that was on the TV. “I don’t even know how Spike survived the fight with Wolfram & Hart. It was looking pretty grim.”

“Maybe someone stepped in to help. Witch Willow, maybe.” Xander tried to picture the Willow he’d
known in high school doing magic, and couldn’t. She’d been a pretty practical girl.

“I doubt it. Angel had alienated them fairly thoroughly. They didn’t trust him.”

“Well, occasionally souled vampire, yeah, I can see why the trust would be difficult.”

“Yes, it would be,” Wesley said, and he looked so overcome with sorrow for a moment that Xander patted his shoulder. Wesley gave him a small, grateful smile.

“Um, your Xander. Was he always gay?”

“I know he dated girls. Cordelia, for instance.”

Xander nearly choked. “”Cordelia? Cordelia Chase?”

“Yes. In high school.”

“Cordelia Chase would have rather bought her clothes at Wal-Mart than go out with me.”
Wes shrugged. “You two apparently found some...chemistry. And then later, I understand Xander was engaged to a girl called Anya. She used to be a vengeance demon. But the wedding was called off.”

A vengeance demon? Somehow, that was more believable than Cordelia, so Xander didn’t question it. “Your Xander’s seen a lot more action than me. Maybe I’d get luckier in a world with demons in it.”

“Perhaps. I wasn’t all that fortunate in love myself.”

Xander remembered what Wes had told him about that girl and how she’d been possessed somehow by a god. Wes hadn’t said as much, but Xander had the fairly strong impression that Wes had had it bad for Fred. But that gave him a thought. “Have you tried looking for Fred here?”

Wesley frowned. “Yes. She was one of the first...when I’d realized what had happened to me. She’s a professor at the University of Texas in
Tyler. She’s becoming quite well known in her field, I believe. She’s married and she has a young son.”

“Did you...did you ask if she can help you?”

“No. She went through so much in my world, and here...here she’s happy. I let her be.”

Xander nodded and for a while he watched the men in shorts run back and forth across the court, their shoes squeaking the whole time. And then something else occurred to him. “You came to see me because of that dream you had, or vision, or whatever.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you look for Spike? You knew him a lot better than you knew me, right?”

“Xander, in this world, the man who would have been Spike was born in the 1850s. He’s been dead a very long time.”
For no reason, Xander’s stomach clenched. “Oh.” He picked at a small fray in the fabric of his jeans. “I thought maybe he was your ticket out of here instead of me.”

Wesley grew very still. Then he turned and grabbed Xander’s shoulders. “Of course! You’re a genius!”

“Now, there’s a sentence nobody’s ever said to me before. Unless they were being ironic. Or sarcastic. I’m a little fuzzy on the difference between the two.”

The other man ignored his babble. “A person cannot physically pass from one reality to another if his counterpart is alive in the other world. If he were to try, it would cause all sorts of temporal-spatial anomalies...possibly destroy one or both worlds.”

“Well, that’s bad.”

“And if his counterpart is not alive, he could pass over, but then he’d be stuck. It’s a one-way
journey.”

“Also bad.”

“But if the person were dead in both worlds...as I am...he might be able travel both directions. The fact that I lack a body in my original world keeps me from doing it by myself. But if the deceased person did have a physical presence....”

“So, what? You want to try to catch a ride back home on a cadaver?”

“Not a cadaver. A vampire.”

Xander scratched at his neck as he took a few moments to mull this over. “Okay. So how do you lure a vampire to this world?”

Wesley grinned. “Perhaps with a man who has been described as a demon magnet.”

~*~*~*~*~
For once, Xander woke up in his own bed, in the arms of his own vampire. “You were calling my name, love.”

“I missed you. The other Xander’s never met you—he’s not even into guys—and he still misses you.”

“I expect that’s the bit of him that’s you, Xan.”

“Maybe.” Xander didn’t want to think about the whole duality thing. It made his head hurt. “But he’s really lonely.”

Spike clutched him closer. “Don’t like to think of a lonely Xander, even if he’s not really you.”

“Hmm.” Xander squirmed around so he was facing Spike, and he looked into that familiar, beloved face. He didn’t have to say anything. He could keep his mouth shut and Spike would never know, and life would go on just fine. Except Xander would be haunted for the rest of his days by the thought of
stranded Wesley.

He reached up and traced his fingertips over Spike’s cheekbone, then over the scarred eyebrow. “Wesley had an idea,” Xander said very quietly.

Spike waited.

“He thinks maybe a vampire could fetch him somehow. But that doesn’t have to be you, does it? Angel could do it. He’s the one who got Wes all tied up with Wolfram & Hart to begin with.”

Spike kissed Xander’s forehead.

Xander let Spike tell the story this time, while Xander sat in one of the library chairs, glaring at the wall. Angel, of course, volunteered to go, even though Kyna’s lips thinned and her eyes hardened. But after an hour or so of especially frenzied book-consultation, during which Xander had silently chanted, Not Spike, not Spike, not Spike, Giles had crowed in triumph and then shook his head.
“It has to be Spike,” Giles said.

“Of course,” said Spike. “Who wants an interdimensional pouf?”

Giles rolled his eyes. “It has to be Spike because he’s closely tied emotionally to Xander. And Xander’s connection with the other Xander will provide the means for Spike to travel.”

Xander exploded. “I don’t understand any of this bullshit! Give me something to build, something to bite, that’s fine. This alternate universe crap is stupid!”

Giles stood and walked over. He pulled a chair closer to Xander so that they were facing one another and he took off his glasses. “Xander, you and your counterpart form the two ends of a bridge that connect dimensions. Humans, if they tried to traverse that bridge, would be destroyed or they’d be caught on the other side. Most vampires, including Angel, would…well, get lost. They would never find their way to the opposite side, nor would
they find their way back.” Xander glanced at Kyna, who was listening intently, grimly. “But Spike could travel safely, because you two are intimate.”

“So if I fucked Angel he could go instead?” Xander said angrily.

Spike growled and Angel made a face.

But Giles shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. Yes, you two are certainly, erm, physically close. But I meant emotionally. Spike knows you, doesn’t he?”

Spike nodded gravely.

“Spike could cross the bridge and then lead Wesley back. And then the bridge could finally be destroyed, and you would stop having these visions.”

It all sounded so logical, so simple. Xander scowled and crossed his arms on his chest.

Angel approached them both. “What happens if
Spike does drag Wes back? Wes is dead. Does he end up a ghost? Does he...I don’t know...ascend to heaven?”

“We can make him a body,” Lindsey said. He’d been sitting on the couch the whole time, massaging his legs. “The firm did that now and then. They did it for me. You end up in the same physical condition you were when you died, more or less, but you’ve got a meat jacket again. The magic’s not that hard.”

Xander looked down at his hands. They were calloused, and there was a scab on the back of his right hand from when Spike had decided to put a very cold hand down the back of Xander’s jeans while Xander was working, and the putty knife Xander had been using had slipped a little. Spike had licked and sucked at the tiny wound, his eyes shining the way a cat’s eyes shine in the dark, and Xander had let Spike throw him down on the floor and fuck him right then and there, with the handle of the putty knife digging into Xander’s back. “It’s not fair,” he almost whispered.
Spike had been standing nearby. He knelt beside Xander’s chair and clasped their hands together. “It never is, love.”

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Xander gasped and watched as his sweat dripped down onto Spike’s straining body. Spike’s head was thrown back, the cords of his neck standing starkly, his face clenched in what appeared to be exquisite agony. “Harder,” Spike said. “Hard...oh, fuck, Xan...like that...Xan...Xan...Xan....” Chanting Xander’s name like a prayer or a spell.

Xander didn’t have the breath to say anything at all, at least anything more coherent than a wild cry that sounded more than a bit like a howl. His hips were pistoning and he felt like he was so deeply inside his lover that he might be swallowed whole. And that wasn’t a bad thing.

“Bite!” Spike said, his voice hoarse and broken.
Xander didn’t have to be told twice. He wouldn’t have been able to resist the temptation much longer anyway. As his lower body still moved rapidly, Xander unlocked his elbows and collapsed onto Spike’s chest. He grabbed Spike’s hair and then sank his teeth into ivory skin, just above Spike’s jutting collarbone.

Spike yelled. Xander felt the rush of room-temperature liquid against his own stomach, felt Spike clench around him. As the salty taste of his own sweat and Spike’s blood filled his mouth, Xander juddered and froze and climaxed.

They stayed stuck together, Xander’s soft cock still inside Spike, for a long time, until they were both almost asleep. Spike sucked lightly on Xander’s neck and ran his hands up and down Xander’s back, making Xander’s over-sensitized nerves twitch. “You’re bloody good at shagging,” Spike said when Xander finally withdrew and rolled off, to flop bonelessly at Spike’s side.

“Practice makes perfect.”
“Yeah?” Spike reached over to play with Xander’s nipple. “You’re not perfect yet. Perhaps we ought to practice some more.”

Xander tried to laugh and groan at the same time. “Just...give me five minutes, okay?”

“We have to be downstairs in fifteen, love, or they’ll all come marching up here.”

Xander thought about being interrupted by Giles when in the middle of...in the middle of Spike. He shuddered. “Okay. Three minutes, then.”

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Magic made Xander itchy, and it smelled funny. He wanted to reach up and scratch his nose, but Spike was holding tightly to one hand, and Xander’s other hand was clutching what looked like a blob of melted blue glass, but which Giles had insisted was some kind of mystical talisman thing. The floor was
hard underneath him, and he wondered how difficult it was going to be to remove the paint from it. He understood that enchantments often required special symbols and marks, but did they have to be made in the lobby, where he’d just recently spent days restoring the tile? He remembered when Willow had stuck Angel’s soul on permanently; at least this time, Xander and Spike hadn’t been required to take their clothes off.

Giles and Lindsey were sitting on the round seat, squinting together at a huge book that was opened across both their laps. That didn’t give Xander much comfort; it was like seeing a surgeon consulting an anatomy text just before they wheeled you into the OR. He really wished they had decided to wait until Willow was available, but Spike had been anxious to get the whole thing over with and Giles had been worried that, over time, Xander’s connection with the other world would either disappear or become permanent, and neither of those was a good thing.

Angel was standing awkwardly nearby, his face set in its usual brooding lines, but Xander knew that
underneath the scowl was genuine concern for Spike. Plus, Angel had never been happy to be simply a bystander, but there wasn’t much he could do right now. Kyna was pacing. She liked to be in on the action, too, preferably bossing people around.

Xander turned his head to the side to look at his vampire. “Spike, if you get stuck there—”

“I won’t.”

“Yeah, but if you do—”

“Pet, I’ve made my way back from death, from ashes, from hell, from being a bloody ghost. And that was before I had you to come home to. I won’t get stuck.”

Xander felt slightly comforted. “Okay. But promise me: if the impossible happens—because Christ knows it has before—promise me you’ll find someone in that world. I don’t want you by yourself. You don’t do well alone.”
Spike sighed. “Xan, if the impossible happens, if I’m convinced that there’s absolutely no return, I’ll seduce the other Xander.”

Xander felt an odd combination of relief and jealousy. Could you be jealous of yourself? “He’s straight.”

“So were you, once.”

“No. I was bi and in denial. That Xander really isn’t into guys.”

“That’s because he’s never met me,” Spike said smugly. “You couldn’t resist me in this dimension or any other.”

Xander didn’t argue because he wasn’t sure Spike was wrong. Besides, just then Giles came over to loom beside them. “All right,” he said. “The bond should have cemented. Xander, you can place the talisman on the floor now.”

Xander did. His hand was all sweaty and he wiped
his palm against his thigh.

Giles said, “The next bit is quite simple. I’m going to put you to sleep, Xander—”

“Not a phrase you want to say to someone who’s semi-canine, G-Man.”

Giles huffed impatiently. “Within a few minutes, the spell should set you into communication with the alternate reality. Spike, as soon as he’s there, you should feel sort of a tug. Don’t resist it; just relax and allow it to pull you along. You should very shortly find yourself with Xander.”

“That’s a few more shoulds than I’d like, Giles,” said Xander.

“Nothing is ever certain with magic. Or with anything else, for that matter. But I’m quite confident.”

That was going to have to be good enough. “Okay, then. Hit me.”
“You do remember how to get back, Spike?”

“I’m not an idiot, Watcher.”

Giles opened his mouth like he might disagree, then shut it. He nodded twice and walked back to Lindsey, who handed him a green plastic bowl. Giles brought the bowl back over with him. From it he removed what looked like a glass salt-shaker, then sprinkled liquid from the shaker onto Spike and Xander. It had a bitter, acidic smell. Next he dropped several pinches of a pleasant-scented herb on them.

“I’m beginning to feel like a side of beef,” Xander said. “Werewolf. It’s what’s for dinner.”

Giles glared at him. “Do be quiet!”

Then there was some chanting in various languages and some waving around of sticks and it was pretty boring, actually, and Xander felt his eyelid growing heavier and heavier and Oh! That was the point,
wasn’t it? Sleep came slowly upon him, as if he were sinking gently into quicksand, and everything grew fuzzier, and the last thing he remembered was Spike squeezing his hand.

Part Seven

The crash and clatter came from the aisle with the bulk nails and screws. It was louder than the usual noises that occurred when the children of inattentive parents decided to play, or when a customer unaccountably decided that the thing just out of reach needed to be in their hands right that second. Xander took off running, grateful that at least it wasn’t the lightbulb aisle, but already dreading having to re-sort the tiny little pieces of metal.

What he found was a man lying on the ground, looking more than a little dazed. Thousands of bolts were scattered around him, and maybe that’s why nobody in the small gathered crowd had tried to approach him. The guy looked kind of shady, Xander
thought, with nuclear-colored hair and a long leather duster. Probably he was drunk or stoned. But his eyes sharpened when Xander cautiously approached him.

“Xander!” he said.

Xander glanced down at his name tag. “Yep, that’s my name. Are you okay? Do you want me to call 911?”

With some difficulty, the guy struggled to his knees and then to his feet. He took an unsteady step towards Xander, and Xander took a step away. But then the man froze. His mouth fell open and he held a hand against his own chest. “It’s beating,” he said.

“Yeah, well, that’s generally considered a good thing. Look, maybe you’d better sit down. I can bring you a chair—”

The man shook his head. “No. I...I didn’t expect to be alive.” He had an English accent.
“Well, you took a nasty fall, but it doesn’t look like you really hurt yourself.”

The man spun around and looked past the other end of the aisle, out through the exit doors. “I could go outside.”

“Sure you can. But you should rest a little first. We have paperwork, incident reports, that kind of thing. Besides, you’ll want this documented for later, when you sue us for ten million dollars.”

Most of the bystanders began to drift away, probably disappointed that there hadn’t been gore and mayhem. The man in black took a few deep breaths and squared his shoulders. “Don’t you know me, Xander?”

Great. More craziness. What was he, a lunatic magnet? Except when he looked at the man, really looked at him, there was something familiar about him. But he couldn’t place him at all. “Sorry,” Xander said.
The man seemed to shrink a little. “Right, then. Well, you’ve heard of me, anyhow. Name’s Spike.”

Xander felt so dizzy he had to reach out to one of the building's support pillars to keep from falling. “Spike? You mean as in va—” He stopped and looked around at the few remaining gawkers and at Todd, that asshole who worked in the paint department and who was watching with his mouth hanging open. “Spike as in, um, the Spike who knows Wesley?”

“Yeah. Where is he?”

Xander glanced at his watch. “Probably on the way to pick me up. I’m supposed to clock out in ten minutes.” He had about a million questions to ask, but not in front of an audience. He was beginning to seriously doubt his own sanity—he didn’t intend to make that a spectator sport. “Let’s go talk, okay?”

Spike nodded.

Xander left Todd to clean up the mess and told his
boss that there was an emergency and he had to leave a little early. His boss looked at Spike skeptically and said, “Okay.”

Spike seemed hesitant to step out into the bright sunshine, but once he was outside, he looked up at the blue sky in amazement. “Bloody hell,” he murmured.

They stood at the curb, waiting. After Spike finished admiring the sun, he took to staring at Xander instead. It made Xander really uncomfortable. “Are you...did you come from...where Wes is from?” Xander said.

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“Long story. I’ll explain later.”

“Are you really a vampire? With the fangs and all that?”
“Not here, but yeah, ordinarily.”

“Can you turn into a bat or a wolf?”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Bloody Stoker. I can’t turn into anything but myself with sharper teeth. You’re the one who becomes a wolf.”

“Huh?”

“Watcher didn’t tell you that bit, did he? Well, I don’t expect he knows. It was after his time.”

“What bit?”

“You—well, not you. My Xander is a werewolf.” He said it proudly, the way a parent might brag about his child being an honor student.

“A werewolf?” And then he caught something else as well. “You said your Xander. Are the two of you, um, a couple? ‘Cause Wes dreamed of you kissing, but….” He felt his face grow red.
“Xander Harris is the love of my bloody unlife. And right now he’s in your noggin, listening, probably going all smug about me getting all nancy-boy in the middle of a car park.”

“He’s in my head?”

“Like I said. Long story.”

Xander was saved from more astonishing revelations as Wes’s Ford came clanking across the lot. But then Wes must have caught sight of Spike, because his mouth fell open and he almost ran them both over.

“Oi, Percy! ‘M alive here. Don’t fancy getting splattered by your car.”

Wes managed to stop the car without killing them. He pushed his door open with a squeal of metal and leapt out with the engine still running. “Spike!” He grabbed Spike by the shoulders and damned if he didn’t have tears in his eyes. “Is it really you?”
“In the flesh. The living, breathing flesh, as a matter of fact.”

“Good Lord! How did you get here?”

Spike sighed. “I think the tale will be easier with a few pints down, yeah?”

Xander ended up climbing in the back of the car with Spike, who stared at him the whole way home. Xander had rarely been under such close scrutiny, and knowing this man was his alter ego’s lover made him feel very odd, even as a tiny part of him almost thrummed with the urge to reach out and touch Spike.

It seemed like a very long drive home.

At long last, though, the three of them were seated around Xander’s table, which was kind of an event anyway because he’d never had two guests in his place at once. They each had a bottle of beer in front of them, although Xander was wishing he had something stronger, and he had the idea the other
two were wishing the same.

Xander had never been attracted to men, at least not that he’d been aware of. But sitting under his bug-spotted fluorescent light, watching Spike pick at the label of his Killian’s Red, Xander realized that the man was beautiful. Vampires and werewolves aside, how could someone like that fall for someone like him?

Spike told them a story. It involved the Watchers’ Council, which Wesley had mentioned to Xander, and some people Xander had never heard of before. And of course it involved the other Xander too, and he was, as Spike had said, apparently in Xander’s head right now, listening in, or maybe he was a part of Xander; Xander was a little confused by the whole concept. Either way, it was pretty creepy.

Wesley seemed fairly shocked by some of what Spike had to say: “Rupert Giles and Lindsey McDonald?!” Other parts saddened him, like the news of Charles Gunn’s death, and his face tightened when Spike said they never heard from
Illyria again after the battle. But he was clearly relieved to learn that Angel had survived, and he was even happier when Spike described how they eventually managed—with the other Xander’s help!—to destroy the law firm once and for all. And, finally, he was touched that his friends were trying to save him.

“Thank you,” Wes said very softly when Spike was finished speaking.

“Thank my boy. He’s the one who’s been dragging back and forth between dimensions.”

It took Xander a moment to realize that “my boy” meant him, or at least the other Xander. He’d never belonged to anyone before. He looked down at the table and swallowed hard, only managing a nod when Wesley repeated his thanks.

Spike stood and walked to the fridge. He came back with fresh bottles for all three of them. But it was very late by then and Xander was exhausted. “How are you guys getting back, anyway?” He was happy
for Wes, and yet not really looking forward to being alone again.

Spike bit at his lip. “‘T’s not very nice, actually.”

Xander and Wesley looked at him expectantly.

“See, the Watcher and his lawyer will have a nice new body all waiting for you on the other side, good as new. But a bloke can’t cross dimensions if he’s alive in both, or else the world ends. So—”

“So you have to kill me.”

Spike arched his eyebrows and nodded.

“Kill? No, wait!” Xander was willing to accept this shared lunacy to a point, but that did not include homicide. “You can’t kill him!”

“Why not, pet? I’ve offed thousands before, and with considerably less excuse.”

Oh, yeah. Vampire. Serial murderer. “But...but you
can’t just—”

Wes put his hand on Xander’s arm. “It’s quite all right. He’s correct about my not being able to pass otherwise, and remember, I’ve already died once.”

“Pfft,” said Spike. “ Amateur.”

“Isn’t there some other way?” asked Xander.

Spike reached up and almost touched the cheek under Xander’s missing eye, then let his hand drop. “There isn’t. ‘M sorry pet. But don’t worry, I’ve some mojo that will make the corpse disappear, so you won’t have the police coming after you. I fancy you’d be locked up pretty quickly if you tried to tell them this story.” He stood. “Let’s get this sorted, yeah? My Xan’s been asleep a long time now, and the others will be anxious to see you, Wes.”

“Now?” Xander squeaked.

“Now, pet.” Spike did touch him this time, briefly ruffling Xander’s still-bristly hair in a familiar fashion
that filled Xander’s heart with longing.

Wes stood, too, very tall and straight. “Yes, let’s get this over with. Is there any special way you must do it?”

“I’d rather hoped I could drain you. It’d be lovely for me, and it’s not a hard way to go. But I expect that’s out of the question, seeing as I’m temporarily incapacitated.” Spike thought for a moment. “Don’t want to do anything too bloody—wouldn’t want Xander to have a mess to explain. How about a broken neck? I should be able to manage that even without vampire strength, and it’s nice and quick.”

“Yes, all right.”

Xander couldn’t believe they were having this discussion as matter-of-factly as a couple of guys deciding where to go for dinner. But Spike closed the few feet between him and Wes and they stood there a little awkwardly. Then Wes put up a hand. “Just a moment, please.”
Without even noticing he was doing it, Xander had managed to stand and back away until he was pressed against the wall, as far from the other two as possible. But Wes walked up to him and rested one hand on Xander’s shoulder. “Thank you, Xander.” He chuckled a little. “Xanders, I mean. But I’m specifically addressing the one from this world right now. You listened to my lunatic story when nobody else would, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am for your help. And your friendship.”

“I’m…uh…you’re welcome. Good luck.” Wesley was his only friend, Xander realized, the first he’d had in a very long time. He looked over at Spike, who was waiting patiently. “Can I go, too? I mean…this world kinda sucks, at least for me. Maybe in yours….” His voice trailed away and he looked down at his shoes.

He looked up again when Spike gently pushed Wes aside. “I’m sorry. Can’t. Can’t have two of you in one universe.” He grinned. “Which is probably just as well, for the universe’s sake.”

Xander started to move away, but Spike caught him
and held him firmly against the wall by his shoulders. “Listen to me, pet. I know you. In my world, we’ve been together for some time; we spent several years fighting against each other, but more years fighting side-by-side after that. I know you. You don’t have much confidence in yourself. We can blame those bloody tossers who gave birth to you for that. But you’re brave and strong, and you’re a good man, Xander. The best I’ve known.”

“That’s the other Xander, not me,” Xander said bitterly.

“The other Xander is you. He’s had a few opportunities you didn’t, made some better choices now and then. He had friends at his side when you didn’t. But you’re the same person.”

“He’s a werewolf.”

“But he was a hero long before that. Saved the world once without a single superpower. Just by being true to his friend. Saved me when he didn’t even like me. He’s a brilliant carpenter as well.”
You’ve been willing to believe the rest of what we told you, so now believe this: you are an extraordinary man. Stop drinking and trust yourself. Allow yourself to become who you really are. You don’t need magic for that.”

Those blue eyes were looking at him so earnestly. Spike clearly believed every word he’d just said. Deep inside Xander’s head a tiny whisper encouraged him to believe. He could be someone better. Someone happy.

For the first time that Xander could remember, he felt hopeful.

Spike startled him by gathering him in a fierce embrace and loudly kissing his cheek. “That’s my boy,” Spike said.

A few moments later, Spike was standing with his elbow crooked around Wesley’s neck, mumbling something or other to himself. Wes had his eyes shut, but he appeared calm and ready.
Xander heard a loud and sickening crack, saw Wesley collapse in Spike’s grip like a puppet with its strings cut. Spike said something else that Xander couldn’t catch—it wasn’t in English—and then there was a crash like a clap of thunder.

And Spike and Wesley were just...gone.

Xander was pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to hear anything but the ringing in his ears for a while. He walked on unsteady legs towards the spot where the two men had disappeared. There was no sign of them.

“Shit,” he said.

He needed a drink.

He went to the fridge and pulled it open. A thick white envelope lay on the top shelf. He removed it and saw that his name was written on it in curiously ornate, old-fashioned handwriting. “What the hell?” he said, as if mystery envelopes were the strangest thing that had happened to him that day. When he
opened it he found a thick sheaf of green papers. Hundred dollar bills. A lot of them. They were held together by a rubber band, which also anchored a small piece of white paper. Xander set the money down on the counter, closed the fridge, and removed the bit of paper.

Dear Xander,
I hope alternate universe dosh is good in your world. Use this for a new car or a new flat or maybe a nice, long holiday. Use it for whatever you want. I know money can’t buy happiness, but it’s a nice start, isn’t it?

S

Xander stared at the money. There was probably enough there to renew his contractor’s license, buy some tools, maybe even get a decent used pickup truck.

He smiled.

And then he went to the fridge and took out the last
few bottles of beer. He popped off the tops and poured the contents down the drain.

~*~*~*~*~

Before Xander could even ask, Spike was there, smoothing the hair from Xander’s face. “You made it back,” Xander said.

“Seems that way.”

“And Wes?”

“Off nattering with the rest of them.”

Xander looked around, then, and realized he was in his own bed. Spike must have carried him upstairs. “You think Wes’ll stay? I’ll have to build him a suite, too.”

“Rest first, love. You can pound nails and other things later.”
“You have a one-track mind.”

“Yeah, but it’s a good track, innit?” Spike smirked.

Xander sat up and wrapped his arms around Spike’s strong and comforting body. “God, I’m so lucky to have you.” Then he pulled away a little. “What was the deal with the money?”

Spike looked very pleased with himself. “Found that, did he? Nicked it from the old man. I wasn’t certain it would cross universes with me, though.”

“It was a nice thing to do.”

Spike smiled shyly for a moment. “Do you think he’ll listen to what I said? You’re such a stubborn git.”

“Yeah. I think he might.” He sighed. “Have they disconnected me from him yet?”

“Rupert said they’d do it tonight. Oh, and you’re to ring the Scoobies and tell them you’re all right.”
Xander yawned. “Okay. But right now I think I need a nap of the regular magic-free kind. And then maybe are you up for a run? Maybe even a hunt?”

“I’m always up for you, pet.”

Xander pulled Spike back into his arms and then down, so that they were scrunched comfortably together. Spike sighed contentedly and latched his soft lips onto Xander’s neck. Xander closed his eye and thought about whether they might go back to that beach tonight. He was imagining the feel of sand beneath his paws when he fell asleep.

Epilogue

“It’s beautiful, Xander. You do wonderful work.”

Xander smiled at Wesley. “Thanks. I enjoy it. It’s rewarding, you know?”

Wes ran a hand over the desk Xander had built him. It was mahogany, with a few more exotic woods
inlaid in a pattern around the edges because Xander had been in the mood to experiment with veneers. Wes used the library downstairs, of course, but Xander had thought he’d appreciate a private study space in his suite as well. “It feels like home,” Wes said.

“Good. That’s the idea. Tonight I’ll finish installing the bathroom fixtures. I got the new kind of toilet seat; it just sort of twists on and off without any tools. Which was probably more than you wanted to know, but hey, it’s exciting if you’re Home Improvement Guy.”

Wes’s mouth twitched into a small grin. “Thank you for sharing, Xander.”

“No problem. You ever want to talk plumbing trivia, I’m your guy. But I’m thinking that an impatient vampire’s gonna come bursting through your door any minute now to heckle me in British. I think I’ll go head him off.”

“You do that. Thank you, Xander.”
Xander unbuckled his tool belt and laid it on the floor. When he left the room, Wes was still standing there, smiling down at his new furniture.

Spike was, indeed, on his way down. His duster was swirling and his mouth was set in what he probably thought was a fierce frown, but what Xander thought more closely resembled a pout. Spike stomped to a halt in front of him. “Oi! You were meant to be upstairs hours ago.”

“Sorry. I was almost finished and I got carried away.”

“Carried away, huh?” With vampire-quick speed, Spike swept Xander into his arms and flipped him over his shoulder. He swatted Xander’s ass very firmly and carried him upstairs. Xander decided not to fight the indignity. Besides, his position left Spike’s own ass within reach, although it was, sadly, obscured by the coat. Xander patted it anyway.

As they went up, they passed Lindsey on his way
down. He wasn’t exactly flying down the stairs, but he was walking, brace-free and using only one hand on the banister for balance. He snorted in laughter at Xander and muttered, “Should’ve had Rupe carry me around like that.”

In their room, Spike dumped him on the bed and quickly and efficiently stripped off all Xander’s clothing and then his own. “Let’s see if we can make the pouf complain about the noise again,” he said.

Xander reached up towards his vampire. “Sounds like an excellent plan.”

~*~*~*~*~

Xander dreamed. It was probably just an ordinary dream, because the Council had long ago cut him off from the other world. But still, it was very vivid, very lucid.

In the dream, Xander set a two-by-four in place and then held it steady while Chelsea nailed it down.
When she was done, she turned and grinned at him. It was a breezy day and her short curls ruffled a little around her face. “If we keep working this fast we’re gonna make the rest of the crew look bad,” she said.

“If we keep working this fast maybe we can knock off work early and we’ll have time to shower before dinner.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Was that a proposition, Xander Harris?”

He smiled wolfishly at her. “Do you want it to be, Chelsea Perez?”

She smiled, which made her warm brown eyes crinkle at the corners. “Tell you what. We finish up here, we shower—separately, in our own homes—and then I’ll pick you up and we can go to that seafood place over on 9th Street. I was on the crew that built that building, you know.”

“Well then, I guess I can feel assured the ceiling
won’t fall on us while we eat.” He reached over for the next piece of wood and put it in place. “I could pick you up instead.”

“In that POS Chevy? No way. I’ve got a shiny new Tacoma. Wanna show it off a little.”

“Yeah, okay. I could stand to be chauffeured, I guess.”

When they finished, less than an hour later, they cleaned up the site together. Chelsea grabbed his shoulders and looked up at him—not far; she was almost as tall as he was—and gave him a little peck on the cheek. “See ya at six, Xan.”

He practically skipped to his truck. It was kind of a POS, but it ran and he owned it outright, and if he got that promotion Mr. Martin had been talking about, soon he’d be able to afford something flashier himself. He set his toolbox into the truck's bed and then climbed into the cab. Before he backed out of the lot, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror. The patch was there,
slightly sweaty and dusty at the moment. And his face around the patch was still kind of...dented. Lately he’d been thinking that even when he could afford it, maybe he wouldn’t get it fixed. Chelsea said she thought it made his face interesting, intriguing. Like he was a guy with interesting stories to tell. Maybe she was just being nice. But for the first time he could remember, when Xander looked in the mirror, he liked the man he saw looking back at him.

The End

Changed

Xander’s eye was gritty and his limbs were dead weight. A horrible caterwauling was coming from across the room, the sound shredding his brain like Ginsu knives. He shoved the pillow over his head but that didn’t help, so instead he kicked the still form beside him. The evil fiend pretended to
be dead asleep—or maybe just dead.

“You get it,” Xander moaned into the pillowcase. Spike didn’t respond, so Xander kicked him harder.

“Oi! ‘S your turn.”

“Is not. Besides, he’s your Sire, not mine.”

“But I’m your alpha, and I say you get it.”

They were at an impasse and the horrible noise grew louder.

Finally, with a growl that was more wolf than human, Xander threw his pillow across the room and glared at Spike. “Fine, alpha. See how long it is before you get lucky.”

Spike smirked and ran his hands down his own chest. “As if you could resist this for long, pup.”

“Can. Will. I’ll…I’ll stay furry.” Neither of them had
any desire whatsoever to have sex while Xander was in wolf form. It was one of the few things that squicked them both.

Spike narrowed his eyes for a moment and then sighed in resignation. “Fine. I’ll sort him this time.” He stood and shuffled over to the cardboard box that was emitting all the horrible noise. He bent over the box, naked, his hair standing up in all directions and a big sheet crease on his right ass cheek. He looked sort of lost and pathetic, so Xander relented too and got out of bed to shamble to Spike’s side.

Angel looked up at them, his eyes all teary and his face bright red. He didn’t stop screaming—if anything, his cries increased in volume.

“How come we couldn’t go suck up to the vengeance demons?” Xander whined. “I know vengeance demons. We’re practically family.”

“Yeah, but you’re not the one who made the sodding wish, are you? So you can’t unwish it
either.”

Xander scowled. He knew that. Still—not fair. “Why the hell did Kyna wish for a baby anyway?” he asked, bending to pick Angel up. Angel was wearing a pair of fuzzy pajamas with little blue puppies all over them. As soon as he was in Xander’s arms he grabbed hold of Xander’s hair with his chubby little fists and held on tight, but he didn’t stop crying. He was kind of adorable, Xander had to admit, with his hair sticking up in soft little tufts and cheeks all dimpled. But he was so goddamn loud and Xander had just fed him less than two hours ago and…and he reeked.

“Uh-oh,” Xander said.

“What?”

“Don’t tell me your vamp senses aren’t picking this up, Fangface. Angel needs a change.”

Spike looked horrified. “He’s been changed enough already, hasn’t he? Why couldn’t the
bloody demons at least have made him into a vampire infant?”

“I’m guessing because Kyna was wishing for a little human bundle of joy. And this one needs a new diaper.”

Spike backed up a few steps. “Erm...I’ll just go put on some water. Some tea sounds lovely, yeah?”

“Uh-uh. No way. I’m not doing this by myself.”

“But you did such a brilliant job of it last time he needed a new nappy,” Spike wheedled.

“I didn’t. He pissed in my face, Spike, and then I stuck myself in the thumb with the goddamn pin and you got to have a nice little snack of Xanderjuice. Besides, that was number one. This is definitely number two. And possibly three and four.”

“But…that’s human shite. Erm, literally. That’s your territory—you’re much more human than
me, love.”

“Yet still with the canine sense of smell. Spike—” Angel squirmed and yanked on Xander’s hair and wailed even louder. He looked so sad and pathetic, and it occurred to Xander that while Angel probably didn’t have a clue what had happened to him, he was probably scared and certainly uncomfortable and for the moment he was just a helpless baby.

Making a sound of resignation deep in his throat, Xander carried Angel out of the bedroom and into their suite’s main room. Kyna had set up a makeshift changing area before she left, spreading a couple of thick towels on their kitchen table and piling diapers and wipes beside them. Xander set Angel down on the towels, managing to extricate his hair from Angel’s grip with some difficulty.

Angel lay there, kicking his bowed legs and waving his arms and screaming. Fat tears slipped from the corners of his eyes and down the sides of his face.
“It’s okay,” Xander said softly. “I’ll get you cleaned up and you’ll feel all better and Kyna will get you revamped and you are both so gonna owe me.” He began to undo the zillion snaps on Angel’s jammies. “We’re talking all-expense-paid vacation in Hawaii—or, um, somewhere less sunny, I guess. We’re talking a cow’s worth of beef. We’re talking a set of wheels way snazzier than the van. I want a convertible.” Xander realized with considerable dismay that even if the diaper change was successful, in his exhausted state he was never going to be able to snap the jammies up correctly. Why did they need to snap down the front and inside both legs?

Getting the clothing off Angel wasn’t much easier, actually. It was like trying to peel a leotard off an octopus, only noisier. But finally the pajamas were off and all that was left was the diaper.

Xander tried to breathe only through his mouth.

As he tried to steel himself for the next step, Spike glided up almost silently behind him and placed a
cold hand on Xander’s shoulder. “Do you reckon he looked like that when he really was young?”

“I guess so.”

“He makes a bonny baby.”

“Hmm. I bet you were a cute kid.”

Spike kissed Xander’s shoulder. “Nah. Never could tame my hair and I was a bit sickly. Everyone said I took after my Grand Aunt Ernestine and she was a horror.”

Xander set a hand on Angel’s round tummy and leaned his head back to conk it gently against Spike’s. “Well, you grew up nicely. I was a funny-looking kid. My ears stuck out.”

Spike kissed one of those ears. “Still do, love,” he teased.

“Hey!”
Spike wrapped his arms around Xander’s middle and rested a sharp chin on Xander’s shoulder. “Going to do something about this mess, then?”

“Yeah. I guess so. But you have to go warm up a bottle. And you’re so getting the better end of the deal.”

Spike snickered and unwound himself.

Xander gave the squalling infant a stern look. “I’ve handled zillions of demons and alternate dimensions and curses and evil lawyers. I can handle one little diaper change.”

Except by the time he was finished, Xander was pretty much yearning for demons.

Angel was more or less clean and dry, and the jammies were sort of back on him, and the crying had even decreased a bit. But Xander felt like soaking in bleach for a year or two. He’d only barely kept himself from retching, he had three fresh pinpricks in his fingers, and his knees felt
weak with exhaustion. But hey, on the upside he’d learned that poop came in colors and textures he’d never before imagined.

Spike scooped Angel into his arm and held him surprisingly tenderly. Angel shut up the second the nipple entered his mouth, and was soon sucking busily away on formula, staring sleepily into Spike’s face. They both looked adorable like that, Xander thought. Sweet and innocent. He wondered whether he could find Kyna’s camera.

“Go back to bed, Xan. I’ll join you as soon as he’s out.”

Xander yawned so hugely that he almost disconnected his jaw. “Okay. Don’t forget to burp him. And Spike?”

Spike was looking down at Angel fondly. “Yeah?”

“It might take Kyna a while to persuade the demons to undo the wish. They can be pretty stubborn about stuff like that.”
“So?”

“So if we're going to get any sleep, I’m thinking maybe we need some backup babysitters.”

Spike looked up at him, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

Xander grinned wolfishly. “I’m gonna go give Giles and Lindsey a call.”

The End